# Postmodernism, Multiculturalism, and the Death of Tolerance: The Transformation of American Society

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Over the past several decades American society has been engaged in what is popularly described as a "culture war," pitting secular "liberal" progressives against "conservative" traditionalists. The conflict is generally thought to involve various contested social issues, such as abortion, homosexuality and sexual expression more generally, education, the family, media, environment, and others. The focus on issue politics, however, tends to obscure the more fundamental and deeper divide in contemporary American society. Every culture is a product of the religious views held by members of that society. The contemporary battle over the direction of culture in the United States is ultimately a battle not over discrete issues but rather conflicting religious worldviews. Modern liberal progressivism (the Left) generally embodies the novel secular or human-centered faith that arose in competition to traditional biblical faith, generally defended by contemporary conservatism (the Right). The division between the two camps could not be starker. Their respective views conflict at the most fundamental level, the level of religion, encompassing as they do conflicting views regarding

*"Culture war" in America rooted in conflicting religious worldviews.*

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the very nature of human beings and purpose of human existence. Nor could the stakes involved in the culture war be more significant. What is ultimately at stake is not the substance of particular public policy but rather preservation or destruction of the characteristically American way of life, dependent as it is upon certain inherited religious values (culture) implicit in both its institutional structure and customary practices.

The contemporary culture war is a particularly American manifestation of the modern revolt against God and displacement of Christianity by one variant or other of a secular or innerworldly political religion. Contemporary cultural and political conflict in the United States did not begin with recent elections but is rather an outcome of trends and movements developed over several centuries. The nineteenth century witnessed the construction of various forms of intramundane social or political religion intended to supplant traditional Christianity. The political Left is the chief carrier of the novel secular religiosity in the American context, beginning with such movements as the Social Gospel and Progressivism, the proximate forebear of modern liberalism.[1] Traditional religious values and institutions are typically defended by the Right, the conservatives whose general aim, as the term indicates, is the conservation of traditional American values and institutions in the face of modern challenges.

For well over a century the Left in both Europe and North America has led an assault on biblical religion and its civilizational manifestations. Such efforts have achieved substantial success; contemporary Western culture, including American culture, is saturated with the secular progressive worldview. The rising generation in the United States has been reared in a cultural environment profoundly shaped by nontheistic and even antitheistic assumptions, a society implicitly and explicitly informed by a post-Christian, post-theological, or postmodern worldview. Many members of American society are ignorant of the nature and history of Western civilization

*Contemporary Western culture saturated with the secular progressive worldview.*

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[1] Charles D. Cashdollar, *The Transformation of Theology, 1830-1890: Positivism and Protestant Thought in Britain and America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Gillis Harp, *Positivist Republic: Auguste Comte and the Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1920* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995); Linda C. Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

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in general and American society in particular and increasingly unfamiliar with the religious worldview that impelled their development. The deracination of significant portions of the American populace, especially its younger members, may be well-intended but is not accidental. It is rather the result of conscious efforts to transform American society, efforts typically spearheaded by secular or progressive elites. Advocates of such transformation, from Karl Marx through Antonio Gramsci to Saul Alinsky, have long understood that the success of their efforts depends upon transformation not only of particular political, economic, and legal institutions but culture more generally. As one important contemporary American public figure put it, such transformation requires a "change in our traditions, our history."[2] Culture is always and everywhere the product of the cult. Thus the transformative change sought by the modern American Left necessarily involves transformation of the religious and moral self-understanding of traditional American society, an understanding decisively informed by the biblical worldview.

The ongoing transformation of traditional American values and beliefs has been facilitated by the rise of several significant intellectual and educational trends, among the most important of which are postmodernism, multiculturalism, and relativism. Marxism and related modern ideologies are widely recognized to have sought explicit transformation of Western society. The relation between the fashionable doctrines of postmodernism, multiculturalism, and relativism and the goal of cultural transformation is less commonly perceived. The means employed by the latter are more subtle, indirect, and implicit than those advocated by classic Marxist ideology, but such doctrines serve to undermine traditional Western and American society as surely, if not as straightforwardly, as Marxist doctrine proper. The Fabians and fellow travelers were correct: the transformation of the free society in the direction of socialism or some other form of collectivism does not, as Marx suggested, depend on violent revolution. The same goal can

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[2] "Barack knows that we are going to have to make sacrifices; we are going to have to change our conversation; we're going to have to change our traditions, our history; we're going to have to move into a different place as a nation." Michelle Obama, Speech given in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on May 14, 2008.

be achieved by the gradual, evolutionary destruction of its foundational beliefs and values, as recognized by the British Fabians, their Progressive American counterparts, and later Communist strategists such as Gramsci. The realization of Communism, Gramsci maintained, requires destruction of the "cultural hegemony" putatively held by the capitalist ruling class—the false intellectual, philosophical, and religious ethos it has long perpetrated to maintain privilege and control. Such can be achieved by the patient and long-term reeducation of the populace within the framework of traditional social institutions, such as schools, universities, courts, and media. Communist student leader Rudi Dutschke famously reformulated Gramsci's evolutionary strategy as "the long march through the institutions."[3] We recall in this regard the motto of the Fabians: "Make Haste Slowly." Postmodernism, multiculturalism, and relativism are three gradualist or evolutionary means advanced by the modern Left toward attainment, surely if slowly, of its transformational goals.

### Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the general term used to describe the overarching cultural perspective that develops in the West after the decline of "modernity." Scholars disagree on the precise origin of the term, variously attributing its first use to one or another nineteenth or early twentieth century thinker.[4] The central attribute of postmodern thought, on the other hand, is more readily identified, namely, skepticism toward or outright denial of the existence of universal or absolute Truth—a "Big T" Truth that transcends both history and the subjective values and opinions of human beings. The Western tradition

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[3] In 1967, Rudi Dutschke, a German student leader, reformulated Antonio Gramsci's philosophy of cultural hegemony with the phrase, "The long march through the institutions." Instead of a long military march, such as the one undertaken by the Chinese Marxist Mao Zedong, in the highly developed western countries the long march would be through the most culturally significant of our social institutions – that is, through schools, universities, courts, parliaments and through the media, including newspapers and television.

[4] The term originated as a critique of the putatively "modernist" scientific mentality of objectivity and progress associated with the French Enlightenment.

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from classical Greece to modernity is of course saturated with the very outlook that postmodernism rejects—belief in objective and immutable Truth, including moral and religious Truth. Accordingly, the postmodern era, as previously noted, is often referred to as the "post-Christian" or "post-theological" era.

*For postmodern thinkers, such truths as exist are subjective, relative, and conditional.*

Postmodernism not only rejects the concept of absolute Truth but other conceptions central to the Western tradition as well. It rejects, for instance, the characteristic distinction between this-world and the world Beyond first apprehended by Plato, as well as the related distinction between nature (what is objectively *given* to humankind) and history (contingent human experience in time). On the postmodern view, Nature is more or less assimilated to History. Not only does the traditional concept of a *given* nature presuppose a metaphysical "Giver," which cannot be sustained on postmodern grounds, but the truth of nature can never be more than particular historical truth, the only form in which truth of any kind can or does exist. The postmodern restriction of truth to the various truths accepted by particular cultures and societies over time means of course that truth, like history itself, is continually in flux. Truth, as every other aspect of human existence in time, is and must be provisional and contingent, relative and conditional. What is true for postmodern society may not have been true for ancient or medieval society or, for that matter, the eighteenth century society of colonial America. What is true for one culture, say Western culture, is not necessarily true for other cultures. What is true for one ethnic group may not be true for a different ethnic group. Indeed what is true for one person may not be true for a second person. There is no eternal and universal Truth that transcends particular historical truths, no absolute, unconditional Truth that transcends the relative truths of particular historical cultures, groups, individuals, and so on. Postmodernism so conceived therefore must, and does, reject the Truth-claims associated with the Platonic and Judeo-Christian worldviews, and indeed any religion or philosophy that claims to articulate a universal or absolute Truth that transcends the movement of history. For postmodern thinkers, such truths as exist are inevitably subjective, relative, and conditional, relative to and contingent upon the particular

perspective of the perceiver, a viewpoint generally described as "perspectivism."

## Nietzschean Perspectivism

Various postmodern thinkers regard themselves as descendants of Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who famously announced the "death of God" at the close of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche's critique of Western civilization involved a thoroughgoing attack on the Platonic and Christian distinction between transcendence and immanence and the absolute Truth Platonism and Christianity claim to represent. According to Nietzsche, both conceptions are delusions or illusions. There is no Truth that transcends history, only the particular truths of particular perspectives. Nor is there a substantive reality transcending this world; remove the veil of illusion and one finds nothing but a void, a nothingness. The recognition of such hard truth, however, should not be met with despair but rather, Nietzsche proclaims, with courage and the will to create. The great majority of human beings, the weak and cowardly, will undoubtedly fall back on the comforting illusions of traditional philosophy and religion, but a few extraordinary individuals, the *Übermenschen* (Overmen or Supermen), possess the requisite courage and will squarely to face the truth of existence. The *Übermensch* responds to the metaphysical void not with despair but rather the realization that he himself must singlehandedly create the values, meaning, and purpose by which to orient his existence. Such are not given by God or a supernatural source, as Platonism and Christianity falsely maintain. Platonism and Christianity, again, represent mere illusions fit only to console and control the great mass of human beings, who, in fact, are little better than slaves. The Nietzschean *Übermensch* is superior to the mass. He alone does not flinch in the face of the void but rather accepts the challenge to endow his life with self-created value and purpose.[5] He alone has the strength to discard de-

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[5] Elaborating the concept in *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche asserts that Christianity, not merely as a religion but also as the predominant moral system of the Western world, in fact inverts nature, and is hostile to life. "I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean,

lusional crutches such as supernatural religion, suitable only for inferior human beings who lack the vitality and will truly to exist.

Nietzsche further maintains that the Truth-claims of Platonism and Christianity are not merely false and delusional but pernicious in yet another respect—they are hostile to life itself. Western philosophy and religion posit a transcendent realm in eternity and a transcendent morality to which man is obliged to align his values and action. According to Nietzsche, such conceptions diminish the significance of this world and existence in time. The negative rules of Judeo-Christian morality are especially malignant, compressing, restraining, and enervating of the life force. Obedience to such rules makes man mild, meek, passive—they make him slavish. Indeed, says Nietzsche, Christianity is the religion of slaves, its morality a "slave morality."[6] The *Übermensch* will not be constrained by such life-denying values. He rises up to "transvalue all values," to create his own morality and his own rules, "beyond Good and Evil."[7] He exerts what Nietzsche calls his "will to power"—his will to create his own existence.

*For Nietzsche, Christianity is a "slave morality."*

According to Nietzsche, the metaphysical and religious tradition of Western civilization stemmed neither from disinterested search for Truth nor revelation by a supernatural God. It is rather a construction of human beings motivated by such a "will to power," the will to define or control reality through the creative act. Nietzsche generally employed the term in reference to the creativity of the artist. Certain of his intellectual descendants, most infamously the German Nazis, interpreted the will to power in a political sense, as the will to political power. Other postmodernists accept Nietzsche's critique of both metaphysics and absolute Truth—all truth is relative and conditional, dependent on the individual's perspective—but, unlike Nietzsche, tend to associate "perspective" with various

and petty—I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind . . . and one calculates time from the *dies nefastus* on which this fatality—arose—from the first day of Christianity! Why not rather from its last? From today? Revaluation of all values! Friedrich Nietzsche, Conclusion, *The Antichrist*, in Michael Tanner, ed, *The Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1989).

neo-Marxist categories, especially the so-called "Marxian Trinity" of gender, race, and economic class. The truth perceived by a poor black woman, for postmodernists, is different from the truth perceived by a rich white man; truth is perspectival, relative, and conditional.

Postmodern theorists suggest, moreover, that the dominant traditions and values of Western civilization—Judeo-Christian morality, constitutionalism, the rule of law, capitalism—rose to dominance not because they are inherently true, in accord with nature, or conducive to human flourishing. Such "social constructions" were rather invented or devised by those persons or groups that historically wielded power in society and this for the purpose of controlling or "marginalizing" less powerful persons and groups. Indeed postmodernists believe that the power possessed by cultural and political elites in all eras includes the power to define language itself, which in turn has enabled such groups to define truth and reality itself. In the case of Western civilization, its dominant elites—more or less European white men—putatively exercised their power to define language to cast themselves as superior to those groups over whom they wielded power—ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, and other groups historically portrayed as culturally or socially inferior. The similarity to Marxism, which attributes the power to form a culture's prevailing ideas and values to the capitalist ruling class, and for the exclusive benefit of that class, is striking and obvious.

*The entire Western Canon dismissed as little more than the self-serving perspective of the powerful.*

Indeed, for staunch postmodernists, the entire Western Canon—the classics of literature, philosophy, religion, art, music, and other cultural expressions that traditionally formed the basis of higher education in the West—represents little more than the biased and self-serving perspective of the powerful. The power of white European men enabled them to define the very concepts of "superior" and "inferior" and do so in a manner that insured the continuing power of their own class and kind. This explains why Shakespeare, for instance, has long been included in the Western Canon but Hildegard von Bingen, the female medieval writer and polymath, has not. Shakespeare was a white European man, and his elevation simultaneously elevated all white European men; female writers, on the other hand, were marginalized, relegated to insignificance. This is

why Plato has traditionally been more highly regarded than the Greek lesbian poet Sappho. White heterosexual men held the power to define what is of value and what is not, and Plato served their purposes far better than Sappho. In postmodernist reality, however, objective grounds for holding Shakespeare superior to Hildegard or Plato superior to Sappho simply do not exist. Such a conclusion follows from the postmodern rejection of objective trans-historical standards, the only means by which such judgments could be made. Who is to say that Plato is superior to Sappho? Who is to say that Beethoven is superior to Madonna? Who is to say that the *Mona Lisa* is superior to Mickey Mouse or *Antigone* to *American Idol?* Who is to say that Notre Dame Cathedral is more beautiful than a strip mall? No one can make such claims. There is no absolute truth or objective universal standard that permits judgments of absolute superiority and inferiority. There is only subjective perspective—only your opinion and my opinion. All opinions are equally based on personal perspective, and all opinions are equally valid. The traditional definitions of superiority and inferiority are mere self-serving inventions or social constructions of dominant elites or power-holders, typically, in the West, white men. Such definitions and judgments have nothing to do with truth but only the will to power.

*All opinions viewed as equally valid.*

Such postmodern logic extends beyond artistic judgments to morality, law, politics, economics, science, religion, and every other cultural phenomenon.[8] Who is to say that marriage should be defined as a union between a man and a woman? Who is to say that Christianity is superior to Wicca? Who is to say that women should be permitted to drive an automobile, travel, and receive an education? Who is to say that it is always morally wrong to steal or kill or lie? Who is to say that rationality is better than irrationality? Who is to say that scientific laws capture objective truth? No one, according to postmodernism, can make such absolute judgments. Even the valorization of rationality and science represents only another "privileged" perspective posing as Truth. Who is to define freedom, justice, rights, law, and other terms of Western political discourse? Who is to say that the rule of law is supe-

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[8] Postmodernism challenges the very concept of logic, regarded as yet another imposition of European man on other perspectives.

rior to the personal rule of men? Who is to say what the U.S. Constitution means? Who is to say that capitalism is superior to socialism? Again, no one can make such claims, for there is no objective trans-historical standard by which to evaluate competing perspectives. Even theory and history—reason and experience—are mere perspectival constructs without universal validity. For postmodernists, traditional definitions and standards, including the standards of rationality, logic, and evidence, do not capture the truth of experience but merely further the power of historically dominant elites. Arguments and evidence offered by scholars and scientists, no matter how scrupulously constructed, can hold no more claim to objective truth than the assertion that Beethoven is superior to Madonna. Scholarship and science, like all claims to truth, in fact and necessarily merely evidence the subjective perspective of the researchers and, indeed, may serve merely to oppress and suppress dissenting perspectives.

Postmodernism thus poses a radical challenge to the foundational principles of Western civilization in general and American society in particular. Western civilization developed precisely on the basis of beliefs, values, and convictions rejected out-of-hand by postmodern doctrine. From the Greeks to the Americans, Western thought and practice was oriented by an ideal of objective Truth, whether the Forms of Platonism or the Divine Truth revealed by the biblical God, a Truth conceived as absolute, immutable, and universal, transcending history and particular perspective. Man, the rational animal of the Greeks, the rational persona of the Romans, the being endowed with reason of the Judeo-Christian conception, was believed not only equipped but more or less obliged to employ his reason to uncover Truth, moral and natural. Such truth as is discoverable by human reason was supplemented in the Platonic conception by the truth apprehended by mystical insight and, in the Christian conception, by the Truth revealed in Scripture. Throughout the course of its development, Western society not only conceived the objective reality of Truth but regarded its pursuit as worthy, legitimate, and even obligatory. Indeed Aristotle regarded the contemplative life in pursuit of truth (*theoria*) as itself the Highest Good, the *summum bonum*, as the medieval world would later describe it, a belief he be-

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queathed to the Western world that followed in his footsteps.

Western civilization developed upon the ancient conviction of the objective and immutable Truth of the order of existence. Such includes the conviction of an objective and immutable order of law—the moral and physical laws of nature which man can potentially discover or recognize but which he himself does not construct or invent. It developed upon the belief that certain actions are right- or wrong-in-themselves, regardless of an individual's subjective opinion, preference, or perspective. It developed upon the further belief in an objective or *given* human nature that is not susceptible of human or social construction. It developed on the belief that there is a superior, higher form of existence suitable to human nature and an inferior, lower form of existence that violates that nature. Certain actions or ways of life are in accord with the unfolding of human nature and certain ways of life prevent the realization of that nature. Postmodernism denies the Truth-value of all such traditional Western convictions, dismissing them as mere privileged and self-interested perspectives of the dominant elites who invented them. In so doing, postmodernism takes aim at the very heart and soul of Western civilization.

*Western civilization developed upon the belief that certain actions or ways of life accord with human nature and others violate that nature.*

### Multiculturalism

One of the major carriers of postmodernist thought in contemporary American society is the fashionable doctrine of Multiculturalism embedded in the greater part of educational curricula throughout the United States. The term itself is inoffensive and even appealing by traditional standards. Western educational aspirations generally included the expansion of intellectual and imaginative horizons beyond the limited confines of a student's particular culture, the hope of learning from experience and wisdom embodied in other historical civilizations. The goals of contemporary Multiculturalism, however, are of an entirely different nature. Multicultural education furthers a purpose quite unlike that of traditional cultural studies—a social and political purpose that involves, indirectly if not directly, the transformation, indeed the transmogrification, of Western civilization.

The threat to Western society posed by the doctrine of Multiculturalism is most clearly perceived in light of the precondi-

tions of cultural and social survival. Most persons, quite under-standably, tend to assume that the society into which they are born will last forever: "There'll always be an England!" sang the British people in 1939.[9] Few persons ponder the origins of their own society or concern themselves with the means of its preservation and vitality. Even a cursory study of human his-tory, however, clearly demonstrates that societies and civiliza-tions are not permanent, self-sustaining entities guaranteed to endure over time but transitory phenomena that rise and fall, appear and disappear, come and go. Contemporary societies and civilizations, including American society, are not exempt from the possibility that they too will one day be relegated, as is said, to the "dustbin of history." American society, like all societies, is a fragile *growth* whose existence and flourishing require cultivation and care. Failure to recognize or honor the conditions of its existence and vitality may unintentionally lead to its demise. Civilizational decline or destruction can oc-cur, moreover, not only through carelessness or ignorance but also willful intention. Insofar as the latter holds true, a society may not only experience cultural decline but also be said to commit cultural suicide.

Contemporary multiculturalism is a popularized offshoot of postmodernist thought. Both constructs embrace radical relativism, perspectivism, and a denial of universal Truth that transcends particular historical experience. Multicultural education, as said, purports to serve an important and unob-jectionable purpose—to expose American students to cultural beliefs and values beyond their immediate range of experience. Such exposure is considered necessary, among other reasons, to overcome a putative American ethnocentrism—an exclusive focus or preoccupation with the American cultural perspec-tive. The aim of multicultural education is often widened to include a critique of so-called "Eurocentrism"—the exclusive focus on the values and perspective of Europe, the home of Western civilization and mother of America. The actual content of multicultural curricula, however, does not typically involve

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[9] "There'll Always Be an England" is an English patriotic song, written and distributed in the summer of 1939, which became highly popular upon the outbreak of World War II. It was composed and written by Ross Parker (born Albert Rostron Parker, 16 Aug 1914 in Manchester) and Hugh Charles (born Charles Hugh Owen Ferry, 24 Jul 1907 in Reddish, Stockport, Cheshire).

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the praiseworthy goal of exposing students to the achievements of other historical cultures. Multicultural education rarely includes exploration of, say, Confucian China, Shinto Japan, the Byzantine Empire, or the ancient civilizations of Egypt and India. Students generally learn very little about the actual historical experience of other world cultures. What they unfailingly "learn" is rather the postmodernist dogma that all cultural perspectives are relative. They learn that no objective standard exists by which to evaluate the contributions of various cultures to world civilization and thus no civilization may be regarded as intrinsically superior or inferior. They learn that there is only "your culture" and "my culture," your cultural perspective and my cultural perspective; one is as valid as the other. Any judgments to the contrary merely evidence a pernicious American or European ethnocentrism. They learn, moreover, that an exclusive commitment to the values of one's own culture—a conviction that its values are good, perhaps even superior to those of other cultures, and thus worthy of defense—is not merely ethnocentric but indeed the gravest of all multicultural sins: the sin of "intolerance."

*Multicultural curricula rarely expose students to achievements of other historical cultures.*

In the name of multiculturalist value-constructions such as "diversity," "otherness," and "tolerance," students are steeped in a philosophy of radical cultural relativism. The road of relativism is anticipated to end in the glorious embrace and celebration of "diversity." The more probable end, however, is nihilism (nothingness). If all cultures—all values, beliefs, and practices—are equally and relatively true, then nothing is True. The multiculturalist claim inevitably undermines commitment to one's own particular culture, conceived as merely one alternative among many equally valid options. In light of multiculturalist assumptions, efforts to preserve one's particular society, one's particular way of life, seem misguided if not absurd. Radical cultural relativism undermines a society at its deepest level, the level of self-preservation.

*Students are steeeped in a philosophy of radical cultural relativism.*

Such a possibility calls for reflection upon the general conditions essential to the preservation of any culture, society, or civilization. We have discussed the fact that every society ultimately manifests the implicit and explicit beliefs, values, and assumptions—the worldview—embraced by its members. Society is man writ large, and man is a being who seeks value

fulfillment. The values jointly held and pursued by members of a particular society largely generate the facts of that society, a relation derived from the nature of things.[10] Although it may seem obvious and self-evident, it must nevertheless be emphasized that the first and most basic requisite of cultural survival is the desire of a people to maintain the values and beliefs that constitute their culture's foundation and spring of action. A people indifferent to the characteristic values of their culture, or a people weary of existence, will lack the will to sustain it. An apathetic people will not put forth the effort that may be required to preserve their way of life, especially in the face of opposition from competing cultural paradigms. Such is also true of a people who, for one reason or another, grow hostile to their own culture, who come to denigrate or despise its customary values, beliefs, and practices. They may become convinced that their way of life is bad or wrong, detrimental to the planet or flourishing of other cultures. Or they may simply be distracted, ignorant, or lazy, unwilling to expend the energy necessary to understand themselves or the larger culture of which they are part.[11] They may be unaware of their own personal values and beliefs or those characteristic of their own culture. In such a case, they would be unable to recognize an attack on those values and thus disarmed from their defense.

The first condition for the survival of any society, then, is the conviction in the minds of the people that their particular society is worth preserving, that its characteristic values and beliefs are good and true, not merely relatively but absolutely. A people who despise themselves, hold themselves in contempt, or otherwise reject the enduring validity of their characteristic cultural values cannot and will not strive to preserve them. Such a conclusion seems self-evident. Thus one certain way to destroy a society is to convince the people that their society and culture, their way of life, is not good or special or grounded in Truth. Such is precisely the achievement of postmodern Multiculturalism.

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[10] "Values generate facts," in the words of F. A. Hayek.

[11] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

### On Toleration

Among the virtues preached by the gospel of Multiculturalism, perhaps none is accorded greater reverence than the virtue of "tolerance." On its face, the promotion of tolerance, like the promotion of multiculturalism, is unobjectionable and even praiseworthy. Both the virtue of tolerance and multicultural education have long been characteristic Western values. Multicultural tolerance, however, like contemporary Multicultural education in general, has little in common with the traditional Western virtue beyond a shared name. Tolerance is yet another characteristic Western value whose meaning has undergone significant transformation over recent decades. The traditional definition of tolerance, according to Merriam-Webster, is the "capacity to endure pain or hardship; sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own." In other words, throughout most of Western history, tolerance has implied "putting up" with something that causes one pain, enduring something that one personally dislikes or of which one personally disapproves. A person does not "tolerate" beliefs or behavior that he enjoys or finds praiseworthy but rather those he finds somehow offensive or repugnant. In the social and political sphere, tolerance thus means permitting other people to think and behave in ways that one personally finds objectionable, distasteful, or even morally wrong.

*Tolerance traditionally has meant permitting others to think and behave in ways one finds objectionable or morally wrong.*

Tolerance so conceived has long been recognized as a Judeo-Christian virtue and enjoined on Christian conscience. Its classic Anglo-American defense was provided by John Locke in his celebrated work on religious freedom, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). Locke 's work was inspired by the bloody conflict engendered throughout Western Europe in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, and, particularly, the English Civil War. Monarchs of the era claimed the right to control the religious beliefs of the populace. Religious division among the populace led various sects to fight long and hard to obtain political power, which was routinely employed to penalize members of dissenting sects. Locke identified the ultimate source of such religious conflict and violence: the claimed right of government to control the religious life of the people. The only way to end the violence, he said, was to remove the sphere of religion from political control. Religion and the Church, he

said, should be recognized as voluntary associations and thus immune to the coercive reach of government. Religious sects must forego the use of coercion and agree to tolerate—put up with—one another's differences. Toleration did not emerge in a spirit of graciousness or nobility but rather as a practical solution to the conflict of the era.

The Western valorization of tolerance may have emerged as a pragmatic resolution of religious conflict, but its significance extends far beyond religion and practical politics. Beyond securing peace, which of course is no mean accomplishment, the question is why persons should strive to be tolerant of thought, speech, and practice they dislike and perhaps even condemn, not only with respect to religion but social life more generally. One reason is the awareness that, since humans are not omniscient, it behooves us to allow for the possibility that one's own viewpoint, no matter how strongly held, might be incorrect or misguided. Given mankind's flawed nature and the tendency to portray one's own desires always in the best light, morality dictates that we guard against premature certainty concerning the rectitude of our views. Members of Western society are obliged to tolerate much that they may personally dislike for yet another reason: it is the price we must pay for individual freedom. Every individual desires to be free to act on the basis of his personal values and purposes: values and purposes that others may find distasteful, offensive, or immoral. Every individual wants other persons to "put up with" his personal beliefs and idiosyncrasies. To recognize that one's personal desire for toleration is shared by all other human beings is to live by the Golden Rule. Justice—equality under law—demands that toleration of one's own beliefs and behavior be extended to equal toleration of others' beliefs and behavior. Moreover, in a free society on the American model each individual is held to possess a natural right to liberty, that is, to engage in voluntary actions that do not violate the equal rights of other individuals. The only behavior legitimately restrained by law is behavior that violates other persons' unalienable rights to life, liberty, and property, including related First-Amendment rights such as free speech and free exercise of religion. Such rights do *not* include the right to be free from merely offensive or objectionable behavior, behavior of which

one personally disapproves but which violates no one's natural or constitutional rights. Individual freedom so conceived thus obliges every individual to tolerate, put up with, beliefs and behavior he or she may find objectionable, so long as such behavior does not infringe on the legitimate rights of another person.

Such, however, is emphatically not the understanding of tolerance propounded by contemporary Multiculturalism. As one contemporary dictionary succinctly defines the novel Multicultural meaning, toleration is said to be "a disposition to tolerate or *accept* people or situations (emphasis added).[12] The concept of toleration has been transformed from "bearing," "enduring," or "putting up with" objectionable behavior to "accepting" such behavior. Such is not a superficial but rather profound change that fundamentally redefines the meaning of toleration. Moreover, such is the meaning that saturates contemporary American culture. Members of contemporary society have been taught, explicitly and implicitly, to identify "toleration" and "acceptance," a lesson conveyed by both popular culture and formal education at every level, from kindergarten to post-doctoral training. To tolerate is to accept, without judgment. Such is without question the meaning attached to the concept of toleration by the overwhelming majority of contemporary students.

*Under the new multicultural definition, to tolerate is to accept, without judgment.*

They have further been taught that "intolerance" so conceived, that is, the failure to accept—to express *disapproval* of the beliefs or behavior of other people—is among the most reprehensible of social crimes. Negative moral judgments are unpardonable, the very height of intolerance. A classic example is the issue of homosexuality. In the current cultural environment, persons dare not express moral disapproval of homosexual behavior, a disapproval, it should be noted, which has been more or less the norm within Western civilization since the ascendancy of Christianity. Multicultural toleration, however, means acceptance, without judgment, in this case to regard homosexuality as merely one lifestyle among various morally equivalent possibilities. Multicultural tolerance is thus related to other contemporary illiberal phenomena such as "political correctness," campus "speech codes," "hate speech,"

*Traditional moral judgments now condemned as intolerance.*

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[12] The Free Dictionary.

and the like. Even to *think* in traditional moral categories is condemned as wrong; indeed, such thought may be evidence of mental disease—"homophobia," "Islamophobia," and so on. Under such cultural pressure few persons are foolish or courageous enough to express conventional moral judgments or even employ common sense (consider, for instance, the contentious issue of "profiling" airline passengers).

Many college students and other young adults have been exposed to such a closed and repressive mental atmosphere since birth. One consequence is a disturbingly passive generation that seems incapable of making—certainly reluctant to make—moral judgments of any kind. Young people have been taught that to make such judgments is "intolerant" of other "perspectives." Self-censorship has become habitual among students shaped by Multicultural education, the mind unfamiliar with conceptual and moral discrimination.[13] To exercise the capacity for critical evaluation—to "judge"—is regarded as wrong, intolerant. (The irony of such strident moral condemnation of "intolerance" is striking: young people, largely forbidden to make moral judgments, have no difficulty condemning "intolerance" in no uncertain terms.) All behavior, all opinions, all cultures, must be regarded as more or less equal, relative to the individual's perspective. No one is able or entitled to say that certain beliefs and actions are absolutely right or wrong or that certain cultural norms are superior to others. Such judgments are dismissed as mere "opinion"; others may hold a different opinion. There is no objective standard by which to judge between conflicting opinions; and, in any case, to make moral or truth judgments would be intolerant.

### Diversity

Students are implicitly taught that beyond tolerance (approval), the primary and absolute value, exists only the correlative value of "diversity"—the putative celebration of vari-

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[13] Indeed the word "discrimination" has undergone transformation. Contemporary usage tends to equate it with "prejudice" and injustice, implying that discrimination is always morally wrong. Merriam-Webster, however, retains the older definition, in which discrimination is defined as "the ability to recognize the difference between things that are of good quality and those that are not."

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ous and different perspectives and experiences, of "otherness." The multicultural conception of diversity, however, requires as careful analysis as its corresponding conception of tolerance. American society has traditionally represented one of the most authentically diverse societies in the course of human history. Between 1782 and 1956, the de facto motto of the United States, as every schoolchild once learned, was *E pluribus Unum"*— "out of many, One."[14] During the Founding era, the motto generally referred to the welding of a single federal political order out of many individual political communities—originally colonies and then states united under the federal Constitution. Over time, however, it acquired further significance for American self-understanding. America, as the saying goes, is a "nation of immigrants," a "melting pot" enriched, one might say, by the diverse perspectives of people from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. American society is atypical for many reasons, among which is the lack of relation been American identity and kinship or ethnicity. American identity is not a function of birth or biology but rather commitment to a particular historically developed culture, moral tradition, and way of life. American identity, unlike national or cultural identity in the majority of societies known to history, is not defined by race, ethnicity, or biological factors of any kind. Any person, from any ethnic or cultural background, can, in principle, be an American. The only requirement is the acceptance of certain value commitments, in particular, the moral and political principles that underlie the unique structure of American constitutional order. "One, from Many": the "Many" is inseparable from the "One"—the unity of moral and political principle that makes the diverse "Many" one people, the American people.

The traditional economic order of American society further promotes a truly diverse society. Capitalism not only permits but encourages multiplicity—diversity of tastes, interests, and pursuits. The abstract legal framework comprised by the rule of law serves the same purpose. Law does not command individuals to pursue specific values or ends but merely struc-

*Traditional American identity emphasized unity in diversity:* E pluribus Unum.

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[14] *E Pluribus Unum* was adopted by an Act of Congress in 1782 as the motto for the Seal of the United States and has been used on coins and paper money since 1795. Few of my undergraduate students have ever heard of the phrase. In 1956, Congress adopted "In God we trust" as the official motto.

tures the means they must employ in pursuing their diverse personal values and purposes. Indeed the hallmark of the free society is pluralism: the pursuit of diverse and individually self-determined values and goals and not a unitary purpose binding on every individual. A pluralistic society such as traditional America honors the fact that values and purposes vary greatly among persons and does not recognize a right of government to impose a uniform set of goals on the populace. The traditional American ideal—morally, legally, politically, economically—has long been diversity-within-unity, *e pluribus unum*.

American universalism—the conception that any person can in principle be an American—is yet another manifestation of the underlying Judeo-Christian vision that informs traditional American political order. Christian universalism teaches that all human beings share the same nature and possess equal spiritual worth, a worth that does not derive from their particular attributes but rather human nature itself: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). A person is not defined by what might be classified as "secondary attributes" (concrete particulars such as ethnicity, sex, and so on) but rather his essential nature or substance, his abstract status as a human being.

*Contemporary multiculturalism rejects American identity based on unifying moral and political principles.*

Contemporary multiculturalism dramatically revises such traditional American ideals. More particularly, it eviscerates the elements of unity and universalism bound up with traditional American self-understanding. The multiculturalist perspective recognizes only "the Many"—"diversity," "difference," and "otherness"—and turns a blind eye toward a shared and unifying "One." Indeed it challenges and even rejects the view that American identity is defined by subscription to unifying moral and political principles. Such a view is dismissed, even reviled, as mere American ethnocentrism, regarded as yet another means by which dominant elites, including the Framers themselves, marginalize and suppress persons and groups who do not subscribe to traditional American principles and values. To assert allegiance to values such as constitutionalism, the rule of law, unalienable natural rights, and economic freedom is to assert a merely subjective

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opinion and, moreover, display "intolerance" of diversity and difference.

For multiculturalists, there is no more reason to honor such social constructions than the equally oppressive social constructions of Christianity, which similarly serve to suppress the perspectives of historically marginalized social groups. Postmodern multiculturalism regards all traditional concepts and views—gender roles, sexual preference, family structure, morality, constitutionalism, the rule of law, economic theory, and beyond—in the same light. There is no objective reality or Truth that validates the superiority of the traditional family or heterosexuality. Such concepts, like constitutionalism and the rule of law, are merely cultural constructs invented throughout history by dominant and self-serving elites. Language controls reality, and those who hold power control language. There is no objective reality *given* to man that language serves to describe, only the social construction of meaning. Language is regarded as eminently plastic and malleable, readily susceptible to human design. Moreover, insofar as reality is little more than a social construction defined by language, the proper manipulation of language can serve to change or transform reality itself. Thus the ongoing redefinition of the meaning of the central moral and political concepts of traditional Western and American society. And thus the endless charade of postmodern politics, its twisting and parsing of language, fantastic promises, and absurd observations that defy reality.

Postmodernism and multiculturalism regard truth and reality as relatively meaningless concepts, but they attribute the greatest possible significance to language. Despite their intense preoccupation with language, however, such constructs fail to recognize one of the most important characteristics of language, which is not its role in the "social construction" of reality but, rather, transmission of the actual historical experience of a people. We have discussed the traditional American ideal of "diversity within unity." One requisite of achieving such unity among the culturally diverse members of American society is the acquisition of the historical language of that society—English. Contrary to postmodern assertions, the English language is not a constructed artifact but rather a spontaneously evolved carrier of cultural experience. To learn any language is

simultaneously to learn a particular way of experiencing the world. In the case of the English language, it is to absorb the unique experiences that have shaped the development of Anglo-American society. An individual cannot fully understand or participate in American society (or any society) without understanding the language that carries its meaning. As any bilingual person will attest, to comprehend two languages is to perceive reality through two different lenses, to perceive two different worlds.

*Multicultural-ism dismisses the importance of language for cultural unity.*

A common language is essential to a common culture, a fact long recognized in the United States. Historically, a primary goal of immigrants, if not for themselves then for their children, has been to learn English, a goal also encouraged if not demanded by the wider culture—schools, churches, businesses, and so on. Postmodern multiculturalism, however, dismisses the significance of language for cultural unity. Its proponents suggest, on the contrary, that to learn English is to be subjected to the ethnocentric social constructions of European culture, historically dominated by white Christian men and long serving to oppress women, homosexuals, people of color, non-Christians, and other minorities. Contemporary immigrants to the United States are rarely encouraged, indeed often implicitly discouraged, to learn its language, which is to say, absorb its traditions, values, and meaning. The absence of a shared language, however, eliminates an essential social bond. There can be no American people, no American society, without an element of unity, and a common language is central to such unity. The multicultural demand for diversity, extending even to language, can only shatter American society into disjointed fragments. Scholars warn of the "Balkanization" of America that looms large if present trends are not arrested.[15]

The assault on the English language, however, is merely one skirmish within the greater battle fought by postmodern multiculturalists—the battle against traditional American society and the overarching civilization from which it emerged. Multiculturalism is an important phenomenon because it embodies at a popular level numerous currents implicated in

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[15] Merriam-Webster defines the primary meaning of Balkanization as follows: 1. To break up (as a region or group) into smaller and often hostile units.

the ongoing erosion of American and Western culture. The free society emerged in Western Europe in line with the particular values, assumptions, beliefs, and historical circumstances of the European peoples. Over time the Judeo-Christian world-view blended with elements of Greco-Roman and Germanic culture to form the unique civilization of Christendom. The spiritual foundation of that civilization comprises certain fundamental and related convictions, including the reality of a transcendent God who creates man in his image. Every human being is regarded as a being of inestimable spiritual worth, endowed with reason and free will, and charged with a profound personal mission—to earn eternal salvation. The biblical worldview further comprises a distinction between heaven and earth, this world and the world Beyond. It is also bound to the conviction of an omnipotent and omniscient God who is the source of order in existence, both natural and moral order, a God who rules the world providentially and administers ultimate divine justice in the world Beyond time. Western civilization is grounded on the belief in a creative Source who stands beyond history and who establishes the nature of things, the *givenness* of existence in this world.

The characteristic moral, legal, political, and economic practices and institutions of traditional American society presuppose all such convictions to varying degrees. Postmodernism dismisses all of them in one fell swoop. Indeed it dismisses the very concept of cultural, social, or spiritual "foundations," which implies a rootedness transcending the flux of history. It challenges the concept of Nature as an index of objective reality beyond the reach of human subjectivity. The postmodernist view perceives no such reality, no givenness of existence impermeable to human will and action. Nature is dismissed as yet another social construction, leaving behind only History, only human experience in time, only particular cultures, particular religious beliefs, particular historical circumstances, and so on. Natural or Higher Law recedes from view along with the concept of universal and overarching Truth, convictions central to the Western tradition for millennia. For postmodernists as for Progressives, truth, including metaphysical and religious truth, consists solely in the relative and particular truths thrown up by particular historical experiences in particular cultures.

Many individuals who pursue the multicultural agenda and educational curriculum undoubtedly do so on the basis of mere naivety or thoughtlessness, failing to consider either the sources or implications of such a paradigm. The doctrine, moreover, is not only popular and politically correct but a mandatory component of educational curricula in many public schools. Teacher training in the universities is saturated with multicultural dogma, and public schoolteachers are often required to transmit its teachings regardless of their personal values or concerns. For various reasons, then, many advocates of multiculturalism may be unaware that the doctrine is a spearhead of contemporary neo-Marxist movements in the United States and elsewhere. The leaders of such movements correctly perceive the utility of the multicultural paradigm with respect to the fundamental transformation of Western society for which Marx once yearned and they themselves continue to yearn. We have mentioned the "long march through the institutions" anticipated by Gramsci and others.

*Multicultural theory is saturated with the Marxian concept of class struggle.*

Contemporary multiculturalism, as previously observed, is not concerned with comparative study of various world cultures, as the term would imply. The actual content of multicultural studies in the majority of American educational institutions is of Marxist inspiration, whether or not such is explicitly recognized or acknowledged. More particularly, the basic paradigm of postmodern multicultural theory is saturated with the Marxian concept of class struggle. Postmodern thinkers, following Marx, tend to perceive class struggle or conflict— the conflict between oppressors and victims—as the essence of social relations. So called cultural Marxists, however, move beyond Marx in broadening and extending that struggle beyond the economic antagonism between capitalist and worker to other dimensions of social experience as well, in particular, race and gender. The oppressors are generally portrayed as European elites of various kinds—"Dead White Men," such as the American Framers, who imposed their definition of reality on others. The victims comprise the myriad of putatively marginalized groups—women, people of color, Native Americans, non-Christians, homosexuals, non-western civilizations, and even the planet itself (endangered by Western science and greed). Indeed, on the postmodern and multiculturalist

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view, the very concept of civilization appears as a symbol of Western oppression, defined by powerful elites and imposed on those subject to their power. What is civilization or civilized behavior? Who is to say? The traditional meaning assigned in the West, like the meaning of its other traditional symbols, has no inherent validity but is merely one more language-construct foisted on the powerless by self-serving elites.

*The concept of civilization itself dismissed as a symbol of Western oppression.*

Multicultural relativism and perspectivism lead not only to an explicit rejection of the traditional American conception of justice but also traditional views of religion, morality, marriage and the family, sex roles and practices, and capitalism, indeed every value and institution historically associated with American society. The premises of postmodern multiculturalism preclude the defense of any traditional value on any grounds but the vagaries of history, a defense which itself runs the risk of condemnation as both ethnocentric and intolerant. The proper attitude is to be tolerant (accepting) and open to otherness and diversity. The disparagement or rejection of traditional values extends even to patriotism, said to be yet another manifestation of ethnocentric hubris. Americans must learn to overcome parochial attachments to their way of life and become "global citizens," celebrating the equal value of all cultural perspectives. They must overcome their traditional attachment to Christianity. Biblical religion must be recognized as merely one perspective or subjective preference among others of equal validity. They must overcome their traditional commitment to capitalism, which is similarly disarmed from claiming the status of objective truth, representing, on the contrary, the "false consciousness" or mere rationalization of capitalist oppressors. The Framers' idea of unalienable rights, as mentioned, should be dismissed as mere propaganda. History itself must be redefined, transformed, "changed."[16] Conventional history represents not a true and accurate account of human experience but rather the selective and self-serving narrative of cultural and political elites. In the end, none of the values, beliefs, assumptions, traditions, institutions, or customs that constitute the traditional American way of life are left standing. The Fabian

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[16] "We are going to have to change our conversation; we're going to have to change our traditions, our history. . . . " Michelle Obama, Speech, May 14, 2008.

Socialists were right—violent revolution is far from necessary to transform and even destroy a society or indeed an entire civilization.

We thus return to the issue introduced at the outset—the issue of cultural survival. The fundamental requisite of such survival—the will to perpetuate one's particular culture—is difficult if not impossible to sustain in a society saturated with multiculturalist assumptions. Contemporary multiculturalism portrays all cultures as more or less equal and recognizes few if any intrinsic values beyond "tolerance-acceptance" and "diversity." Such doctrine inevitably undermines confidence in the worth of any particular way of life, including the American way of life. Americans are not entitled to regard their unique culture as anything more than one historical option among various others of equal validity. Such radical relativism and perspectivism inevitably weaken patriotic sentiment and the willingness or ability to defend traditional American values in the face of competing cultural constructs and worldviews. A people will only defend the characteristic values of their society if they believe they are good and worth preserving. Such conviction, however, is daily undermined by the explicit and implicit multicultural message conveyed to members of American society, especially its youth, by both contemporary education and influential popular media. Indeed every dimension of contemporary American society—moral, religious, cultural, political, and historical—is saturated with the belief-complex or worldview of postmodern perspectivism and relativism.

Multiculturalism is far from the only contemporary trend that poses a threat to the preservation of American society. Its special significance arises from its role as a carrier, in a simplified and seemingly benign manner, of neo-Marxist aspirations. Multiculturalism as practiced in contemporary American society shares the purpose if not the methods of the ideological movements of the twentieth century, namely, the radical transformation of Western and American society. The experience of Europe is most instructive in this regard. American multiculturalism was largely imported from European sources. The doctrine has to date advanced further in its birthplace than in America, allowing a glimpse of its longer-term consequences. Relativistic *Toleranz* (acceptance) has become

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a more or less absolute value in many Western European nations, one that dare not be challenged, while contempt for the religious tradition that formed the basis of Western civilization knows few bounds. Despite pleas and protests from religious leaders, for example, European political leaders refused to acknowledge, even cursorily, the Christian roots of European civilization in the founding documents of the European Union. The decline of Christianity and accompanying rise of multicultural "tolerance-acceptance" has disarmed European peoples from defending their traditional values and way of life in the face of non-European immigrants who do not share Western values. In recent years—owing in part to the massive influx of Muslim migrants from the war-torn Middle East—the situation has become progressively more unwieldly and even dangerous. Farsighted European statesmen and scholars warn that the resulting inability to assimilate the large influx of migrants from non-Western cultures such as fundamentalist Islam—whose religious worldview is both alien and antagonistic to that of the West—may lead to the disappearance of Europe as a distinct civilization, perhaps within the lifetime of present inhabitants.[17] The United States has historically achieved greater success with respect to the cultural assimilation of immigrants but such was largely achieved prior to the widespread embrace of multiculturalist assumptions. The same multicultural trends that are devastating European culture are presently advancing in the United States and, if reason and history are reliable guides, will lead to a similar outcome.

*Multicultural trends are further advanced in Europe, allowing glimpse of America's future.*

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[17] There are recent signs that inspire hope: the attack on multiculturalism by Cameron in England; Merkel in Germany; Sarkosy in France. Marcello Pera, *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians: the Religious Roots of Free Societies* (New York: Encounter Books, 2011). Bruce S. Thornton, *Decline and Fall: Europe's Slow Motion Suicide* (New York: Encounter, 2007).