

What is Western Cultural Identity? Three Examples, Three Disputes

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Abstract

The concept of cultural identity is illustrated by the example of Latin America. At the same time Latin America is shown to be a true part of the Western world and understandable only as such, and the reasons for other cultural identifications of Latin America are examined. Then the cultural development and identity of the West as a whole is considered, with special reference to two competing accounts of Western cultural development, both of which focus chiefly on the economic development of Europe and North America, in contrast to its cultural or spiritual roots. Finally the special case of the United States is looked at, and it is asked how her peculiar self-understanding affects her cultural identity as part of the Western world.

Keywords

Cultural identity; West; Latin America, United States, economic development.

How people conceive of themselves has profound consequences for their everyday lives, especially for their lives in common. And how people conceive of themselves has much to do with their cultural identity.¹ Cultural identity concerns how we conceive of ourselves in our national and corporate existence, and has important implications for our common life as a nation or culture, ultimately for our entire way of organizing our social existence. What do I mean by cultural identity? The concept of cultural identity can be illustrated by looking at Latin America. Very often in the United States Latin America is considered as part of the non-Western world.² Of course, this idea is

¹ Cultural identity is a term borrowed from the field of cultural studies. But in using the term I do not mean to commit myself to the theory or method of cultural studies as that is commonly practiced.

² For example, Latin-American philosophy is usually classified as non-Western, often courses in Latin-American literature or history fulfill requirements for a non-Western component in a university curriculum, etc.

absurd, since the Spanish colonization of Latin America was in fact the first extension of Western civilization to the Americas. Despite the admixture of populations, the culture of Latin America, its religion, language, literature, educational system, derive from Europe, and can be understood in no other way. As Salvador de Madariaga wrote, “A glance . . . is enough to show that the unity of Spanish America is rooted in its common Spanishness.”³ Indeed, until recently this sense of Spanishness was taken for granted among Hispanic Americans, as the following incident related by de Madariaga shows.

I was once walking along the winding, pleasant streets of a garden suburb in California when I noticed that the gardeners who were tending the flowers were all Mexican Indians (How far mestizo? Not much anyhow). I stopped by the nearest one and, in Spanish, asked him what his nationality was. “I am a Spaniard,” he answered.⁴

But for many inhabitants of the United States the only important aspects of a culture are its technological development and its wealth, and because Latin America is seen as wanting in these areas, it surely could not be part of the Western world. The West, in this view, comprises only the United States, Canada, and the affluent nations of western and central Europe.⁵ Such an attitude, unfortunately widespread, exhibits the scientific outlook so common in the United States and reveals a real ignorance of cultural realities.

Although the true position of Latin America is that it is heir to Renaissance and Baroque Catholic Iberia, nevertheless many North Americans, as I said, do not understand this, and increasingly Latin Americans themselves seem not to see this. Thus among both Hispanics living in the United States and those in Mexico and other Latin American countries, there is now a tendency to hark back to the pre-Hispanic past to seek cultural affinities with the Aztecs and other Indians. For example, a training ship of the Mexican navy has been named the *Cuauhtemoc*, after the last Aztec emperor, and during the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America there was widespread criticism not only of the real abuses of the Spanish

³ Salvador de Madariaga, *Latin America Between the Eagle and the Bear* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962) p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵ Among many others, Samuel Huntington in his celebrated article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” (*Foreign Affairs*, 72, (1993), has espoused this view: “Western civilization has two major variants, European and North American . . .” (p. 24). In his later book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), he continues in this same vein, comparing, for example, Mexico with Turkey and stating that “Mexico has a distinctly non-Western culture” (p. 149). In his initial discussion of the various world-civilizations in this book (pp. 45–48), he is a little bit ambivalent about placing Latin America outside the West. However, he seems to me entirely arbitrary about what he thinks are the identifying characteristics of Western culture, and one could as easily argue that the West was made up of Europe and Latin America only, and place the United States in a category *sui generis*.

conquest, but a rejection of the legitimacy of the spreading of the Catholic faith by the Spanish, since that had undermined the traditional life of the native inhabitants of the Americas, and at the same time a playing down of the bloody Aztec religion and the Aztec's own subjugations of other Indian tribes.⁶

There is more than one cause of this question of Latin American identity, which we will explore below. But one can see, I think, that there is potentially a great deal of difference whether one thinks of oneself as heir to Isabella the Catholic and Cervantes or to the Aztecs, or as simply an individual on a certain level of economic development whose cultural roots and background are unimportant, and who derives all his significance from his technological and material attainments.⁷

A proper Latin American cultural identity, then, would be as part of the tradition of European life flowing from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, transplanted it is true to the New World and transformed by that environment, but still in essential continuity with that Christian civilization that was formed by Greco-Latin civilization and the Catholic Church.⁸ And thus a Latin American who rejects such an identification cuts himself off from his true roots and forms a false notion of his identity. What are the likely causes of this?

They fall, I think, broadly into two groups. On the one hand, there is the attitude, copied from the United States, that economic

⁶ An interesting article in the *Washington Post*, August 25, 2003, showed the somewhat strange controversy taking place among Latin Americans themselves in the debate over the terms *Hispanic* or *Latino*. Although both words are obviously of European origin, a preference for one or the other currently is taken to denote a different cultural identity. One person was quoted as saying: "I'll tell you why I like the word Hispanic . . . If we use the word Latino, it excludes the Iberian peninsula and the Spaniards. The Iberian peninsula is where we come from. We all have that little thread that's from Spain." Another was quoted: "Hispanic doesn't work for me because it's about people from Spain . . . I'm Mexican and we were conquered by people from Spain, so it's kind of an insult." Darryl Fears, "Latinos or Hispanics? A Debate About Identity," pp. A1 and A5. Yet another question of cultural identity by Hispanics concerns the apparently increasing conversion of Hispanics in the United States to Islam. Many of those doing so highlight the period of Moorish domination of Spain and claim that many of those who came to the New World were in fact secret Moslems. Indeed, some say they do not convert to Islam but "revert"! See the website www.latinmuslims.com

⁷ There are some signs that Latin American political elites are aware of their cultural identity. When Argentina observed March 25 as the Day of the Unborn Child for the first time, to symbolize its rejection of abortion, her President, Carlos Menem, wrote to the heads of state of all the Latin American countries, and of Spain, Portugal and the Philippines, inviting them to join in this observance. He wrote that "the common historical roots of our nations bind us together not only on matters of language but also in an understanding of man and society based on the fundamental dignity of the human person." (Catholic World News feature, 3/25/1999)

⁸ "Strictly speaking, there are no true survivals of Indian cultures, even in the remotest Andes; there are *transformed* beginnings of a culture with Indian and Catholic roots." Waldo Frank, "The Hispano-American's World" in Lewis Hanke, ed., *History of Latin American Civilization* (Irvine: University of California, c. 1967) vol. 2, p. 329.

development is the only important measure of the life of a nation, and therefore Latin American nations are part of the Third World, which is *ipso facto* understood to be non-Western. This clearly is an entirely materialistic and economic notion that implicitly or explicitly holds material wealth to be the only or the most important statement about men and nations.⁹ It is akin to that error of *economism* identified by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* as the

error . . . of considering human labor solely according to its economic purpose. This fundamental error of thought can and must be called an *error of materialism*, in that economism directly or indirectly includes a conviction of the primacy and superiority of the material, and directly or indirectly places the spiritual and the personal . . . in a position of subordination to material reality. This is still not *theoretical materialism* in the full sense of the term, but it is certainly *practical materialism*, a materialism judged capable of satisfying man's needs . . . on the grounds of a particular way of evaluating things, and so on the grounds of a certain hierarchy of goods based on the greater immediate attractiveness of what is material. (no. 13)

Thus not just Latin Americans, but any group of people which characterizes itself simply in terms of its level of economic development,¹⁰ is making a cultural statement. That is, such a group is proclaiming that whatever actual cultural influences may have formed it in terms of religion, language, literature or the arts, these are of less importance than its acquisition of material wealth conceived chiefly as the latest technological devices and practices. This latter is what really gives it meaning and identity.

Pope John Paul II further reflected on these questions in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. After noting that “the fundamental error of socialism is anthropological in nature,”¹¹ and is rooted in atheism, John Paul says the following.

The atheism of which we are speaking is also closely connected with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which views human and social

⁹ “Some countries or parts of countries in Latin America may have per-capita incomes as low as any in Africa or Asia. But Latin America differs from them in that its basic social, political, and economic values come from the European tradition. Three hundred years of colonization by Spain and Portugal, more than one hundred and fifty years of independent life inspired by European and American ideals, and the important contributions by European immigrants, have produced a continent of many races unified by a common set of values inspired by Western Christian culture.” Horacio H. Godoy, “Latin American Culture and Its Transformation” in Samuel Shapiro, ed., *Cultural Factors in Inter-American Relations* (Notre Dame University Press, 1968) p. 167.

¹⁰ Of course, the entire notion of *economic development*, the idea that civilization as it has evolved in North America and western Europe is the pinnacle of human society and thus the desirable aim of every people, is itself a particular and far from obviously true, statement about man's nature and culture.

¹¹ Pope Pius XI had previously made this same point in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (nos. 117–120 in Paulist edition).

reality in a mechanistic way. Thus there is a denial of the supreme insight concerning man's true greatness, his transcendence in respect to earthly realities . . . and, above all, the need for salvation . . . (no. 13)

Such a mechanistic way of looking at man is connected, either explicitly and theoretically or practically, with a view of man which sees his meaning as embodied only in his material productions and possessions. And in fact, such a view of man and of society was implemented as one of the responses to Communism after World War II. John Paul describes it later in the same encyclical.

Another kind of response, practical in nature, is represented by the affluent society or the consumer society. It seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values. In reality, while on the one hand it is true that this social model shows the failure of Marxism to contribute to a humane and better society, on the other hand, insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture and religion, it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs. (no. 19)

We see here a good description of the kind of outlook that has led many to consider Latin America as part of the non-Western world, because by identifying the West not with a culture or a view of man or with that civilization formed by the Christian faith, but simply with the production of ample material goods, they perforce regard societies from a purely materialistic basis.¹²

But there are other reasons why some Latin Americans increasingly minimize their European heritage. In the first place, on account of various reasons Western civilization is not held in high repute today in many circles. These reasons include the almost exclusive identification of Western culture with scientific materialism that I have been discussing, which causes those who see that the mere piling up of goods and the concomitant destruction of the natural world cannot be the goal of life, to reject what they think is the culture responsible

¹² "During the past decade Mexico has assumed a position somewhat similar to that of Turkey. Just as Turkey abandoned its historic opposition to Europe and attempted to join Europe, Mexico has stopped defining itself by its opposition to the United States and is instead attempting to imitate the United States and to join it in the North American Free Trade Area. Mexican leaders are engaged in the great task of redefining Mexican identity and have introduced fundamental economic reforms that eventually will lead to fundamental political change. In 1991 a top adviser to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari described at length to me all the changes the Salinas government was making. When he finished, I remarked: 'That's most impressive. It seems to me that basically you want to change Mexico from a Latin American country into a North American country.' He looked at me with surprise and exclaimed: 'Exactly! That's precisely what we are trying to do, but of course we could never say so publicly.'" Huntingdon, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, pp. 42–43.

for that false goal. Then there is the related romantic idealization of primitive peoples, an idea whose intellectual roots lie at least as far back as Rousseau. And of course, the hatred of Christianity, which afflicts elites all over the world, obviously would tend to make one reject a culture which, especially in its Hispanic version, was once a militant and unapologetic bearer of the Cross. Therefore the rejection of Latin America's European cultural roots, whether done out of an economic outlook or for other reasons, is widespread today.¹³

This discussion may serve as an introduction to our next topic, which is to ask, What is the proper way of looking at the Western world as a whole in its own cultural identity? I said above that many in the United States, and some in Latin America, have judged that only the economically prosperous countries of North America and Europe are Western and that such a judgment is grounded in a materialistic way of looking at things. Thus to such people, the history of the West is the history of a progressive manipulation of nature and emancipation from all that characterizes a traditional society.¹⁴ On this view Christianity is important for the West only because it is held to have been a more fertile soil for secularism than were other world religions. As Peter Berger wrote,

If this interpretation of the historical nexus between Protestantism and secularization is accepted (as it probably is today by a majority of scholarly opinion), then the question inevitably suggests itself as to whether the secularizing potency of Protestantism was a *novum* or whether it rather had its roots in earlier elements of the Biblical tradition. We would contend that the latter answer is the correct one, indeed that the roots of secularization are to be found in the earliest

¹³ Another and nearly perfect example of a question of cultural identity concerns the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, wedged between Poland and Lithuania. Kaliningrad, formerly the Prussian city of Königsberg, home of Immanuel Kant, was deliberately reconstructed, physically and culturally, by the Soviets after World War II to represent and embody the Soviet workers' paradise. "The people who moved there were defined by their Sovietness, not their ethnicity or religion or their connection to any particular landscape. But when the Soviet Union [collapsed], Kaliningraders' nationality was swept away . . . and suddenly all . . . who had built their lives in the postwar murk were forced to rethink who they were, now that they were no longer Soviets . . . When the Red Army occupied the oblast in April 1945, it erased all forms of prewar life, blew up the castles and cathedrals, and repopulated the [area] with Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Tartars, Georgians, Uzbeks, and tens of thousands of other 'transplant-patriots.'" Peter Savodnik, "Kaliningrad," *Wilson Quarterly*, 27 (2003), p. 16.

¹⁴ What might be considered as the "official" definition of "traditional society" is that of Walt Rostow in his *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1971). Rostow defines it: "A traditional society is one whose structure is developed within limited production functions, based on pre-Newtonian science and technology, and on pre-Newtonian attitudes toward the physical world. Newton is here used as a symbol for that watershed in history when men came widely to believe that the external world was subject to a few knowable laws, and was systematically capable of productive manipulation." p. 4. Thus his description includes not only primitive cultures, but the high civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome, China, India, Europe in the Middle Ages, indeed all human cultures up to the scientific and technological revolution in eighteenth century England.

available sources for the religion of ancient Israel. In other words, we would maintain that the “disenchantment of the world” begins in the Old Testament.¹⁵

On this view, then, Europeans were fortunate enough to have adopted a religion which had within itself the seeds of its own dissolution, and Western history exhibits a progressive secularization, whose major landmarks include the Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution and its discarding of Aristotelian physics,¹⁶ the rise of capitalism and the revolt against medieval economic morality, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the industrial revolution, and perhaps the rise of socialism. I say “perhaps” for this brings out the fact that, broadly speaking, there are two versions of this view, both rooted, however, in the same historical events and tending toward a similar end.

The revolt against the West as a Christian civilization has historically, as well as today, expressed itself in basically two different ways. Both are equally hostile to the Middle Ages but one sees its liberation from the shackles of Christian social morality in capitalism and the formal institutions of democracy, while the other has manifested itself in forms as various as Marxism and Fascism. To differentiate these two strands it is tempting to employ a typology developed by C. S. Lewis with regard to religions, that of the *thick* and the *clear*. He wrote, “We may . . . divide religions, as we do soups, into ‘thick’ and ‘clear’. By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are Clear religions.”¹⁷ The strand of thought that has fostered capitalism, and for the most part, democracy, would be the clear strand, while that which has fostered socialism, as well as Fascism and related movements, might be called thick.¹⁸ But both must be understood for what

¹⁵ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967) p. 113.

¹⁶ The overthrow of Aristotelian physics was in fact a chief landmark in the rise of the new Western civilization. As Henry Veatch has written, “the very rise of so-called modern science and modern philosophy was originally associated – certainly in the minds of men like Galileo and Descartes – with a determined repudiation of Aristotle: it was precisely his influence which it was thought necessary to destroy, root and branch, before what we now know as science and philosophy in the modern mode could get off the ground.” And he speaks of “the Aristotelianism that both antedated and was considered antithetical to the whole modern experiment in knowledge and in living.” *Aristotle, a Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1974) p. 4.

¹⁷ “Christian Apologetics” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970) p. 102.

¹⁸ Thomas Molnar used similar language to describe the two currents of Enlightenment thought, speaking of “the transparent French and the opaque Germanic thought . . .” *The Counter-Revolution* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, c. 1969), p. 44.

they are, ways of overturning the formerly Christian culture of the West. As Michael Novak, one of the chief capitalist apologists, wrote: "There are two major traditions of revolutionary political economy in the world, one liberal [i.e. capitalist] and the other Marxist," both of which "compete against a backdrop of traditional, often peasant, societies."¹⁹

The capitalist version of Western development, though at least in the United States it is quite willing to give an honored place to religion, does so on the condition that religion is deprived of any real social force and reduced to a means of private morality and psychological comfort,²⁰ or better yet, is made to seem an ally in the promotion of a neoliberal society.²¹ Equally with socialism, liberal capitalism sees itself as a force liberating men from the restraints of feudalism and tradition, although in the United States this is not clearly perceived because of the alliance between capitalism and many who oppose the overthrow of certain elements of Christian morality. I will discuss the unusual case of the United States at more length below.

These two varying streams of thought are each indebted to the scientific and technological revolutions and to the Enlightenment tradition, but base themselves upon different aspect of that tradition.²²

¹⁹ "Editor's Postscript" in *Liberation South, Liberation North* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1981) p. 97. Novak makes the same point elsewhere, for example in his Introduction to the volume, *Liberation Theology and the Liberal Society* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1987), where he writes that the papers in this work were meant "to open a public dialogue between the two forms of liberation theology in the Americas, the 'liberation theology' of Latin America and the liberal society of North America" (p. 1). This shows that Novak is well aware that capitalism, so far from being a conserving force, is perhaps the chief agent of change in the world today. Thus the absurdity of Americans calling those who support capitalism *conservatives*. For an excellent statement from the Liberal side of the presuppositions and norms of the new society that was created in eighteenth century Britain and North America, see Ralph Lerner, "Commerce and Character: the Anglo-American as New Model Man" in Novak, ed., *Liberation South, Liberation North*, pp. 24–49.

²⁰ The classic statement of this view of the role of religion in the United States is Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: an Essay in American Religious Sociology*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960).

²¹ For example, the attempt to interpret John Paul II in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* as repudiating the Church's previous reservations about capitalism and the market. See, for example, George Weigel, ed., *A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992). But for another view, see Stephen Krason, "Centesimus Annus: Maintaining the Continuity of Catholic Social Teaching" *Faith & Reason*, 17 (1991) pp. 371–87, and the present author's "What Does *Centesimus Annus* Really Teach?" *The Catholic Faith*, 7 (2001) pp. 34–40.

²² Speaking of England, Bernard Murchland wrote, "This England was in effect a battleground between two humanisms. One, in a line that might be traced from Francis Bacon through John Locke and Adam Smith to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, favored the modern developments of science, democracy, and capitalism. The other humanism followed a primarily literary-religious track, beginning with Renaissance humanists like Petrarch and Erasmus . . . and continuing in an unbroken line through the German idealists to Carlyle,

And behind the railway, the motor lorry and the airplane, there has spread a wave of secular ideas which had their origins in Europe in the age of the Enlightenment of the French Revolution, and which have communicated the ideas of political liberty and social equality, of nationality and self-determination from one people to another until they have become literally world-wide.

Although these ideas all had a common origin, during the nineteenth century they became differentiated into a number of distinct ideologies which were regarded as mutually exclusive and tended to become embodied in political parties and regimes At the present time [1959] there is a tendency for Liberal Democracy of the American type and Communist Socialism of the Russian type to become the opposite poles round which all the other ideologies and political regimes range themselves.

Thus we have two distinct ideological complexes, Western Democracy and Eastern Soviet Communism, which threaten to divide the world between them Both of them are secular ideologies as contrasted with the religious ideologies on which the four ancient world civilizations were based.²³

Thus the scientific revolution and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment are the common origins of both capitalism or neoliberalism, and likewise of Marxist or socialist traditions.²⁴ The quarrels between them are family quarrels and are more over means than ends.

For our purposes it is important to see that whatever their origin they all share a similar notion of the history of the Western world as progressive liberation from repressive religious and political authority. Whether Christianity is seen as something to be overthrown in order to return to paganism (as in some versions of romantic irrationalism today) or in order fully to embrace Enlightenment rationalism, neither sees Western history as fulfilled in the establishment of a Christian social order.

Thus these two different rejections of Europe's Christian heritage are both especially hostile to *Christendom*, the social and institutional embodiment of Christian civilization. In fact, the

Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold." *Humanism and Capitalism: a Survey of Thought on Morality* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1984) pp. 1–2.

²³ Christopher Dawson, *Christianity in East & West* (La Salle, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden, 1981), pp. 104–106.

²⁴ "The development of this rationalized theology and of this secularized millennialism, whether in its revolutionary-socialistic or revolutionary-liberal forms (but especially the latter), is of central importance for the understanding of modern culture. It was in fact a new reformation, which attempted to rationalize and spiritualize religion in an even more complete and drastic way than the first Reformation had done, but which ended in emptying Christianity of all supernatural elements and interpreting history as the progressive development of an immanent principle." Christopher Dawson, "The Kingdom of God in History" in John J. Mulloy, ed. *The Dynamics of World History* (La Salle, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden 1978), p. 283.

conception of Western civilization that understands it as a progressive liberation from antiquated ideas and forms may be summed up as an attempt to destroy Christendom. Christendom is seen as oppressive, as stifling man, both in his freedom of thought and in his personal vitality, though whether in his economic or his sexual energies depends on the individual critic and which of the historical accounts is chosen. But for a Catholic the course of Western civilization must culminate in the establishment of Christendom, not in the sense that then a paradise was reached, but in the sense that an integrated Christian culture was what a believer would naturally want to attain, a culture that would never be complete or perfect, but that would provide the means and context for continual efforts toward such completion and perfection as this world is capable of reaching.²⁵

The proper cultural identity of the West, then, would regard its present position as a degeneration of that Christian civilization which it once championed and represented.²⁶ This degeneration has taken very diverse forms in diverse countries, so that, for example, the situation in Spain is very unlike that of the United States. But any cultural identity of the West that looks only or chiefly at its economies or even its democratic political institutions, and sees in them the essence of the West, is far from correct.²⁷

Now today it is certainly the case that Christendom no longer exists, even though vestiges of it still linger here and there, especially in lands colonized by Catholic powers such as Latin America or the Philippines. And still today, the other conceptions of Western culture continue their relentless attacks on whatever of Christendom does still exist. The forces conducting such attacks are, in the case of the neoliberal form of secularism, chiefly the Anglo-Saxon powers, and above all, the United States, with its unremitting promotion of global

²⁵ This is not the place to enter into the controversy over the Church's teaching on the place of religion in the public order since the Second Vatican Council. Suffice it to say that whatever one may think about *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, the conciliar documents themselves make clear that Catholics are to be active in shaping cultures according to the pattern of the Gospel. For example, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, "The temporal order is to be renewed in such a way that, while its own principles are fully respected, it is harmonized with the principles of the Christian life and adapted to the various conditions of times, places and peoples" (no. 7), while *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that it is the mission of the laity "to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city" (no. 43).

²⁶ Before his elevation to the Papacy, Pope Benedict XVI referred to our present civilization as "post-European." He wrote, "Ist die siegreich über die Welt ausgebreitete Zivilisation der Technik und des Kommerzes die europäische Kultur? Oder ist sie nicht eher posteuropäisch aus dem Ende der alten europäischen Kulturen geboren?" Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Europas Kultur und ihre Krise," *Die Zeit*, nr. 50, (7 December 2000).

²⁷ Thus Roger Scruton's work, *The West and the Rest* (Wilmington: ISI, 2002), gravely errs by identifying the West simply with Enlightenment liberalism and secularism.

economic liberalization (accompanied by an inevitable degeneration of popular culture) and formal democracy as the solution of all political ills.

The other form, that which was transmitted largely through nineteenth-century German idealism, finds its promoters in other political sources, such as (in part) the European Union or the United Nations, which are hostile to prohibitions on abortion and which promote feminism, homosexual conduct, etc. The Anglo-American variety likewise opens up traditional societies to such ills, but in more complicated ways.²⁸

From an economic and political point of view the United States is certainly one of the main parts of the Western world. But in what sense do Americans (meaning here, citizens of the United States) understand their self-identification as Westerners? Do they see themselves as heirs of Europe, of Greece and Rome and the Catholic Middle Ages, or do they understand Western civilization differently? What is their own sense of cultural identity?

There is reason to think that for the most part the United States sees itself as heir to a rationalizing process that began in the late Renaissance, and which in its scientific, technical, political and economic results has transformed the world. The heritage of Europe is, to that extent, viewed as more of a launching pad, something which provided the necessary context for the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment transformation of political and economic life. To the degree that western and central Europe share in the way of life brought about by the scientific, political and economic revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they too are entitled to be considered as parts of the West. But the West as a real cultural unit – that is of very little interest.

This self-understanding is connected with the notion, present from the beginning of its existence as an independent regime, of a secular messianic idea which identifies America as the harbinger of a new age for mankind.²⁹ Indeed, such a notion is inscribed on the Great

²⁸ The attitude and practice of the United States in this regard is complex. Although under the Republican party the United States government professes to oppose abortion and usually curtails funding for some pro-abortion groups, such as the United Nations Population Fund, nevertheless the U.S. government continues to promote contraception and sex education. However, probably the best promoters of these ills are American popular culture and the general approach to life which capitalism tends to create. Since these generate enormous sums of money, every U.S. government, regardless of political party or professed outlook, will support their penetration into every part of the world.

²⁹ “The United States achieved their independence in the heyday of the European Enlightenment, and this ideology of the Enlightenment was the foundation of their national existence. The peoples of Europe, in spite of their revolutions, were committed to the past and to their separate national traditions. But Americans were committed to the future. They saw the Revolution as the dawn of a new age and a new civilization which was destined to be the civilization of a new world....” Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western*

Seal of the United States reproduced on the one dollar bill, the motto *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the New Order of the Ages. Likewise, in the statements of America's statesmen and politicians one can find this notion of the United States, not as an ordinary nation among nations, but as a nation that is at least as much an idea as a place or a homeland. Let us look at a few of the expressions of this idea. (Emphasis throughout is mine.)

It cannot be denied, but by those who would dispute against the sun, that with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs. This era is distinguished by free representative governments, by entire religious liberty, by improved systems of national intercourse, by a newly awakened and an unconquerable spirit of free inquiry, and by a diffusion of knowledge through the community, such as has been before altogether unknown and unheard of. America, America, our country, fellow-citizens, our own dear and native land, is inseparably connected, fast bound up, in fortune and by fate, with these great interests. If they fall, we fall with them; *if they stand, it will be because we have maintained them.* Let us contemplate, then, this connection, which binds the prosperity of others to our own; and let us manfully discharge all the duties which it imposes. If we cherish the virtues and the principles of our fathers, Heaven will assist us to carry on the work of *human liberty and human happiness.*

Daniel Webster, "A Discourse in Commemoration of the Lives and Services of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson," August 2, 1826.

Who shall assign limits to the achievements of free minds and free hands under the protection of this glorious Union? *No treason to mankind since the organization of society would be equal in atrocity to that of him who would lift his hand to destroy it. He would overthrow the noblest structure of human wisdom,* which protects himself and his fellow-man. He would stop the progress of free government. . . . He would extinguish the fire of liberty, which warms and animates the hearts of happy millions and invites all the nations of the earth to imitate our example.

James K. Polk, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845.

We are provincials no longer. . . . And yet we are not the less Americans on that account. We shall be the more American if we but remain true to the principles in which we have been bred. They are not the principles of a province or of a single continent. *We have known and boasted all along that they were the principles of a liberated mankind.*

Woodrow Wilson, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

America – not just the nation – but an idea, alive in the minds of people everywhere. As this new world takes shape, America stands at

the center of a widening circle of freedom – today, tomorrow and into the next century.

George H. W. Bush, State of the Union Message, January 31, 1990.³⁰

All these passages make clear that their authors considered the United States as a nation with universal implications for all mankind, and that at least some of them saw this country as more an idea than a place. But if America is an idea, and if that idea does not belong to us – “not the principles of a province or of a single continent,” but rather “the principles of a liberated mankind” – then to be an American is not to place oneself culturally in any particular tradition, but to regard oneself as a kind of universal man, an exemplar of a new humanity. But if this is so, then *ipso facto* the importance of the United States lies in its mission toward the rest of the world, its role as the bearer of mankind’s liberation and material advancement. Any other sort of cultural identity is of no importance, and in fact the cultural identity of the entire West is both swallowed up and realized in America. But this cultural identity is now entirely seen in the establishment of the institutions of a neoliberal economy and of formal democracy. The United States sees itself as part of the West because it has redefined the West in its own image.

The consequences for the rest of the world of America’s understanding of itself as a state with a messianic mission are clear enough in some of the justifications advanced for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, such as the spreading of democracy throughout the Middle East and the whole world.³¹ But if the notion of the United States as an idea more than as a place with a cultural tradition is wrong, what cultural identity ought Americans to have? It would seem that equally with Latin America, the United States cannot really understand itself apart from the cultural traditions inherited from Europe, from which it derived even those aspects of English Dissenting thought which gave rise to its secular messianic conceptions. But this unhinging of a nation from its traditions of place and the making of it, as it were, into a free floating idea, has also harmed the American mind. For as Josef Pieper wrote,

That is why man cannot live permanently “beneath the stars,” *vis-à-vis de l’univers*; he needs the roof of the familiar over his head, the

³⁰ The dedication, to President George Washington, of Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, contained a sentence which began, “That the Rights of Man may become as universal as your benevolence can wish, and that you may enjoy the happiness of seeing the New World regenerate the Old” It is a very short step from the desire that “the New World regenerate the Old” to George W. Bush’s present crusade to force neoliberal democracy upon the entire world.

³¹ President George W. Bush, in his second inaugural address (January 20, 2005) stated, “So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

surroundings of everyday life, the sensual proximity of the concrete, the regularity of habit and custom. In a word: a full human life calls for environment, too, in the differentiated sense we have given it, in which environment is not "the world."³²

It is probable that for many Americans the United States has meant something more than simply the testing ground of the first specimens of the new type of humanity. But this has rarely been articulated, at least by those who presume to shape and express national opinion. And so those who, inarticulately, do feel a normal human love of place, and the traditions of place, when they wish to give some kind of utterance to those feelings, have no other language at hand to adopt except that of the universal republic, of the nation as holding an undefined freedom in trust for the whole world, of America as an idea more than a country. And it likewise seems undeniable that the constant iteration of the theme of America's universal mission has harmed normal patriotism, and to some degree confused not only the speech but the thoughts of most citizens of the United States. In any case, that such an idea represents a danger not only to the thinking of its own citizens, but to the rest of the world it obvious today.

What we think of ourselves matters greatly. If mankind is to retain its links with its past, if the scientific and technological revolutions that began a few centuries ago are not to cut us off completely from our ancestors, or, on the other hand, if hatred of all things Christian is not to excise a vital part of the history of our civilization, then we must be careful as to how we identify ourselves culturally. Moreover, focusing on what is of most importance in our own past will help us to escape from defining ourselves by how many material goods we have obtained or how much we have dominated the natural world around us. Only so will we have any hope of remaining truly human.

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³² *The Philosophical Act in Leisure the Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1952) p. 121.

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