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Is Europe Dying? Notes on a Crisis of Civilizational Morale

By George Weigel

Europe's anemic birthrates are the most concrete manifestation of a spiritual crisis in the homeland of Western civilization. That crisis is driven by the marginalization of Christianity in European cultural, intellectual, and public life over the last century.

America's "Europe problem" and Europe's "America problem" have been staple topics of transatlantic debate for the past several years. Political leaders, media commentators, and businessmen usually discuss those problems in terms of policy differences: differences over prosecuting the war on terrorism, differences over the role of the United Nations in world affairs, differences over the Kyoto Protocol on the global environment, differences over Iraq. The policy differences are real. Attempts to understand them in political, strategic, and economic terms alone will ultimately fail, however, because such explanations do not reach deeply enough into the human texture of contemporary Europe.

To put the matter directly: Europe, and especially western Europe, is in the midst of a crisis of civilizational morale. The most dramatic manifestation of that crisis is not to be found in Europe's fondness for governmental bureaucracy or its devotion to fiscally shaky health care schemes and pension plans, in Europe's lagging economic productivity or in the appeasement mentality that some European leaders display toward Islamist terrorism. No, the most dramatic manifestation of

Europe's crisis of civilizational morale is the brute fact that Europe is depopulating itself.

Europe's below-replacement-level birthrates have created situations that would have been unimaginable when the institutions of European integration were formed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. By the middle of this century, if present fertility patterns continue, 60 percent of the Italian people will have no personal experience of a brother, a sister, an aunt, an uncle, or a cousin;¹ Germany will lose the equivalent of the population of the former East Germany; and Spain's population will decline by almost one-quarter. Europe is depopulating itself at a rate unseen since the Black Death of the fourteenth century.² And one result of that is a Europe that is increasingly "senescent" (as British historian Niall Ferguson has put it).³

When an entire continent, healthier, wealthier, and more secure than ever before, fails to create the human future in the most elemental sense—by creating the next generation—something very serious is afoot. I can think of no better description for that "something" than to call it a crisis of civilizational morale. Understanding its origins is important in itself, and important for Americans because some of the acids that have eaten away at European culture over the past two centuries are at work in the United States, and indeed throughout the democratic world.

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Reading “History” through Culture

Getting at the roots of Europe’s crisis of civilizational morale requires us to think about “history” in a different way. Europeans and Americans usually think of “history” as the product of politics (the struggle for power) or economics (the production of wealth). The first way of thinking is a by-product of the French Revolution; the second is one of the exhaust fumes of Marxism. Both “history as politics” and “history as economics” take a partial truth and try, unsuccessfully, to turn it into a comprehensive truth. Understanding Europe’s current situation, and what it means for America, requires us to look at history in a different way, through cultural lenses.

Europe began the twentieth century with bright expectations of new and unprecedented scientific, cultural, and political achievements. Yet within fifty years, Europe, the undisputed center of world civilization in 1900, produced two world wars, three totalitarian systems, a Cold War that threatened global holocaust, oceans of blood, mountains of corpses, the Gulag, and Auschwitz. What happened? And, perhaps more to the point, why had what happened happened? Political and economic analyses do not offer satisfactory answers to those urgent questions. Cultural—which is to say spiritual, even theological—answers might help.

Take, for example, the proposal made by a French Jesuit, Henri de Lubac, during World War II. De Lubac argued that Europe’s torments in the 1940s were the “real world” results of defective ideas, which he summarized under the rubric “atheistic humanism”—the deliberate rejection of the God of the Bible in the name of authentic human liberation. This, de Lubac suggested, was something entirely new. Biblical man had perceived his relationship to the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as a liberation: liberation from the terrors of gods who demanded extortionate sacrifice, liberation from the whims of gods who played games with human lives (remember the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), liberation from the vagaries of Fate. The God of the Bible was different. And because biblical man believed that he could have access to the one true God through prayer and worship, he believed that he could bend history in a human direction. Indeed, biblical man believed that he was obliged to work toward the humanization of the world. One of European civilization’s deepest and most distinctive cultural characteristics is the conviction that life is not

just one damn thing after another; Europe learned that from its faith in the God of the Bible.

The proponents of nineteenth-century European atheistic humanism turned this inside out and upside down. Human freedom, they argued, could not coexist with the God of Jews and Christians. Human greatness required rejecting the biblical God, according to such avatars of atheistic humanism as Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche. And here, Father de Lubac argued, were ideas with consequences—lethal consequences, as it turned out. For when you marry modern technology to the ideas of atheistic humanism, what you get are the great mid-twentieth century tyrannies—communism, fascism, Nazism. Let loose in history, Father de Lubac concluded, those tyrannies had taught a bitter lesson: “It is not true, as is sometimes said, that man cannot organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can only organize it against man.”⁴ Atheistic humanism—ultramundane humanism, if you will—is inevitably inhuman humanism.

The first lethal explosion of what Henri de Lubac would later call “the drama of atheistic humanism” was World War I. For whatever else it was, the “Great War” was, ultimately, the product of a crisis of civilizational morality, a failure of moral reason in a culture that had given the world the very concept of “moral reason.” That crisis of moral reason led to the crisis of civilizational morale that is much with us, and especially with Europe, today.

This crisis has only become fully visible since the end of the Cold War. Its effects were first masked by the illusory peace between World War I and World War II; then by the rise of totalitarianism and the Great Depression; then by the Second World War itself; then by the Cold War. It was only after 1991, when the seventy-seven-year-long political-military crisis that began in 1914 had ended, that the long-term effects of Europe’s “rage of self-mutilation” (as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn called it) could come to the surface of history and be seen for what they were—and for what they are. Europe is experiencing a crisis of civilizational morale today because of what happened in Europe ninety years ago. That crisis could not be seen in its full and grave dimensions then (although the German general Helmuth von Moltke, one of the chief instigators of the slaughter, wrote in late July 1914 that the coming war would “annihilate the civilization of almost the whole of Europe for decades to come”⁵). The damage

done to the fabric of European culture and civilization in the Great War could only be seen clearly when the Great War's political effects had been cleared from the board in 1991.

The Naked European Public Square

Contemporary European culture is not bedeviled by atheistic humanism in its most raw forms; the Second World War and the Cold War settled that. Europe today is profoundly shaped, however, by a kinder, gentler cousin, what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has termed “exclusive humanism”⁶: a set of ideas that, in the name of democracy, human rights, tolerance, and civility, demands that all transcendent religious or spiritual reference points must be kept out of European public life—especially the life of the newly expanded European Union. This conviction led to two recent episodes that tell us a lot about Europe's crisis of civilizational morale and where that crisis leads politically.

The first episode involved the drafting of the European Union's new constitution—or, to be technically precise, a new European constitutional treaty. This process set off a raucous argument over whether the constitution's preamble should acknowledge Christianity as a source of European civilization and of contemporary Europe's commitments to human rights and democracy. The debate was sometimes silly and not infrequently bitter. Partisans of European secularism argued that mentioning Christianity as a source of European democracy would “exclude” Jews, Muslims, and those of no religious faith from the new Europe; yet these same partisans insisted on underscoring the Enlightenment as the principal source of contemporary European civilization, which would seem to “exclude” all those—including avant-garde European “postmodernists”—who think that Enlightenment rationalism got it wrong.

The debate was finally resolved in favor of exclusive humanism: a treaty of some 70,000 words (ten times longer than the U.S. Constitution!) could not find room for one word, “Christianity.” Yet while following this debate, I had the gnawing sense that the real argument was not about the past but about the future—would religiously informed moral argument have a place in the newly expanded European public square?

A disturbingly negative answer to that question came four months after the final Euro-constitution negotiation. In October 2004, Rocco Buttiglione, a distinguished

Italian philosopher and minister for European affairs in the Italian government, was chosen by the incoming president of the European Commission, Portugal's José Manuel Durão Barroso, to be commissioner of justice. Professor Buttiglione, who would have been considered an adornment of any sane government since Cato the Elder, was then subjected to a nasty inquisition by the justice committee of the European Parliament. His convictions concerning the morality of homosexual acts and the nature of marriage were deemed by Euro-parliamentarians to disqualify him from holding high office on the European Commission—despite Buttiglione's clear distinction in his testimony between what he, an intellectually sophisticated Catholic, regarded as immoral behavior and what the law regarded as criminal behavior, and despite his sworn commitment, substantiated by a lifetime of work, to uphold and defend the civil rights of all. This did not satisfy many members of the European Parliament, who evidently agreed with one of their number in his claim that Buttiglione's moral convictions—not any actions he had undertaken, and would likely undertake, but his *convictions*—were “in direct contradiction of European law.”

Buttiglione described this to a British newspaper as the “new totalitarianism,” which is not, I fear, an exaggeration. That this new totalitarianism flies under the flag of “tolerance” only makes matters worse. But where does it come from?

One of the most perceptive commentators on the European constitutional debate was neither a European nor a Christian but an Orthodox Jew born in South Africa—J. H. H. Weiler, professor of international law and director of the Jean Monnet Center at New York University. Weiler argued that European “Christophobia”—a more pungent term than Taylor's “exclusive humanism”—was the root of the refusal of so many Europeans to acknowledge what Weiler regarded as obvious: that Christian ideas and values were one of the principal sources of European civilization and of Europe's contemporary commitment to human rights and democracy. This deliberate historical amnesia, Weiler suggested, was not only ignorant; it was constitutionally disabling. For in addition to defining the relationship between citizens and the state, and the relations among the various branches of government, constitutions are the repository, the safe-deposit box, of the ideas, values, and symbols that make a society what it is. Constitutions embody, Weiler proposed, the “ethos” and the “telos,” the cultural foundations and

moral aspirations, of a political community. To cut those aspirations out of the process of “constituting” Europe was to do grave damage to the entire project.⁷

Whether that happens remains to be seen, as it is not clear that the European constitutional treaty will be ratified by E.U. member states. But what is unhappily clear at this juncture is that Europe has produced a constitution that denies the vision of three of its most prominent founding fathers—Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi, and Robert Schuman, serious Christians to a man, all of them convinced that the integrated and free Europe they sought was, in no small part, a project of Christian civilization.⁸ Europe’s contemporary crisis of civilizational morale thus comes into sharper focus: Europe’s statesmen—or, at the least, too many of them—are denying the very roots from which today’s “Europe” was born. Is there any example in history of a successful political project that is so contemptuous of its own cultural and spiritual foundations? If so, I am unaware of it.

Boredom and Its Discontents

The demographics are unmistakable: Europe is dying. The wasting disease that has beset this once greatest of civilizations is not physical, however. It is a disease in the realm of the human spirit. David Hart, another theological analyst of contemporary history, calls it the disease of “metaphysical boredom”—boredom with the mystery, passion, and adventure of life itself. Europe, in Hart’s image, is boring itself to death.

And in the process, it is allowing radicalized twenty-first century Muslims—who think of their forebears’ military defeats at Poitiers in 732, Lepanto in 1571, and Vienna in 1683 (as well as their expulsion from Spain in 1492) as temporary reversals en route to Islam’s final triumph in Europe—to imagine that the day of victory is not far off. Not because Europe will be conquered by an invading army marching under the Prophet’s banners, but because Europe, having depopulated itself out of boredom and culturally disarmed itself in the process, will have handed the future over to those Islamic immigrants who will create what some scholars call “Eurasia”—the European continent as a cultural and political extension of the Arab-Islamic world. Should that happen, the irony would be unmistakable: the drama of atheistic humanism, emptying Europe of its soul, would have played itself out in the triumph of a thoroughly nonhumanistic theism. Europe’s contemporary crisis of

civilizational morale would reach its bitter conclusion when Notre-Dame becomes Hagia Sophia on the Seine—another great Christian church become an Islamic museum. At which point, we may be sure, the human rights proclaimed by those narrow secularists who insist that a culture’s spiritual aspirations have nothing to do with its politics would be in the gravest danger.

It need not happen: there are signs of spiritual and cultural renewal in Europe, especially among young people; the Buttiglione affair raised alarms about the new intolerance that masquerades in the name of “tolerance;” the brutal murder of Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh by a middle-class Moroccan-Dutch has reminded Europeans that “root causes” do not really explain Islamist terrorism. The question on this side of the Atlantic, though, is why should Americans care about the European future? I can think of three very good reasons.

The first involves *pietas*, an ancient Roman virtue that teaches us reverence and gratitude for those on whose shoulders we stand.

A lot of what has crossed the Atlantic in the past several centuries has been improved in the process, from the English language to the forms of constitutional democracy. Yet *pietas* demands that Americans remember where those good things came from. A United States indifferent to the fate of Europe is a United States indifferent to its roots. Americans learned about the dignity of the human person, about limited and constitutional government, about the principle of consent, and about the transcendent standards of justice to which the state is accountable in the school of freedom called “Europe.” Americans should remember that, with *pietas*. We have seen what historical amnesia about civilizational roots has done to Europe. Americans ought not want that to happen in the United States.

The second reason we can and must care has to do with the threat to American security posed by Europe’s demographic meltdown. Demographic vacuums do not remain unfilled—especially when the demographic vacuum in question is a continent possessed of immense economic resources. One can already see the effects of Europe’s self-inflicted depopulation in the tensions experienced in France, Germany, and elsewhere by rising tides of immigration from North Africa, Turkey, and other parts of the Islamic world. Since 1970, which is not all that long ago, some 20 million (legal) Islamic immigrants—the equivalent of three E.U. countries,

Ireland, Belgium, and Denmark—have settled in Europe. And while, in the most optimistic of scenarios, these immigrants may become good European democrats, practicing civility and tolerance, there is another and far grimmer alternative, as I have suggested above. Europe's current demographic trendlines, coupled with the radicalization of Islam that seems to be a by-product of some Muslims' encounter with contemporary, secularized Europe, could eventually produce a twenty-second century, or even late twenty-first century, Europe increasingly influenced by, and perhaps even dominated by, militant Islamic populations, convinced that their long-delayed triumph in the European heartland is at hand.

Is a European future dominated by an appeasement mentality toward radical Islamism in the best interests of the United States? That seems very unlikely. Neither is a Europe that is a breeding ground for Islamic radicalism; remember that the experience of life in Hamburg was decisive in the evolution of both Mohammed Atta, leader of the 9/11 "death pilots," and of the pilot of the "fourth plane" of that grim day, the plane forced down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania—the one intended to hit the Capitol or the White House.

The third reason why the "Europe problem" is ours as well as theirs has to do with the future of the democratic project, in the United States and indeed throughout the world. The strange debate over the mere mention of Christianity's contributions to European civilization in the proposed European constitution was especially disturbing because the amnesiacs who wanted to rewrite European history by airbrushing Christianity from the picture were doing so in service to a thin, proceduralist idea of democracy. To deny that Christianity had anything to do with the evolution of free, law-governed, and prosperous European societies is, to repeat, more than a question of falsifying the past; it is also a matter of creating a future in which moral truth has no role in governance, in the determination of public policy, in understandings of justice, and in the definition of that freedom which democracy is intended to embody.

Were these ideas to prevail in Europe, that would be bad news for Europe; but it would also be bad news for

the United States, for their triumph would inevitably reinforce similar tendencies in our own high culture, and ultimately in our law. The judicial redefinition of "freedom" as sheer personal willfulness, manifest in the 2003 Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas*, was buttressed by citations from European courts. And what would it mean for the democratic project around the world if the notion that democracy has nothing to do with moral truth is exported from western Europe to central and eastern Europe via the expanded European Union, and thence to other new democracies around the world?

So Americans should, and must, care. We sever ourselves from our civilizational roots if we ignore Europe in a fit of aggravation or pique. Our security will be further imperiled in a post-9/11 world if Europe's demographics continue to give advantage to the dynamism of radical Islamism in world politics. The American democratic experiment will be weakened if Europe's legal definition of freedom as willfulness reinforces similar tendencies here in the United States—and so will the democratic project in the world.

Notes

1. Nicholas Eberstadt, "What If It's a World Population Implosion? Speculations about Global De-population," the Global Reproductive Health Forum (Harvard University, 1998; available at www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/HUpapers/implosion/depop.html).
2. Niall Ferguson, "Eurabia?" *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 2004.
3. Ibid.
4. Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 14.
5. David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 224.
6. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
7. J. H. H. Weiler, *Un Europa cristiana: Un saggio esplorativo* (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2003).
8. See Robert Wendelin Keyserlingk, *Fathers of Europe* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1972).