

# LECTURE

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## The Future of European Civilization: Lessons for America

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**Abstract:** *America has much to learn from Europe's current condition. In Europe, the decline in religious faith has led to a universal weakening of society and a loss of confidence in the value of its civilization. And the effects of this have been grave: throngs of unassimilated immigrants, unchecked military threats from abroad, and confusion about national identity threaten Europe's future. America, by contrast, still shows many signs of strength. Nonetheless, should we lose our sense of shared identity, Europe's path likely awaits.*

In a gloomy but strangely enthralling book published at the end of the First World War, the historian and polymath Oswald Spengler wrote of the decline of the West, arguing that Europe was moving inevitably to its end according to a pattern that can be observed among civilizations from the beginning of recorded history. Each historical superorganism, he argued, displays its distinctive and defining spirit through its culture. That of the West is “Faustian”—involving an outgoing and conquering attitude to the world displayed in the science, art, and institutions that came to fruition at the Reformation, spread themselves far and wide through the Enlightenment, and then reached a crisis at the French Revolution.

After that great period, things began to ossify into rigid legal and bureaucratic forms. Thus was born the period of “civilization,” typified by Napoleon’s new rationalization of the old spirit of France. Culture leads to civilization, which in turn leads to decay and then death. The culture of the West, Spengler argued, will dwindle to a purely mechanical simulacrum of its former greatness before disappearing entirely.

### KEY POINTS

- The threats confronting Europe also confront America: mass immigration of people whose loyalty cannot be guaranteed, the purging of religious assumptions from the public square, and the state’s growth which squeezes out civil society.
- Europe is also threatened by the rise of confused human rights doctrines which often contradict common sense, the law, and national security interests.
- Americans have something Europeans lack: a sense of shared identity.
- This sense of identity depends on borders, laws defined by territory, and preserving the idea of the nation.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1265>

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In the wake of the First World War, Europe was more than normally receptive to stories of its doom, and Spengler was eagerly embraced by the reading public. Despite a polemical attack from G. K. Chesterton, his brand of cultural pessimism survived to gather momentum with the outbreak of the Second World War and to exert a mesmerizing influence over the post-war literary world.

Many of Spengler's arguments are sophistical, many of his facts are invented and his comparisons far-fetched, but it is difficult, on reading Spengler now, to think that his prophecy of doom was entirely unfounded. In one particular, he has surely been proven right, which is that the culture of Europe is destined to become an empty shell, held in place by rigid structures of law and bureaucracy around the void where art and religion were once enthroned in splendor.

In one particular, however, Spengler seems to have been wholly off-beam, and that is America. His Eurocentric vision is focused, like that of Marx, on the great turning points in our continental history: the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution. He has nothing, or nothing significant, to say about the other revolution that preceded the French by 13 years and which led to the founding of the longest-lasting democracy that the world has so far known.

The American Revolution was, for Spengler, a distant commotion like the bursting of a supernova light-years away in space, a tiny pinpoint of light in the ambient darkness, but the nation that was born on these shores has proved itself more resilient, more creative, and more able to sustain its defining mission than any other in the modern world. It is, of course, tied to Europe, and to one European country in particular, by language, history, culture, and institutions. It is a product of the European diaspora, and in particular of the English religious and political inheritance. The American Constitution does not make sense without that inheritance and is in one interpretation simply an attempt to transcribe into a document the civic freedom that the English won for themselves over centuries of common-law government.

Nevertheless, the American Revolution was in itself a move away from Europe, an attempt to embark on a different kind of history from those that had prevailed across the ocean, and although the ties to Britain remain, it is not possible to predict the condition of

America from the facts presented by Europe. It could be that the rapid and radical decline that we witness on our side of the Atlantic has no equivalent here. Or, if it has an equivalent, it would be presumptuous to assume that the American decline can be understood outside the special context provided by the history and self-image of the United States.

### **The European Union and the Threats to Europe**

Let me summarize some relevant facts about Europe and its civilization today. There is no doubt in my mind both that Europe is now profoundly threatened and also that the approach of the European Union to the threats is informed by a comprehensive failure to understand them. The threats come from both inside and outside, and the two are connected.

From inside, we confront the radicalization of our Muslim populations and the loss of the core structures of European society: the family, marriage, the Christian faith, and little platoons built from those things. From outside, we confront mass migration of populations seeking the benefits of European legal order without assuming the cost. And we confront a growing military threat from Russia. In the past, that threat has been countered by the NATO alliance, but the alliance has been weakened both by European indifference and by the isolationist foreign policy of the Obama Administration.

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The radicalization of our Muslim populations is connected to the migration problem: Not all those fleeing the Middle East are hostile to the Islamist philosophy of ISIS. Many come ready to bear arms against their hosts, and recent atrocities in France have shown the extent to which new arrivals are ready and willing to join the cause of Allah against the infidel. As ISIS consolidates its grip on Syria and loses what support it has among the local populations, it will increasingly seek to export its Islamist ideology and the violence associated with it.

Such is the lesson of modern history: that revolutionary governments become stable when they

can export their chaos to their neighbors. Europe has defenses against armed invasion, but it has no defenses against those who invade without weapons.

The big questions in my mind are these: To what extent is the loss of our traditional religion and the culture that grew from it responsible for our weakness in the face of these threats, and what could we conceivably do now to remedy the defect?

Those questions are difficult even to discuss. The EU institutions have made a point of removing all references to the Christian religion and its moral legacy from official documents, on the view that such things will constitute discrimination in favor of one group of Europeans over another. Cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights and also the European Court of Justice (the court charged with the application and enforcement of the treaties) are pushing for continent-wide laws permitting gay marriage, easy divorce, and abortion on demand, as well as laws banning the crucifix from public places and curtailing the teaching of the Christian religion in schools.

These initiatives have their parallels here in America, and in the same way that liberal activists have used the Supreme Court to overrule the religion-based decisions of state legislatures, secularists and Islamists are using the European courts to impose their vision on the nation-states of Europe.

### **The De-Christianizing of Europe**

This de-Christianizing of Europe is being pursued also through the European Parliament and its Fundamental Rights Agency, charged with the advocacy of human rights at all legislative levels. The Fundamental Rights Agency is led by activists in the cause of “gender equality” and LGBT rights and is inherently hostile to the traditional family and to the religion-based morality that shaped it. It is now pressing for the recognition of abortion as a human right—presumably a right of the mother rather than the child. It is active in promoting the “gender agenda” wherever this can be brought into play and is staffed largely by people who have spent their lives as busybodies and who have never done what my parents would have called an honest job of work.

It is true, of course, that activists gather always at the top and try to push society in the direction that they favor, but their getting to the top is not independent of the fact that they are *allowed* to get to the

top, and the people who allow them are those whom they wish to control. In any case, whatever the cause, there is no doubt as to the effect. Europe is rapidly jettisoning its Christian heritage and has found nothing to put in the place of it save the religion of “human rights.”

I call this a religion because it is designed expressly to fill the hole in people’s worldview that is left when religion is taken away. The notion of a human right purports to offer the ground for moral opinions, for legal precepts, for policies designed to establish order in places where people are in competition and conflict. However, it is itself without foundations. If you ask what religion commands or forbids, you usually get a clear answer in terms of God’s revealed law or the Magisterium of the church. If you ask what rights are human or natural or fundamental, you get a different answer depending on whom you ask, and nobody seems to agree with anyone else regarding the procedure for resolving conflicts.

Consider the dispute over marriage. Is it a right or not? If so, what does it permit? Does it grant a right to marry a partner of the same sex? And if yes, does it therefore permit incestuous marriage too? The arguments are endless, and nobody knows how to settle them.

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Things are made more complex still by the inclusion, in all European provisions, of “non-discrimination” as a human right. When offering a benefit, a contract of employment, a place in a college, or a bed in a hospital, you are commanded not to discriminate on grounds of...there then follows a list derived from the victims of recent history: race, ethnic group, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and whatever is next to be discovered. But all coherent societies are based on discrimination: A society is an “in-group,” however large and however hospitable to newcomers.

Non-discrimination laws effectively tie the hands of the indigenous European communities, forbidding them from offering privileges to their existing

members while permitting every kind of discrimination among the incoming migrants. It is natural for an immigrant family to offer jobs to its own members, to discriminate on grounds of race, ethnic group, religion, and (without necessarily mentioning this) gender and orientation. Hence, European cities are increasingly places of tightly knit immigrant communities with fiercely defended territory, from which the fair-minded indigenous inhabitants are excluded because they will not and cannot offer privileges to their kind.

### **Effects of the “Rights Culture”**

We are witnessing, in effect, the removal of the old religion that provided foundations to the moral and legal inheritance of Europe and its replacement with a quasi-religion that is inherently foundationless. Nobody knows how to settle the question whether this or that privilege, freedom, or claim is a “human right,” and the European Court of Human Rights is now overwhelmed by a backlog of cases in which just about every piece of legislation passed by national parliaments in recent times is at stake.

This development has led, however, to a sudden burst of Christian nostalgia—not only among the older generation, but among young people too. There are evangelical movements in the cities which reach out to the young and attempt to include them in a purified Christian vision. This new evangelism is not opposed to the official “rights” culture but carves out a private space within it—a space where, taking advantage of the permissions granted by the secular order, the old discipline can be adopted as a personal cross.

This privatized Christianity can be found in surprising places. One of them is worth mentioning, since it concerns the art form that more than any other expresses the “Faustian” spirit of Europe as Spengler discerned it: namely, music.

Following the example of Messiaen in France, a new generation of composers has emerged eager to compose liturgical and spiritual music, usually quite difficult music that will be heard only in the concert hall, but nevertheless music with the old message, written in defiance of the secular culture. Notable in Britain is Sir James MacMillan, whose knighthood, recently bestowed, is a sign that this way of reviving Christian values does not offend the powers that be. MacMillan is a Catholic Scot; his predecessor as the voice of Christian music in Britain, Sir John Tavener,

was a Greek Orthodox Englishman; and MacMillan’s most important rival for the ear of Christians in Britain is John Rutter, who is an Anglican, wedded to the old harmless, half-believing rites of our national church.

I mention these people because they exemplify a phenomenon that can be encountered all across Europe, which is the search for the old God of the continent in the sacred buildings, liturgies, and music of our various churches, even and especially among people who don’t set foot in a church on a Sunday for fear of being trapped into prayer.

The marks of Christianity have therefore not been rubbed out from the high culture of Europe. There are still poets, composers, painters, and sculptors who accept the old role of the artist as the one who praises God in the name of his fellow human beings and who represents their dignity before the throne of the Lord.

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### **The foundationless idea of human rights leaves the Muslim no alternative but to dismiss the secular law entirely as an impertinent attempt by human beings to usurp a privilege which is God’s alone: the privilege of guiding us to our salvation.**

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Another interesting effect of the rights pandemic is the increasing turn of young Muslims to a fervent “Salafist” version of their faith. The rights idea leaves everything that is most important in the life of a Muslim without official endorsement: In everything to do with sex, marriage, and the family, in the operation of the law, in the division of the day and the hours of work and recreation, the Muslim heart is at odds with the new official Europe.

Had Christianity retained its status as the foundation of domestic custom and public law, it would have been easier for a Muslim to accept the European order. Our way of life would have seemed like a form of obedience and a human adaptation to the will of God. But the foundationless idea of human rights leaves the Muslim no alternative but to dismiss the secular law entirely as an impertinent attempt by human beings to usurp a privilege which is God’s alone: the privilege of guiding us to our salvation. We

see in the young people eagerly travelling to Syria to join ISIS, in the growth of religious schools and unofficial shari'a courts, and in the wearing of the hijab and (where permitted) the niqab and the burqa a defiant Islamic culture that refuses to belong to the European order and which defines itself increasingly *against* that order.

One interesting side-effect of this has been the trafficking of vulnerable girls from the infidel community, an effect that has been devastating in our English cities. I have touched on this matter in my recent novel *The Disappeared*, in which I attempt to show some of the fault lines between the new Islamized underclass and the surrounding culture of nothingness.

Another interesting side-effect of Islamization has been the growth of anti-Semitism in Europe. It was inconceivable in my youth that anyone should voice an anti-Semitic sentiment, still more inconceivable that he should exhibit violence, contemptuous language, or any kind of assault towards others on account of their Jewishness. This has changed, and changed almost overnight.

Of course, people say that it is all the result of the bad behavior of Israel, but what is now considered bad behavior is precisely what was cheered on and endorsed a decade ago. The real cause of the new wave of anti-Semitism is the growing self-confidence and numbers of the Muslim minority—a fact that you cannot publicly declare in Britain, still less in France or Belgium, for fear of provoking the charge of Islamophobia and even the threat of legal action.

So much for the rights culture, which displays its foundationless character precisely in this matter for which it should put itself aggressively on display. It is precisely the advocates of human rights as a social panacea who are the most ardent in seeking excuses for anti-Semitism.

### External Threats to Europe

**Mass Migration.** This brings me to the external threats to Europe, the one explicit and obvious, which is mass migration, the other implicit and insinuating, which is the growing military readiness of Russia. The migration problem has been exacerbated by three factors:

- The instability and violence in Africa and the Middle East;
- The welfare culture of European nations; and

- The effect of the EU's mobility provisions, which have made it impossible for member states either to control the movement of people or to affirm national loyalty as the *sine qua non* of residence.

Looking back on it, we can see that when the original participants signed up to the Treaty of Rome in 1954, the idea of free movement of people would have had no perceivable consequences: The small number of adjacent member states enjoyed the same prospects for employment, housing, welfare, and the rest. Nobody would particularly want to leave unless his job required it, and there was no dominant language that gave the key to all foreign parts.

Now, with the expansion of the Union, that provision in the treaty has become the cause of massive disruption: the flight of the educated elite from Eastern Europe, the overwhelming of the welfare systems in Western Europe, and the crowding of millions of migrants into Britain and Ireland, the only European countries where the international language is spoken. The most important consequence of this is that if a migrant can make it to any country in the Union and somehow (it is never very difficult) gain the permission to reside there, he can then migrate to his country of choice.

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The result for us in Britain is the breakdown of our welfare system; the destructive overloading of our infrastructure; the collapse of a precious planning system that had served to keep the country looking roughly as it had always done during all the decades since the Second World War; and, last but by no means least, the total destruction of our state schools, in which city teachers have to teach classes of children for whom English is at best a second language and in which topics like national history, English literature, Christian scripture, Latin, and music appreciation have next to no meaning even though they are, or were, the foundation of everything that England once was.

That this problem has been exacerbated by the EU is an understatement. It was created by the EU and by the destructive attempt to govern a continent by a treaty, bypassing the legislatures of all signatory states. A treaty can be amended only by a laborious process and only assuming the consent of all the original signatories. It cannot by its nature adapt to changes that occur with the rapidity of wars, natural disasters, and mass migrations.

There is no way, in my view, that the EU could now adapt to the inflow of unwanted migrants, and it therefore responds by pretending that the migrants are really wanted, that inward migration is an economic benefit, and that no other factor needs to be considered. This is the message sent out to the world by the German political class, and the extraordinary fact is that it comes from a nation that once destroyed Europe in the name of its own search for *Lebensraum*.

All of Europe is now waiting for the politicians to come up with a policy that will solve or at least ease the migration problem, but because the EU is construed as a business deal—though a merger rather than (as for Napoleon and Hitler) an acquisition—it cannot address the cause of the problem. People are migrating into Europe because conditions are intolerable in much of the Middle East and because there is no cost, but only gain, for those engaged in people trafficking.

Had the EU taken the form of a military alliance rather than a social and economic merger, it would perhaps have been able to respond to ISIS, to the breakdown of order in Libya, and to the situation in Iraq. For these are, for European civilization, *military* issues, to be solved in the end by force. But without American leadership, which vanished with the election of President Barack Obama, Europe is unable to involve itself in policing those parts of the world that are exporting their chaos to Europe.

The failure of Europe in this matter illustrates the application of the second law of thermodynamics. Entropy is always increasing but can be made to decrease within a closed system. The active policy of the EU, which has been to dissolve borders and renounce the use of force, has created an open system without the resources to counter the entropy pouring in from outside.

**Confrontation with Russia.** The same weakness is manifest in the confrontation with Russia. Vladimir Putin has understood that the outer borders of Europe are porous and that the withdrawal of American interest is now more or less inevitable,

given the failure of the European leadership to understand the need for it.

Having seized parts of Georgia, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine without any real cost, other than sanctions that mean as little as such sanctions always do, Putin is beginning to probe NATO defense lines in the Baltic States and Eastern Poland. The farcical peace treaty in Ukraine, negotiated by German Chancellor Merkel and French President Hollande in Minsk, shows exactly how pointless in such circumstances is diplomacy not backed by the threat of force. In every way, Putin is being presented with the image of Europe as a military pushover and responding accordingly.

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Of course, the Russian elite won't want to bomb London, since they own it (another consequence of the EU, which has made land and buildings into property that aliens as well as citizens can buy and sell). However, it seems that the Russian army's strategic planning has shifted ominously from escalation to de-escalation as the central strand (so I learn from contacts in Polish intelligence). In other words, not invasion followed by the threat of a nuclear bomb, but a nuclear bomb followed by occupation.

### **Importance of National Sentiment and Local Attachments**

All in all, taking the external and the internal threats together, it is difficult to be cheerful about the future of European civilization. However, what I have said is not the end of the story by any means.

There are signs that people in Eastern Europe, and in the Baltic States especially, are seriously concerned about Russian ambitions, and there are some of them who do not take this as just another reason to flee to London. There is a growing awareness in the European political class that if mass migration is not brought under control, Britain and perhaps other Northern countries will withdraw

from the Union, which will in all probability collapse in consequence.

For there to be a successful turnaround in confronting these two external threats, however, there must also be a rebirth of national sentiment and local attachments. So far, the foundationless ideology of rights has wiped away the emotions that would be needed if people are to be resolute in defense of their shared assets. We see at every level the retreat from confrontation, the embarrassed refusal to affirm our patrimony or its legitimate claim for sacrifice. The only first-person plural that is officially allowed is that of Europe itself, though it is a “we” that few people now understand and which has in any case been bowdlerized by the political elite.

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But we also see, here and there, the signs of social and cultural renewal. During the 19th century, many Europeans thought they could compensate for the decline of the Christian faith by attaching themselves to ideologies: socialism, nationalism, communism, Marxism. The rights panacea is the latest of these, but we know or ought to know that it does not work. It is only by reconnecting with our true inheritance that we can develop the kind of first-person plural that will enable us to stand together against the growing threats to us.

I mentioned the encouraging examples set by English composers in recent years. I could mention the movement of Catholic youth in Italy around the Rimini meetings established by Father Giussani. I could mention the reaction in France—confused as yet and unfocused—to the recent Islamist atrocities. I could mention the extraordinary rebirth of representational painting around the work of Odd Nerdrum in Norway and the emergence in Britain of poets, such as Ruth Padel, John Burnside, and Don

Paterson, who speak directly to both young and old in a language that also recuperates our past.

Even popular culture is moving in the same direction, trying as best it can to recapture the sense of belonging and enchantment, as in the film epics of *Harry Potter*, *Narnia*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. I don’t say that these blockbuster movies are great works of art, but they are not repudiations of our civilization either. In fact, they are affirmations which convey confused but real guidance to young people concerning the values that made them what they are.

### **Lessons for America**

There are lessons in this for America. The threats confronting Europe confront America too: mass immigration of people whose loyalty cannot be guaranteed or who may, like the Boston bombers, see the host society as the devil’s work; the purging of Christian assumptions from the law and the public square and the replacement of them by the contradictory panacea of human rights; the unwillingness to confront threats while they can still be confronted—notably the threats posed by Russia and China.

But there is one thing that Americans have which we Europeans lack: namely, a sense of shared identity, of being included together in an enterprise the rewards of which and the costs of which are distributed among us all. This sense of identity depends upon borders. It depends upon a law defined by territory and human procedures rather than by God. And it depends on the idea of the nation.

Looking at Europe and at what follows when the political class loses all sight of that idea, Americans should recognize how lucky they are and how they must at all costs hold onto the belief in themselves as one nation. And if they add to that phrase the two words “under God,” they will be on the way to protecting the principal thing that we Europeans have lost.

It is not difficult for Americans to learn that lesson. In every crisis, they stand together as a nation, and the tradition of charitable giving is as strong here as it ever was. It is well known that Americans give more per capita to charitable causes than the people of any other country, and even if you complain that 2 percent of GDP is not much, it compares interestingly with the 0.2 percent of France and the less than 0.1 percent of Germany. Of course, in France and Germany, the state looks after those in need, but that is exactly the European problem: namely, that

the state has grown to replace the bonds of civil society and little by little to extinguish them.

This goes hand in hand with a decline in national feeling—indeed, in the case of Germany, with a repudiation of national feeling among the political elite, which treads the world with exquisite softness for fear of the Nazi shadow that creeps along behind. Learning to value your nation as a symbol of your togetherness in a shared land is, in my view, the way forward for all who would live as citizens. It is what has disappeared from the Middle East and what is now under threat in Europe, but it is not under threat here, and long may that continue.

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This brings me to a point in which Europe has the edge on America, which is the innate respect of Europeans for their aesthetic inheritance. Our landscapes and townscapes are dear to us and have been protected through all the destruction wrought by two world wars to survive as symbols of our long-standing settlement.

America is a new country, whose planning laws arose from the need to build quickly and, when the opportunity arose, move on. As a result, the country is now encumbered with vast urban wastelands like Detroit. Very few American cities have a center where anyone wants to reside, and all of them have begun to spread like a fungus over the landscape, forcing people to depend on fossil fuels and hours behind the wheel for the basic needs of life. There is a kind of loneliness that advances with the suburbs as closely knit communities are replaced with people too comfortable in their boxes to have much need of neighbors.

This was not always so. Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries wanted their cities to emulate those of Europe. Architecture was properly taught according to the beaux-arts tradition in the American schools, and city fathers were keen to lay out streets, parks, and city centers as public domains in which all residents have an interest. Look at the photographs of New York at the beginning of the 20th century, or the Chicago of Louis Sullivan, and you will see beautiful townscapes and facades, public spaces and genial details that match in every way the great achievement of Europe.

Of course, American architects are as greedy as their European counterparts and have no qualms in destroying environments if there is money to be made in doing so, but the result is not appreciated by the people, as is shown by the fact that, while no educated American would go to Detroit, Tampa, or Houston for a holiday, almost all want to visit Florence, Paris, or Rome. So here is one particular in which America can learn from Europe—and indeed, with the New Urbanism movement, is beginning to do so. But it will require strength of will to resist the corporate interests and the ideological fantasies of the schools of architecture.

A new revolution from below is needed here, and it should model itself on the long-standing revolution from below that we have had in England and which I document in my book *How to Think Seriously About the Planet*. We in England have taken possession of our landscape and townscape and said “no” to those who want to make it unrecognizable as a human habitat. The habit of saying “no” to new things goes against the grain for most Americans, but some noes are also yeses, and this is especially true of those said on behalf of a loved inheritance and a symbol of what we are.

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