

# TODAY'S CORE WESTERN VALUES GORDON MENZIES

*The cry 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' has come to represent all that the Enlightenment aspired to. But how well has it travelled over the past few centuries, and what would today's three-fold catchcry be? Gordon Menzies posits a Christian view.*



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Growing up in a family that valued radicalism and so-called free thought, my impression of the West was that it was a fairly pluralistic place, where the proverbial thousand flowers bloomed. That changed a bit when I became a Christian at 13. As my faith developed, I became more and more aware of the common assumptions that secular post-enlightenment societies share, but, all the same, I did have a sense of a great diversity of views around me.

More recently, when I was doing my doctorate at Oxford University, I began to reassess this view. I wondered whether it might be possible to describe Westerners (at least young 'up and coming' ones) as having a fairly tight set of core values. This conviction grew after I had three experiences.

**Experience Number One.** The style of debating at the Oxford Union, which is the student debating society, left a marked impression on me. Many students seemed

to be concerned only with political implications of issues, and appeals to morality, in so far as there were any, tended to draw their legitimacy from international law or human rights. Asking questions about the basis for these laws and rights was just impossible. I had expected that my own Christian opinions would not be welcome, but I had not realised just how narrow the scope of much of the debating was.

In the end, I approached one of the leaders of the Union, after dark of course. He told me that most undergraduates arrive at Oxford with an uncritical espousal of democracy and Free-market Liberalism (what is called Economic Rationalism in Australia).

For **Experience Number Two**, I had a chance meeting with a senior figure in European Buddhism as we travelled together on a bus from Heathrow to Oxford. As he spoke, I was intrigued at how secular he appeared: one cherished Buddhist belief after another was tossed aside as he explained his attempts to get the most worthy human rights and values out of this religion without being ensnared by anything remotely otherworldly. Eventually, I put it to him that he was a secular humanist who just used Buddhism to provide some kind of ethical anchor. He immediately agreed with this.

I began to feel a sense of *deja vu*. The narrow set of values of the 20-something year-old Oxford rhetoricians seemed to be marching on other, older world views by completely re-defining their central concerns.

Finally, September 11, which occurred two days before I handed in my thesis, provided my **Experience Number Three**. 9/11 has led to a growing questioning of how the West stands in relation to other cultures, but the taxonomy of cultures has not really caught up. I am reminded of Sartre's novel *Nausea*, where the anti-hero, Roquentin, in a moment of existential angst, cannot get the words to stick to seats anymore:

Things have broken free from their names, they are there, grotesque, stubborn, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything about them: I am in the midst of Things, which cannot be given names. Alone, wordless, defenceless, they surround me, under me behind me, above me.

In the post September 11 environment labels like 'right' and 'left' seem to hang limp off their targets, and then fall off. Is it possible to find new ways of describing the cultural distinctiveness of the West?

## Democracy

I take as my starting point the observation of the Oxford Union Leader that the cohort of people arriving at university are pro-democratic and market driven. Whatever may be said of Western culture, it is certainly pro-democratic. The praises of democracy ring out everywhere. It is valued so highly that it is sometimes even possible to get away with appealing to it in an argument, as though the joy of unfettered expression was itself a logical point. For example, the US President often met critics prior to the Iraq war with the incisive 'I love democracy', as though that settled the issue. Now I do not wish to rubbish democracy; it is very successful at preventing a small minority oppressing the majority, and it allows all kinds of views to be aired without fear of reprisal. It seems that democracy, like good grammar, is a vehicle to clear communication. But imagine if an articulate critic of the Iraq war was met with the response 'I love good grammar'. Would that have settled the issue any more effectively?

More fundamentally, democracy cannot shield us from what Stephen Boyden (ANU) has called cultural mal-adaptions. Presumably, a democratically elected ancient Chinese or Mayan government would have approved of foot-binding, and, human torture and sacrifice. Boyden believes that the whole Western world is at this time in the grip of 'ever-more-ism', with catastrophic environmental effects. If he is even partly correct, it is a tribute to the fact that the existence of democratically-elected governments in the West doesn't rule out mass delusion.

But America plans to vigorously export democracy, as they are doing in Iraq as I write.

[we aim to bring] the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world'

Bush Administration

And what is the hope of free markets?

## Economy

In the West, the organisation of economic affairs has come to be governed by Free Market Liberalism. This extols the virtues of trading as many goods and services as possible in markets, thereby making the most of prices

as signals for producers and consumers.

But markets are only part of the story: the motives of individuals are important. A towering figure in the imagination of many an economic theorist, *homo economicus*, or Economic Man, is a fairly unpleasant fellow to have around. He is almost always thinking of himself, and when he does think of others there is a tantalising ambiguity about his motives; some economists are exploring altruism in a meaningful way, while most others are busy debunking altruism as yet another example of enlightened self-interest.

The cultural effect of Economic Rationalism is on one level straightforward. To speak against selfishness is now simply

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viewed as misguided. When mediated by markets, it is thought that selfishness is both good for society and good for the individual.

Adam Smith, the father of economics, long ago spoke of the providential way in which selfishness can turn out for good. Gordon Gecko's famous "Greed is good" quote from Wall Street is admittedly crude, but it is not a bad paraphrase of how Smith is often misunderstood. Some people, and some Christians, can put up with the economic way of thinking if selfishness is genuinely transformed into stewardship (i.e. using resources well so that one can serve), or if it is mainly confined to the commercial world.

On the latter, Economic Man is no longer content to stay in the commercial world. Recently, he has been attempting to widen his sphere of influence. Following the work of Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker, he has decided to enter into the estate of marriage. The Becker research program has sought to explain marriage, the decision to have children, and the decision to divorce, using the tools of cost benefit analysis, and a market for so-called 'marital goods'. One can only wish him well in his own marriage as the tantalising ambiguity of his motives becomes clear to his wife, or wives.

So, to summarise the comments made

by the Oxford Union leader, undergraduates arrive with more interest in the fact that the majority can decide things, than in what that majority might actually decide. And, with a quiet confidence that selfishness is a positive virtue, at least when it is under the discipline of the market.

I myself think that there is more to generalise about Western Culture than this, but before I go onto that, I want to raise a puzzle.

### *Why aren't more people Christians today?*

Contrary to the impressions of many Muslims, Christianity is certainly out of fashion in the West (at least, the kind of Christianity that is not captive to the state).

What is so puzzling about this is that, relative to the end of the C19th, a number of developments have made it a lot easier to argue for. As one philosopher put it, the battle to keep Christianity respected in the academy was fought, and lost, in the C19th.

At that time:

1. The question of origins and the status of Humanity was rethought with the arrival of Darwinism.
2. The New Testament documents were dated quite late (eg. AD 175-200 for John's account of Jesus).
3. Scientism – the extolling of experiments and mathematics as the only reliable paths to truth – was on the rise.

But now:

1. On origins, reductionism has come under attack; meaning is different to process, apparent inorganic design is not harmed by evolution, origin of the universe with the 'Big Bang' raises causation questions.
2. The New Testament documents are dated earlier (possibly all in the first century).
3. "Only experiments and mathematics can establish truth" is not a statement provable by experiment, or mathematics.

To solve this puzzle, I want to pursue the idea

that Christianity is unpopular because the West is preoccupied with other things, namely power and sex.

## Empower me

At the end of the Second World War, everyone was horrified at the images of the concentration camps. Those of a philosophical bent could not help noticing the inspiration that the Nazis drew from Nietzsche, and *Der Übermensch* 'the Overman', the towering figure whose supremacy over other men was as decisive as the supremacy of humanity over animals. In a characteristically clear way, his longing for the evolutionary leap towards the Overman came hand-in-hand with his contempt for Christianity:

*Christians are surprised by neither the Auschwitz images nor the beautiful Family of Man photos.*

What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment...

Even in the past this higher type [the Overman] has appeared often—but as a fortunate accident, as an exception, never as something willed...From dread the opposite type was willed bred and attained; the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick animal—the Christian.<sup>1</sup>

While it would be unfair to align his thoughts directly with the Nazis—his creative sister did much of the damage here—I think Christians would be comfortable saying they both listened to the same voice.

Nazi images are still with us today; while I stayed in the UK, the airplay of documentaries of the Second World War gave me the impression that I ought to be listening more carefully for air-raid sirens. But I think the Second World War is a powerful memory in popular culture everywhere in the West, providing a strong platform for the pursuit of human rights. Indeed the Charter of the UN was written partly with this in mind.

But Auschwitz was not the last image. Before long, in 1955, a collection of photographs was compiled under the

glowingly optimistic title 'the Family of Man'. Despite the innocent beauty of these images, it is hard to doubt there was an element of denial in the exhibition verse:

There is only one man in the world  
and his name is All Men.

There is only one woman in the world  
and her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world  
And the child's name is All Children.

Christians are surprised by neither the Auschwitz images nor the beautiful Family of Man photos. They are used to affirming both the wonder of creation, and the tragedy of the fall. But how have these images been resolved in secular Western culture? I suspect that they have hardly been resolved at all. The only

resolution one can point to is a kind of historical compromise coming out of a dialectic process. Nietzsche/Hitler was the thesis, the Allied victory in the Second World War was the antithesis, but what is the synthesis?

Perhaps the synthesis could be described as post-Nazi or post-Nietzschean, because being post is not the same as being anti. For example, part of being post-modern is to lose faith in some of the things of the modern world (for example, the presumption of progress) while not losing faith in others (for example, the gadgets of science). In a similar way, the West is post-Nazi or post-Nietzschean in the sense that it has lost faith in the militarism and genocide of the Nazis, but without giving the whole thing away.



First, there is the obsession with personal power and rights. We in the West love power talk. To improve the lot of any group is not to serve them (for that is patronising) but to empower them. For a recent echo of Nietzsche, consider the '48 Laws of Power' by Greene and Elffers.

Law 13: 'When asking for help, appeal to people's self interest, never to their mercy or gratitude'

Nietzsche: 'Help yourself and everyone will help you, the principle of neighbour love'

Law 15: 'Crush your enemies totally'

Nietzsche: 'What is good? All that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? All that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome.'

Second, the West still cherishes the vision of the Master Race, or the Overman. This cherished ideal surfaces in two key ways. First, there is the focus on medical perfectibility, physical beauty and sexual dexterity. Increasingly, genetic engineering, rather than death camps, holds out the promise of the healthy and (in two new twists) Sexy Over-Person (*Überwesen mit Sexappeal*). Supermodel Beverly Johnson expresses what passes as a social conscience in today's West: "Everyone should have enough money to get plastic surgery".

The anti-Christian and post-Nietzschean West by and large has a low view of marriage. Certainly, the feminist writer Shumaleth Firestone, writing in the early 70s, was not alone in decrying sexual fidelity: "Why has all joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into one narrow, difficult-to-find alley of human experience [marriage], and all the rest laid waste?" The West's key concerns are empowerment and sexual dexterity instead of service and care.

As the French Army marched around Europe during the Napoleonic wars, it had as its slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. What should the Western armies, corporations and Sexy Over-Persons say now as they roam around the globe?

Perhaps 'Democracy, Economy, Empower Me'?

How could Christianity, with its suffering-servant hero, ever get a hearing in a culture like this? ☹

## END NOTE

1 F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Zarathustra's Prologue and Zarathustra's Discourses, III.