



# Our Civilisational Moment

Os Guinness



## Our Civilisational Moment:

---

### *Os Guinness*

The world is fast approaching one of the great turning points in history. After half a millennium of unprecedented dominance, Western civilisation is on the wane and the shadows it casts are lengthening. Many parts of the West are living off memories, and outbreaks of weakness, folly, madness, and decadence are all too evident. But any image of sunset and twilight is too benign. Bitter ideological and cultural conflicts throughout the West now cap the story of the massive and destructive conflicts over the last few centuries, many of them set off by the great quartet of Western cataclysms: the Renaissance and Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is plain that the West has lost faith and confidence in itself. It no longer knows how to tell its own story, and it is gambling the civilisation on which it rests. The present moment is moving towards a decisive phase of the showdown. Too many people are in denial and too few realise the gravity of the stakes.

What does this mean for the human future? Is the decline of the West a harbinger of apocalyptic troubles ahead for the world, for example the Singularity—a hypothetical point in the future where technological advance becomes irreversible, endangering human wellbeing? And the rise of authoritarianism in China, Russia, and elsewhere, encapsulated in Chinese President Xi Jinping's statement "The East's risen, the West's declined",<sup>1</sup> inevitable? Or is the present moment a harbinger of new beginnings and a new period of peace, prosperity, and superabundance for all humanity and the wider world? Whatever the outcome, there are unmistakable signs that the West, its lead society the American republic, and the faiths that made them both, are all in a serious condition. The West has lost its essence and soul, and parts of it are in free fall. The decline of the West, the most powerful of the many carriers of globalisation in history, carries titanic implications for the entire world and for the future of humanity.

Those with eyes to see can perceive that prospects for the future are uncertain and that the West is acting carelessly in a time when it cannot afford to do so. Whatever the day in which we live, however difficult, we must rise to meet our time as our time meets us. It is only in this way that anyone can hope to serve their generation well, especially in a time that by any standards is historic. But even before the essential and urgent question, "What is to be done?", we must raise the equally important question, "What is actually happening?" What is the story in which we find ourselves now and in which we are playing our part?

Strikingly, while the West faces strong and implacable enemies from the outside, its most vehement and radical enemies are within. The waning of the West is due in part to a Western war on the West, for the animating spirit in much of the West today is passionately adversarial to what it has stood for historically. Sometimes these challenges come from the most surprising quarters, such as the once-conservative worlds of business and the armed forces. Commentators reach for analogies such as "own-goal politics" and a "circular firing-squad culture war without any end." But the current political iteration of the war on the West is recent and only part of the problem. The real causes of Western decline lie much deeper and go back much earlier. Today these causes are philosophical, ethical, cultural, economic, and technological. However, it would be a cardinal mistake to overlook the deepest cause of all—the deteriorating condition of the West's roots, the animating force that once made the West "the West". This deterioration is happening because the faiths that gave vitality and unity to Western civilisation have become enervated and are contested or rejected entirely today.

Whatever the standpoint and the perspective people take, what is certain is that the West now faces a critical moment and contest. It will either experience a genuine and profound renewal of its ideas and ideals, it will replace those ideas and ideals with different but equally powerful ones, or it will decline beyond hope of recovery and take its place as the latest entrant in the select circle of history's former great civilisations. All but one of the world's great civilisations are found in history books, ruins, and museums, and it appears that the West—the present exception—may be about to join them.

The West is on the wane, but this paper is not a eulogy. One should not give into declinism and should rather retain the conviction that because we humans are free, we are not fated. Renewal is as possible as decline, though a far more arduous task, both intellectually and politically. The challenge of the decline of the West presents choices, rather than inevitabilities. As such, the present situation can offer prospects of a new world to come, and not just an old world on the way out. Matthew Arnold's famous and much-quoted poem *Dover Beach*, which lamented the state of 19<sup>th</sup> century English society, was brilliant, if premature. His "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century need not be the last word.<sup>2</sup> The tide that recedes comes in again. Twilights lead on to mornings.

Yet history, of course, is not cyclical like tides and twilights. Human freedom and responsibility, human choices and their consequences are much more than cycles, more than the swings of a pendulum, and they are never fated or purely determined. "It is what it is," people sometimes mutter, but the truth is, "it" is what we make it through our choices. Far from a eulogy, this paper offers an assessment of the factors that formed the West, factors that will be critical to the outcome of its current crisis, and those that could lead to its renewal. The challenge for the West is not simply to discern the moment. It faces a multitude of questions that are inextricably bound up with the ideas, ideals, and faith that created it. These questions must be answered if the Western twilight is not to end in night, but rather in a dawn worthy of the best ideals of the West. Renewal is as possible as decline, though highly demanding because of what it requires, and due to the major obstacles that must be overcome to answer the deepest hopes of humanity in the global era.

## The World is Wider Than the West

---

There are two common attitudes that shut down any concern about Western civilisation from the start. The first stems from the confidence of those whose focus is global rather than regional. Proponents of this view claim that a grand and unstoppable global reordering is already underway, led by the post-war post-nationalism that created the European Union, the emergence of the liberal world order, and now supported by the digital revolution, and that there is a coming era of superabundance for all in the wings. This worldview can be called "globalism" or "universalism". It is time, these people say, to be citizens of the world rather than advocates for any particular nation or civilisation. Today, this claim is usually associated with the "Great Reset", heralded by Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum at Davos, and his 2020 call for a post-pandemic resetting of global affairs.<sup>3</sup> But it was introduced earlier by the Club of Rome,<sup>4</sup> and it is supported by a host of other global titans such as George Soros and Bill Gates. John Lennon's song *Imagine* captures the essence of this global worldview: "Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do, nothing to kill or die for, and no religion, too."<sup>5</sup> The roots of globalism are longstanding, with a string of champions from Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, to Immanuel Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to H.G. Wells at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The state of the West, according to current proponents of globalism, is neither here nor there. To them it is a red herring that diverts people from seeing the historic progress of humanity in our brave new global era. Whether the West is in decline or on the road to renewal is irrelevant in their estimation. To globalists, universalists, post-nationalists, supra-nationalists, and progressives of all kinds, and to all who

see themselves as “citizens of everywhere”, rather than “citizens of somewhere”,<sup>6</sup> humanity overall is progressing rapidly and well, and the possibility of superabundance for all is within reach. They look past the West to a world government and bureaucracy that H.G. Wells called the “Global Republic”, the “Global Commonwealth”, and the “world directorate”.<sup>7</sup> Progress, the globalists say, is undeniable, though admittedly not universal. As Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker puts it, reflecting on his book *Enlightenment Now*, “progress does not mean that everything gets better for everyone, everywhere, all the time. That would be a miracle, that wouldn’t be progress.”<sup>8</sup>

Those who hold such optimistic views of global progress today are mostly secularists and materialists, like Wells, Soros, and Pinker. They are commonly driven by a twin-engine motive, one negative and one positive. Negatively speaking, “Ruin”, which was seen earlier as the ruin of war, is now the ruin of the “permacrisis” and the converging “polycrises”, such as nuclear war, population increase, pandemics, climate change, and human extinction through Artificial Intelligence. These dire crises create the spectre that gives urgency to their apocalyptic “or else” style of proposals. Positively speaking, “Progress” is the confidence on which they rely as they drive forward to their goals. They might not agree with the radicals who make war on the West, but their eyes are focused elsewhere. As they see things from a worldwide perspective, global trends in science, technology, economics, medicine, and inclusive politics are lifting humanity out of the mire of poverty, backwardness, and superstition. People across the whole world are living longer, enjoying better health, and expanding the areas in which they are making more choices about their own lives. The global trends are onward and upward, and while the prospect of global superabundance is in view, the state of the West is irrelevant.

In sum, they argue, humanity as a whole is on the march, and that is what counts. If the world seizes the post-pandemic opportunity, the globalists say, global progress, prosperity, and peace can be the order of the day, regardless of the interests of any particular civilisation or region of the world.

No one should be blind to the import of such global trends and advances. The enrichment, improved health, and longer lifespan that come from the expansion of the world economy are of course to be welcomed. In my lifetime alone, China has made material strides that can only be described as stupendous, but—and a critical but—all under an iron fist and without any accompanying progress in freedom. No one should be blinded by such dazzling advances. As we shall see, uncritical globalism and universalism are fast becoming a new and improved form of imperialism, and a monstrous threat to freedom and the human future. They are creating a gigantic pincer grip—one claw coming from President Xi’s expanding autocracy in China, and his “Global Civilization Initiative,”<sup>9</sup> and the other claw coming from the centralised interventionism of the Global Resetters in the West.

Our brave new globalists should remember that almost all the advances they herald are the gifts of the West. The progress they highlight is developing along materialist lines only, it is far from even and stable globally, and like all forms of empire-building, the constant focus on the global at the expense of the local carries the seeds of authoritarianism. Deal-making “transactionalism” with regimes such as China’s, at the expense of human rights, will only favour the world’s ruling elites, and materialism with no place for the life of the spirit is the ultimate flat earth view of life. Additionally, it remains to be seen how globalising trends will fare in the future if the faith, spirit, ethics, humaneness, and culture that nurtured globalism’s concern for human wellbeing are no longer given a voice in the world. The emergence of worldviews on the world stage that are hostile to faith—secularism in the West and communism in China—will prove decisive in shaping the kind of cultures that develop across the globe, unless trends are reversed.

Communism and fascism are often seen as fundamentally different extremes, with one anchoring the left and the other anchoring the right. They actually share important resemblances, such as their common roots in the French Revolution, their commitment to the power of the state, and their

inevitable totalitarian imperialism. What differs is not that they are on the left or the right, but the unifying principle of their totalitarianisms—class for the communists and nation for the fascists. Hitler, the grand exemplar of the right, was a great admirer of the French Revolution, the cradle of the left. But it is important to see that, while Communism is in some respects a Christian heresy, fascism is a direct and explicit repudiation of the Jewish and Christian faiths that made the West. Fascism is therefore a return to the pre-Christian and pagan understanding of life and power. Germany's National Socialism from the 20<sup>th</sup> century stands as a warning of what can happen when the brilliance of education, science, technology, and economics outstrip morality and are pressed into the service of an ideology and a political party that serves only their own power.

The monstrous can be reborn. German playwright Berthold Brecht's warning in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* still stands: "This was the thing that nearly had us mastered; don't yet rejoice in his defeat, you men! Although the world stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again."<sup>10</sup>

One foundational value that must not be lost in the global discussion is *sovereignty*—the personal freedom and responsibility of citizens that is the heart of human self-government, local rule, and genuinely thick democracy. Yet where is sovereignty to be located and grounded today? Can it still be anchored in the individual person, the family, and the local community, as is implicit in notions such as "subsidiarity", and in George Washington's favourite biblical vision of each person and family living freely and peacefully "under their own vine and fig tree"?<sup>11</sup> Or is the classical vision of *domus, urbs et orbis* (household, city, and world) to be completely overruled by a global "expert-ocracy", a super-galactic directorate, or by some AI superintelligence that will think and make decisions for us all? Do the globalists even try to understand personal freedom, citizenship, and self-government, let alone have the philosophical basis for believing in them and building them? What is to stop the trend towards all-coordinating, bureaucratic centralisation, and surveillance, morphing from a soft despotism to a hard totalitarianism, even in the West? And what is the condition of such essential counterweights to the overreach of the state as the family, the church or synagogue, and the school? Can these and other institutions of civil society even hope to survive without the faith that inspires them and puts a clear limit on the reach and control of the all-commanding state?

Questions such as these are important in assessing the claims globalists make about the merits of their worldview and the historical and contemporary role of the West.

## Has the West Really Awakened?

---

The second common attitude that ignores any concern for the state of the West is the position which disputes that any crisis exists. Proponents of this position point, for example, to the unity shown by the West in response to President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Putin's invasion is brutal, destructive, and horrendously evil. Europe has been shaken out of its complacency by war crimes committed during the conflict, and the West's unity and resolve in the face of the crisis have reassured many. Yet this is hardly the assurance we need about the state of the West. Being shocked awake by an external enemy is one thing. But adherence to a deep and inspiring vision of what once animated the West as a civilisation is quite another.

Putin miscalculated and reunited NATO and the West to some extent. But to this point, the response from America and the West has been neither strong enough nor united on the elemental civilisational issues and the convictions necessary to sustain resistance. It is far from the renaissance the West needs, so it may not prove enduring. Indeed, a huge irony was evident in the situation. The invading dictator

and his supporters, such as Moscow's Archbishop Kirill, claimed to be motivated by a living sense of history and faith. They justified their actions by appealing to their humiliation by the West in the Paris Treaty of 1856 at the end of the Crimean war, and by echoes of ancient religious beliefs about "Holy Russia" and the "Third Rome".<sup>12</sup> So, they issued a national call to "sacrificial heroism," to Pan-Slavic talk of being "saviours of humanity," and to defending "spiritual civilisation" against the "decadence," "double standards," and "hypocrisy" of the West. A 16<sup>th</sup> century monk, Filofei, articulated the Third Rome doctrine after the cities of Rome and Constantinople had fallen: "two Romes have fallen, the Third stands, and there shall not be a fourth."<sup>13</sup> To be sure, Putin's version of the doctrine is twisted, manipulated, and entirely self-serving, but it has resonated powerfully as a cover for his brutal invasion, whereas much of the West has responded to the invasion in almost purely secular terms.

There is a contrast between Eastern and Western Europe, in light of which it could be said that "the East is the West, and the West is the non-West." This means that much of Eastern Europe, which knew what it was like to live under communism, is in favour of traditional religious values and ways of life that the West used to share, whereas much of Western Europe believes it has graduated beyond all that. That is not to say these ways of life are uniquely Western historically—civilisation developed in Eastern Europe, part of Christendom, for centuries in parallel with Western Europe. There is also division within Western countries between the values of the elites and ordinary people. So clearly the reflection and the soul searching across the West must go much deeper than the recent trumpeted unity.

What in fact is "the West"? Russia, it is said, is European but not Western, whereas Japan is Western but not European. Israel, similarly, is Middle Eastern but thoroughly Western. Does this mean, then, that the West is simply a matter of representative government, the rule of law, respect for private property, a free market economy, and a stable environment in which to do business? Is the West identical to the best of Western art and literature? Or is the West more than that? Is it not also about ideas and ideals such as human dignity, rights, freedom, justice, truth, open debate, or have these ideals been betrayed so badly that they dare not even be named? What of freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly? And what of the Jewish and Christian faiths behind the West?

How, then, is the West doing in grounding and transmitting these ideals to the next generation and in living them out in daily life? Do these ideals still need roots, and nutrients, or can they be just asserted, and left floating in the air? Has the West become a cut-flower civilisation? Are Western ideals in fact solidly grounded in the ideas that Westerners espouse today, and are Westerners even aware of how the West came into being? Some of the most trenchant diagnoses of Western weakness and decay today come from the enemies of the West, such as Putin and Xi. Western decline is what strengthens these autocrats in attacking the West and believing that Russia and China's time has come.

In short, the problem of the West is the West. Along with the lessons of history, the criticisms of Russia, China, Iran, and countless Western radicals offer mirrors that, however distorted, can help the West to see the precipice on which it stands, and what needs to be remedied and restored. Nothing short of a genuine renewal of the roots will be sufficient to turn the tide.

## What Does "Civilisation" Mean?

---

There is considerable debate over the term "civilisation," which has itself been caught up in the heated anger of anti-Western wrangling. A "culture" is simply a way of life lived in common, but is the term "civilisation" only a matter of a powerful culture giving itself a pat on the back? I am not using the word as a compliment, but in the straightforward sense of a culture and way of life that becomes distinguished for both its *excellence* in some areas, its *expansion* in terms of reach, and its *extension* over time. Put

simply, a civilisation is a society and its way of life that rises high enough, spreads far enough, and lasts long enough to merit the term civilisation. The West has been described as the most powerful civilisation in human history, not as a matter of moral achievement—indeed, much of its worldwide expansion was highly immoral—but because of the immensity of its global impact. But the West is at a critical juncture today. It is on the wane for internal reasons, and if the West is to be renewed, it must re-examine its history, identity, ideals, successes and failures, and its conscience.

Too many Westerners show no inclination to think about these things at all. But no one should be so foolish as to hurry past the grand inquiry that our civilisational moment requires. Only the fool or the blind fail to take note of the precipice on which they are standing. The questions of our time run deep, and they need to. What, therefore, is the vision of life that should inspire us, the master story of history that should shape us, and the ground of the foundational trust that is our confidence – the “we” behind the word “us” being nations and civilizations as well as individuals? Without a comprehensive and constructive vision of life, there can be no unity, only disintegration. Without an overarching master story, there can be no prophetic interpretation, only conflicts and confusion. Without solid grounds of trust, there can be neither entrepreneurial risk-taking nor partnership and collaboration, but only suspicion and envy. And at the end of the line, nihilism and despair. And without a profound, rational, and responsible faith, there can only be faltering and civilisational decline.

## The Rise of the Modern West

The civilisations of antiquity considered Europe to be a cultural backwater, an unremarkable rocky outcrop at the north-western end of the great Asian landmass. So how did it come to dominate the world, including the great civilisations that had preceded it? Was the sudden rise due to Europe’s armies, its political order, its economy, or the rule of law? No, it was Europe’s religion that fuelled the political, cultural, scientific, and technological development that facilitated its remarkable ascent. To be more precise, Western religion, the Christian faith, was not European in origin, but Jewish, and therefore Middle Eastern. But it had grown to be the official faith of Rome, declared so by the Emperor Theodosius in 380 AD. The conversion of the barbarian kingdoms over the next centuries created Christendom and brought the Christian faith to the whole of Europe. But for all the influence of its fearless explorers, sailors, traders, and missionaries, Christian Europe had never dominated the world up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What happened then was the revolutionary burst of the Christian faith known as the Protestant Reformation. Scholars have remarked that the ideas of the Reformation, boosted by the invention of the printing press and the wider accessibility of the Bible, “created the modern world.”<sup>14</sup>

Debates still swirl around that conclusion. The Christian faith had already united and inspired Europe for more than a millennium, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation was also powerful in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And of course, the Reformation divided Europe fatefully between Catholic and Protestant countries. But out of all that ferment, there is no question that Europe and then America rose to dominance and, for better or worse, have led the world for the past five centuries. Today, despite its current weakness and divisions, the United States still stands as the lead society in both the West and the world.

Before the rise of Europe, the great civilisations of the world were held to be mainly in Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean—the Sumerians, Egyptians, Chinese, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Europe was never in contention. For a start, Europe has no natural, physical, or racial focus of unity like that of China and India. It was simply a vast territorial homeland for a restlessly wandering variety of tribes and barbarians. Barbarians, indeed, were at the roots of Europe and we Europeans must never forget it. There had certainly been a growing sense of unity in Europe after the Christian conversions of the barbarian kings, gathering force and speed decisively under the Emperor



Charlemagne in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and consolidating in the face of Islamic invaders. And the reforms of the great monastic movements under leaders such as Saints Benedict and Gregory had a culture-forming effect in Europe. The births of the great universities such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, the magnificence of 12<sup>th</sup> century European cathedrals, the profundity of medieval philosophy, and the soaring beauty of sacred music were an indication of what Europe was accomplishing, but Christian dominance in Europe did not mean European dominance in the world.

What then became Western civilisation over the last 500 years has been described as the greatest and most powerful civilisation in all of history, because of its global reach, impact, and its proud track record of genuine social progress. Partly, this was the result of Europe's extraordinary intellectual and artistic prowess—for example, Dante Alighieri, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Johann Sebastian Bach, Rembrandt, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven. But mainly the worldwide impact was due to Europe's "great exports"—the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and the development and applications of science, technology, and the market economy. The combined power of all these innovations has woken the world up from the drudgery of the past, transformed whole societies, and bettered the lives of billions of people, empowering even the enemies of the West today. And these innovations would have been impossible without the West's Christian faith, which provided the necessary assumptions for their development. No people or generation in all of history has ever seen such a powerful tide of progress, with so many believing it was destined to go onward and upward forever.

## Western Decline

---

Today, two facts are almost beyond question. First, the West has dominated the world over the past half millennium. And second, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a swelling chorus of voices that has signalled the decline of the West and the end of its global dominance as a power. If Western greatness has been unequalled, the rapidity of its decline has never been equalled either. Never, for example, have so many major empires collapsed in a single generation, as the European ones did after the two great wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One could understand Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebration on 22 June 1897, as the supreme symbol of the zenith of the European phase of Western civilisation. A 17-carriage grand imperial parade on a beautiful summer day demonstrated the power and glory of Great Britain and Europe. A quarter of the earth's surface lay under the rule of the Queen-Empress's nation alone and Her Majesty's Royal Navy ruled the waves. Yet only days later, Rudyard Kipling celebrated the occasion in *The Times* with a poetic warning, *Recessional*. Within four years, in 1901, the Queen herself was gone. A few years later, her dinner partner at the celebration of her Jubilee, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated, setting off the first of the cataclysmic 20<sup>th</sup> century wars. The greatness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—the century hailed as the busiest, most enterprising, and most progressive century in all of history—was over.

There had certainly been worries about Europe's decadence and decline in the 1890s. For example, French poet Charles Baudelaire blamed the advance of technology.<sup>15</sup> Such was the chaotic ferment of ideas in Vienna that Austrian writer Karl Kraus described the city as "the testing ground for world destruction." Before that, other distinguished voices expressed alarm at the state of the West, included Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky in Russia, Jacob Burckhardt in Switzerland, and the brothers Henry and Brook Adams in the United States. The West, Henry wrote, was barrelling down towards "ultimate, colossal, cosmic collapse."<sup>16</sup> Suddenly, these scattered voices swelled to a strong chorus in the new century, climaxing in the grand narratives of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*,<sup>17</sup> Arnold



Toynbee's *A Study of History*,<sup>18</sup> Pitirim Sorokin's *Social and Cultural Dynamics*,<sup>19</sup> Philip Rieff's *My Life Among the Deathworks*,<sup>20</sup> and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Warning to the West*.<sup>21</sup>

The horror of the First World War was merely the harbinger of the hurricane of history that the 20<sup>th</sup> century became. The so-called "Great War" was soon overshadowed by the dark series of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's atrocities. These atrocities shook the pretensions of European civilisation forever—both the Christian dimension, through the horrifying violations of human life, dignity, and ethics, and the Enlightenment dimension, through the flat-out contradiction of the claim of human progress. Western civilisation's "innocence" was lost once and for all. American novelist Gertrude Stein called the generation that followed the "Lost Generation,"<sup>22</sup> and in his first book *This Side of Paradise*, American writer Scott Fitzgerald described his contemporaries as having "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in men shaken."<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the 19<sup>th</sup> century's voices of decline and doom were amplified by the carnage and horror of the two World Wars, the emergence of total war and the slaughter of civilians, the rise of totalitarianism, the horror of the revelations of the death camps, and the menace of nuclear destruction.

Thanks to the West, humanity must now forever stand "post-Auschwitz," "post-Hiroshima," and "pre-Singularity." Our double human capacity for evil and for destruction has been demonstrated beyond deniability. Could Europe ever deserve to be called civilised again with ideologies as evil and cruel as communism and fascism in its account? Western morale was deflated if not ruined, and in the eyes of many, the moral leadership of the West could never be the same. If the West was envied for its prosperity, power, and progress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and viewed as relatively virtuous, at least in its own eyes, its perception became irredeemably wicked after the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, the chorus of decline and assault now includes the United States within its scope. America was once considered exempt from the run and rules affecting other Western nations, at least in American eyes. The country's modern identity was formed in response to its leadership of the free world against a range of European empires in the First World War, fighting one dangerous European dictatorship in the Second World War, and another equally dangerous European dictatorship in the Cold War.

But now America is accused of all the dark sins and attributes of imperialism itself, including by many Americans. The Vietnam and Iraq wars and American atrocities committed in those conflicts are the American equivalent of the Great War for Europe. The age of innocence, self-righteousness, and the Norman Rockwell salt of the earth image of America was over for good. Today, America's entire past has been revised, and large swathes of the American intelligentsia have joined cultural Marxists in recasting their country's history in the harsh light of the radical left's identitarian critiques. Thus, America is torn by its greatest internal division since the Civil War, instigated by radical ideas adopted uncritically from Europe. Today, America looks to be suffering from the same malaise as much of the rest of the West. If anything, it is declining at an even faster rate, with more bizarre examples of madness and decadence, and with an even more disastrous outcome.

If America's present crisis is part of the overall crisis of the West, this is no time for American parochialism. Nor is it time to be chanting deceptive mantras about American exceptionalism. The present civilisational moment challenges Americans both as citizens of the lead society of the West and, in the case of American Jews and Christians, as heirs of the faiths that made the West. Americans must each enlarge their horizons, stretch the borders of their thinking, and venture beyond the comfort of their customary histories. America's similarities and differences from the rest of the West are important. But the issues the country faces are deeper than simply being Republicans versus Democrats or conservatives versus liberals.

In short, no one can understand and resolve America's present crisis without understanding its source and connection to the wider crisis of the West.

## Civilisational Moment

---

The West is in the midst of a civilisational moment and a civilisational contest. A civilisational moment is a critical transition phase in the life of a civilisation, when it loses a decisive connection with the dynamic that inspired it. Such a moment must result in one of three broad options: a renewal of the dynamic that inspired the civilisation in the first place, a successful replacement of the original dynamic by another, or the decline of the civilisation. In sum, the issue for a civilisation in a civilisational moment is its vision of ultimate reality—is the civilisation in living touch with the ideas, ideals, and inspiration that created it, and which it needs to continue to flourish? Or, with its roots severed and no replacement in place, will it decline and die?

Such civilisational moments are transitional and ripe with several possibilities, so they are fraught with tension and turbulence, and often with conflicts, wars, and revolutions. They are what the Chinese called a “period of the contending states,” what Burckhardt in his prophetic study *Force and Freedom* called “an era of wars,”<sup>24</sup> what Toynbee called “a time of troubles,”<sup>25</sup> what Sorokin called “*dies irae, dies illa*—that day, the day of wrath and impending doom,”<sup>26</sup> and what Leon Kass calls a “civilisational contest.”<sup>27</sup> As the horizon darkened in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Burckhardt noted that “the established political forms of the greatest civilised peoples are tottering or changing.”<sup>28</sup> Little did he realise that four great empires were soon to collapse—the Hohenzollern in Germany, the Habsburg in Austria-Hungary, the Romanov in Russia, the Ottoman in Turkey—and the greatest of all the empires, the British, was well advanced in its sunset years. Civilisational moments are always critical in the history of particular civilisations, but that significance is magnified exponentially in our now globalised world. The outcome of the present civilisational moment and contest will be momentous not only for the West, but for humanity and all future generations.

## The Cancelled Factor

There is no question that the Christian faith was the *ultimate allegiance* and the view of *ultimate reality* that most Westerners knew throughout its history. It was the conviction of the supreme presence of the one true, transcendent God and faith in Him that made the West possible.

Historians Lord Acton and Christopher Dawson both argued repeatedly that “religion is the key to history.”<sup>29</sup> In *Progress and Religion*, Dawson explained, “Every living culture must possess some spiritual dynamic, which provides the energy necessary for that sustained social effort that is civilisation.”<sup>30</sup> If, then, the Western crisis is in part a spiritual crisis, the solution needs to include a spiritual dimension. Put more strongly, an increasing number of people are beginning to appreciate that the Western crisis is essentially a spiritual crisis. Edmund Burke claimed that “religion is the basis of civil society.”<sup>31</sup> The question now is whether the faith of Jews and Christians will prove strong enough to provide a constructive solution to the civilisational moment.

Without identifying the role of faith, any history of the West would be incomplete. There is no alternative to an open acknowledgment of the powerful role of faith in the rise of the West, in the purported decline of the West, and in suggestions about the potential renewal of the West. In today's secularised climate, the crucial role of faith in the West is often ignored. And if considered, it is often despised and “cancelled”. The European Union, for example, is notorious for its miserly appreciation of

its own debts to its Christian origins. Religion is mostly discussed in polite intellectual circles only in terms of its scandals, its weaknesses, its steady disappearance, and its contribution to political conflicts and terrorism. This view is shortsighted due to the importance of religion in understanding the West and Western values.

The reasons for this neglect, as we shall see, are part of the overall conflicts within the West today. But the point is clear: the full crisis of the West cannot and will not be understood properly unless critics take the place of faith seriously and accurately—for two elementary reasons. First, faith is the decisive factor because it is a matter of what people believe to be ultimate reality and a matter of their ultimate allegiance to that reality. Second, to the degree that the crisis of the West turns out to be the result of the crisis of faith, to that degree the role of faith will be crucial to the solution. Our concern here is the crisis of the West as a civilisation, but as Walter Russell Mead points out in his magisterial book *The Arc of a Covenant*, the same difficulty of dealing with faith with intellectual integrity is also true when dealing with many other issues such as nuclear disaster, extreme climate change, cyberwar software, and genetic modification.<sup>32</sup> Difficult as it is to bring religious and ethical convictions to bear in thinking about domestic and foreign policy, “some understanding of and sympathy for the worlds of religion and spiritual hunger remains indispensable for serious policy making.” Considering the gravity of the global challenges facing humanity, to take them seriously is to be braced to face up to the question of ultimate reality. At such a moment, anything less will always turn out to be trivial and inadequate.

Politics provides another reason why faith must not be censored and cancelled in public debate. A culture assumes a cult, and a political order is a commentary on what culture considers the nature of humanity and what is humanly possible. “What is government itself,” James Madison wrote famously, “but the greatest of all reflections of human nature?”<sup>33</sup> Despotism and autocracy, for example, go hand in hand with a low view of human worth, and a low view of human worth makes authoritarianism inevitable. Stated more positively, human freedom assumes and requires a high view of human dignity and worth, and therefore a strong view of faith to undergird freedom and a strong respect for institutions such as the family, the school, and the church or synagogue, which cultivate the faith needed to make freedom possible and lasting. Finally, philosophy too must play its full part in the debate and take faith seriously. The question of what is believed to be ultimately real is basic to philosophy, and so it works together with faith and is crucial in achieving a good outcome to the West’s civilisational moment.

Yet faith has largely been “cancelled” in serious discussion today, not only by secular thinkers, but even by many religious believers, if unwittingly. Secularists give a reductionist account of faith, denying the transcendent. They regard faith as an ornament on the superstructure of society rather than foundational to society’s very existence. And many Christians no longer discuss faith publicly in terms of its ultimate reality, but instead they talk purely in human and secular terms, relying on psychology and sociology to give credence to their arguments. They should be under no illusion: the full psychological and sociological machinery of analysing religion, with all its soaring theories and trunk load of statistics, from Auguste Comte through to Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, to the intellectual giants today, is vital and significant. But it is never more than an assessment of the merely human and secular side of religion, rather than its essence.

What such academic disciplines omit entirely is the ultimate and supernatural reality that faith claims to be about. If the claims of a faith are true, as its believers hold, then faith is an ultimate allegiance that speaks truly about ultimate reality. For those who believe, the ultimate reality must remain the supreme factor in thinking and in all human affairs. For those who believe, the ultimate reality must never be left out of the equation. Incomprehensible though it may be to many people, and impolite and incorrect though it may be to say in certain circles, if faith in God was in any way behind the rise of the West, then

faith or absence of faith in God is also bound to be a factor in the decline or the renewal of the West. Thus, faith must never be left out of the discussion. It is the decisive issue for the West today.

No one should forget that both the strength and the weakness of a civilisation are always internal before they are external. They are spiritual, moral, and cultural before they are economic and military.

Russia's despotism and Chinese totalitarianism have become a problem only because Europe, America, and the West as a whole have not addressed their own civilisational problems. America's ordered freedom, for example, was once the bold answer to history's extremes of anarchy, which is all freedom and no order, and authoritarianism, which is all order and no freedom. But America today appears content to stagger uneasily between semi-anarchism and semi-authoritarianism. Americans need to pay urgent attention to first principles. The conclusions we come to in our time will be critical for the future of the West and for the future of individual nations in the West.

The West is now largely opposed to the faith that made it, and the intelligentsia in its lead society, America, are increasingly opposed to both the faith and the revolution that made it. These facts cannot but be consequential. For those with eyes to see, the present civilisational moment is history's wake-up call to the West. Ignore it and the decline will be irreversible.

## Conclusion

---

When I talk of the renewal of the West, and of renewing the Jewish and Christian contributions to its civilisation, I am emphatically not advocating a post-liberal return to any notion of neo-Christendom, the revival of Roman Catholic integralism, or a revamped Russian Orthodox doctrine of the Third Rome. I personally am strongly opposed to any conservative coalition that could easily become authoritarian. Putin's spurious advocacy of "Christian values" and Patriarch Kirill's support of Putin's war clearly demonstrate the fallacy of the maxim that my enemy's enemy is my friend. There must be no cosying up to autocrats on either the right or the left. My own strong preference is the truly liberal vision of ordered freedom, emphasising freedom of conscience, and a pluralistic "civil public square", in clear contrast to a "sacred public square" (where there is an established church) and a "naked public square" (where there is a complete separation of faith and public life), as outlined in my earlier book *The Global Public Square*.<sup>34</sup>

Like the greatest of the great civilisations of the past, Western civilisation has had a towering impact for better or worse. To turn from the Jewish and Christian faiths that made Western civilisation possible, to alternatives that are unable to replace their vitality and their high view of humanity, would be an act of historic folly that spells the end of the West and a dark day for the human future. No society that ignores such foundational truths of the Jewish and Christian views as human dignity, truth, words, conscience, covenant, freedom, justice, and peace can hope to build a society worthy of humanity.

A civilisational moment, while necessarily including an accurate understanding of the past and the present, is ultimately about the future. As such, it challenges us as humans to be clear about first principles before we think of solving problems. Global transformation is a fundamental quest of our time, but how is it to be pursued and ordered? Globalists and Global Resetters go wrong from the start by beginning with problems, not principles. They begin with grand global problems, such as war, population, pandemics, and environmental disaster, and inevitably arrive at grand global solutions, grand global organisations and institutions to solve them, and, in the end, grand global governance.



Whatever the globalists' motive, they move inexorably towards a revived imperialism that is indistinguishable in principle from that of a Pharaoh, a Caesar, a Holy Roman Emperor, or a Führer. After all, the real evil of Hitler's "nationalism" was his refusal to remain a nation. Hitler's German nationalism was an ill-disguised bid for German imperialism. The result of globalist endeavours is an inevitable shrinking of human freedoms and a stifling of humanity's genuine diversity. Unless globalism is thought through with far greater care, the disdain for nations and the rush to the global at the expense of the national and the local will be a massive reinforcement of the authoritarian trends already powerfully at work in our world.

There can be little doubt that for the Global Resetters, the name of the game is control. The logic is clear and grim. The chaos and conflicts of the world must be brought to order, or else. The world must be brought to heel if it is not to drive us towards hell. In short, there must be universal control if there is not to be universal chaos, so total control becomes the price of human survival. Considering the gravity of the present "polycrises", they say, no extreme scenario is off the table. If the issue is saving the world, the end justifies all possible means. Thus, regardless of the idealism and utopianism they may still profess, their will to power and their drive to dominate takes over in practice. There is no time to lose, they urge. Leaders who understand the gravity of the hour should act without delay.

It is time to buck the fashionable disdain for nations and nationalism, as if they were nothing but "Christian nationalism" and "white nationalism". Protestants were once stoutly opposed to Catholic empires, and Americans were once equally opposed to European empires. It is time to reaffirm the key importance of the nation in the Jewish story, in the story of the Reformation, and in the English-speaking world in particular. While nations and nationalism can go badly wrong—above all, ironically, when they want to be more than nations and grow imperial aspirations—national sovereignty is a vital alternative to imperialism, and the nation-state is a guarantor of a critical level of human self-determination and self-government. Often, only a nation can be the guardian of a shared faith, language, culture, law, tradition, and defence that are distinctive and precious for a people.

There is certainly a present mismatch between global problems and national solutions. But through errors in response, Global Resetters have become intent on pulling the world away from sovereignty at the personal, local, and national levels. In response to the civilisational moment, the West should affirm two key values: *freedom*—the vital liberal freedom for humans as individual persons to be fully themselves, and to think freely, speak freely, and live together freely. And *sovereignty*—so that human responsibility is balanced between personal sovereignty, local sovereignty, national sovereignty, and global sovereignty. Sovereignty is an important bulwark against overly centralised power that can act against human freedom and national interests.

The West should start with these first principles, alongside an appreciation of the fundamental importance of faith, and model solutions to national and global problems based on these convictions. The better way to preserve freedom is to start with principles, not problems—to think, first, of the foundational principles of a human friendly society, such as human dignity, freedom, justice, peace, civility, and the ideal of living together with our deep differences. The way to proceed, then, is to move from first principles to the best political arrangements for realising and fulfilling these ideals, and then to move to the task of forging practical solutions to global problems. Pursued in this way, the best solutions will stem from first principles, and they will honour and protect those first principles, refusing to violate their character.

This essay is written primarily for citizens of the West, and especially for those who appreciate the importance of faith for society—even if they do not share it. This essay is also written for all others around the world who wish to wrestle with the significance of this extraordinary moment in history. Too much thinking today is myopic, and too many people's concerned activism excludes a grasp of the wider

civilisational battlefield. Additionally, little thought is given to what peace after victory might mean. It is time to seriously consider the crisis of the West, and to launch a project of thought and debate on the best way forward for the world. And it is time to strive with heart and soul for a more free, just, and hopeful human future.

- <sup>1</sup> William Zheng, “China’s officials play up ‘rise of the East, decline of the West,’” *South China Morning Post*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3124752/chinas-officials-play-rise-east-decline-west?module=inline&pgtype=article>.
- <sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach* (Oregon: Clunker Press, 1867).
- <sup>3</sup> “The Fourth Industrial Revolution, by Klaus Schwab,” World Economic Forum, accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/about/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-by-klaus-schwab>.
- <sup>4</sup> “About us,” Club of Rome, accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.clubofrome.org/about-us/>.
- <sup>5</sup> “Imagine,” Genius, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://genius.com/John-lennon-imagine-lyrics>.
- <sup>6</sup> David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: C Hurst and Co Publishers Ltd, 2017).
- <sup>7</sup> Edward Mead Earle, “H.G. Wells, British Patriot in Search of a World State,” *World Politics* 2, no.2 (January 1950).
- <sup>8</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now* (New York: Viking Press, 2018).
- <sup>9</sup> R. Evan Ellis, “The Trouble With China’s Global Civilization Initiative,” *The Diplomat*, June 1, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/the-trouble-with-chinas-global-civilization-initiative/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, premiered November 10, 1958.
- <sup>11</sup> Ellis, “The Trouble With China’s Global Civilization Initiative.”
- <sup>12</sup> Archbishop Kirill in a speech, November 3, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, “The Three Romes: The Migration of an Ideology and the Making of an Autocrat,” *Myth and Mythmaking* 88, no. 2 (Spring 1959), 291.
- <sup>14</sup> Subandri Simbolon, “What the Reformation has contributed to the modern world,” Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies, Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada, December 29, 2017.
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1863.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry Brooks Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907).
- <sup>17</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Modern Library, 1965).
- <sup>18</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 1961.
- <sup>19</sup> Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1985).
- <sup>20</sup> Philip Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).
- <sup>21</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Warning to the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).
- <sup>22</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), Epigraph.
- <sup>23</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922).
- <sup>24</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History* (London: Meridian Books, 1955).
- <sup>25</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 1934.
- <sup>26</sup> Joshua Pauling, “The Forgotten Russian Exile: Pitirim Sorokin,” *Modern Reformation*, January 4, 2021, <https://modernreformation.org/resource-library/web-exclusive-articles/the-forgotten-russian-exile-pitirim-sorokin/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Leon R. Kass, “Science, Religion, and the Human Future,” *Commentary*, April 2007, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/leon-kass/science-religion-and-the-human-future/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979), 340.
- <sup>29</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Progress and Religion: An Historical Inquiry* (New York: Doubleday, 1960).
- <sup>30</sup> Dawson, *Progress and Religion: An Historical Inquiry*.
- <sup>31</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: James Dodsley, 1790).
- <sup>32</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People* (New York: Vintage, 2022).
- <sup>33</sup> James Madison, *Federalist Number 51*, 1788.
- <sup>34</sup> Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (London: IVP, 2013).



This research has been produced and published by ARC Research, a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee registered at Companies House with number 14739317, which exists to advance education and promote research.

ISBN: 978-1-916948-01-3

[www.arc-research.org](http://www.arc-research.org)

October 2023