

Europe's Identity Problem and the New Islamist War

by James Kurth

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Abstract: Fundamental transformations of identity within Europe have historically resulted in great wars, which in turn resulted in fundamental transformations of identity. This essay discusses, first, four great periods of war in Europe and the succession of identities they produced, and then the new war that Islamist terrorists, and Islamism more generally, have brought to Europe and the West. It considers the inherent weaknesses and failures of the now-dominant Western ideology and identity, liberalism, in dealing with this new war, and concludes with a consideration of the once-dominant Christian identity in Europe. That identity, much more than liberalism, would have strengthened Europe in its current war with Islamism.

For more than thirty years, ever since the end of the student demonstrations and radical leftism of the late 1960s–early 1970s, Western Europe has enjoyed peace and prosperity, both of which have been rare in its long history of dark and bloody conflicts. In effect, Europe has been living in a historic bubble, or rather in a bubble where it seemed that history had been suspended or even abolished. But now, with violence, rioting, and terrorism issuing out of Europe's Muslim communities, European history is starting up again, with growing prospects that this new chapter will be dark and bloody indeed. Europe faces a new long war, this time with Islamism. The strengths and weaknesses of Europe in this profound conflict will depend upon the very identity of the Europeans themselves. In particular, the identity Western Europeans have chosen for themselves during the past thirty years has largely been a secular, liberal one. But, as we shall see, European liberalism is profoundly ill-suited for the great task of a long and demanding war with Islamism.

War and Identity

War has always been intimately connected with identity in Europe. Fundamental transformations of identity within Europe have resulted

in great wars, which in turn resulted in fundamental transformations of identity.

From Christendom to Catholic, Protestant, and Secular Identities

In the premodern era (i.e., before roughly 1500), what we now normally designate as Europe was generally thought of as Christendom.¹ Europe was defined by a Christian, particularly Catholic, identity. There were, of course, also a myriad of local identities, but the only identity found in all the localities and throughout Europe was the Christian one.

At the beginning of the modern era, the Protestant Reformation introduced into Europe a series of fundamental conflicts and a redefinition of Europe's identity. Although all of Europe was still Christian in some sense, it was the conflict between its two versions, Protestant and Catholic, that was most salient to most people. This conflict soon issued in the Wars of Religion of the sixteenth century and culminated in the Thirty-Years War (1618–48). By the end of the seventeenth century, the old Christian identity of Europe had been split into three distinct identities: (1) Catholic; (2) Protestant; and (3) an emerging secular mentality represented by such philosophers as Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes, and John Locke. In the minds of many, the wars of religion and the catastrophe of the Thirty-Years War represented a great failure of Christianity. It is therefore not surprising that in the aftermath of these wars some elites would seek some kind of non-Christian identity, and this provided a strong impetus for the development of secular philosophies.² In the course of the eighteenth century, this development spread from a small elite to wider and growing educated middle-class groups. This culminated in the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century.

Liberal, Socialist, and Nationalist Identities

It was not long, however, before the Enlightenment itself introduced a new series of fundamental conflicts into Europe, which exploded with the French Revolution. This soon issued in the Wars of the French Revolution and culminated in the Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815). Together, these wars can be seen as another thirty-years war.

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars and by the third decade of the nineteenth century, Europe had again been split into three distinct identities. Each of them was a descendent of the secular ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and in particular of its famous slogan: *liberté, égalité,*

¹ For purposes of this essay, we will consider Europe to consist of almost all countries west of Russia. This largely corresponds to the current and candidate members of the EU.

² Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

fraternité. These identities were, respectively, liberal, socialist, and nationalist. The course of European history during the nineteenth century was largely defined by the struggle between these three secular ideologies and identities.

Democratic, Communist, and Fascist Identities

The long and terrible period between the beginning of the First World War and the end of World War II can also be seen as yet another thirty-years war.³ World War I itself began as a conflict between competing nations, but the long course and profound costs of the war radicalized the three secular ideologies and identities that had been inherited from the nineteenth century. Liberalism was broadened into democracy. A portion of socialism was radicalized into communism. And in the nations that lost the war (or in Italy's case, received virtually no rewards to compensate for its great costs), nationalism was radicalized into fascism and national socialism.⁴

In Europe, World War II was largely defined by the struggle between these three radicalized ideologies and identities. At the end of that war the fascist and national socialist identities had been utterly defeated and destroyed. Indeed, in the minds of many, the latest thirty-years war had also largely discredited even the less-radical nationalist identity. In order to win World War II, however, the democratic Western nations (particularly Britain and the United States) and the communist Soviet Union had both become more nationalist than they had been before. The United States especially had never been a more unified nation-state than it was during that war. The fullest discrediting of the nationalist identity in Europe and the United States would not occur until the 1960s.

The two remaining secular identities, democracy (which soon became more like liberalism again) and communism, were soon engaged in yet another great struggle and a peculiar kind of world war, the Cold War, at the end of which the communist identity had largely been discredited. In the minds of many, the decline and denouement of communism had also largely discredited even the less-radical socialist identity. In order to win their struggle with communism and especially to win the Cold War, however, the democratic Western nations (now including much of Western Europe) had become more social, if not socialist, than they had been before. The Western Europe nations had established extensive social-welfare systems and strong social-democratic parties. Even the United States, beginning with the New Deal in the 1930s and broadening the undertaking with the Great Society in the 1960s, had

³ P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, second edition (London and New York: Longman, 1997), chapters 2–3.

⁴ James Kurth, "War, Peace, and the Ideologies of the Twentieth Century," *Current History*, January 1999; Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Knopf, 2002), chapters 2–3.

established an extensive social-welfare system. The fullest discrediting of the socialist identity in Europe and the United States would not occur until the 1990s.

The Supremacy of the Liberal Identity

With the end of the Cold War, only one secular identity remained in Europe and in the West more generally: liberalism. This liberalism was now an ensemble of several elements: liberal democracy with respect to politics; the free market with respect to economics; the open society with respect to social structure; and expressive individualism with respect to culture. This last element had become an especially dynamic and driving one. The liberalism of the modern era was rapidly being transformed into the hyper-individualism, even hedonism, of the postmodern era. Indeed, the purportedly new identities of the post-modern era increasingly had a great deal in common with the myriad of pagan identities of the ancient era, like those found in the Roman empire. As G. K. Chesterton once remarked, “When men cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything!”⁵

Looking back, therefore, we can perceive a series of successive eras and successive identities within Europe, and also to a degree within America as well. During the premodern era, Europe (more appropriately, Christendom) was defined by its Christian, especially Catholic, identity. During the early modern era (the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries), Europe was divided into Catholic, Protestant, and emerging secular identities. During the more fully modern era (the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century), this division was transformed into a new division between liberal, socialist, and nationalist identities, which were then radicalized in the high-modern era (the twentieth century) into democratic, communist, and fascist/national socialist identities. Finally, in the post-modern era of our own time, Europe is once again defined by one identity, liberalism. At first glance, this might seem to mean that Europe is once again unified around a common world-view, albeit a very different one than the Catholicism of the pre-modern era. But since liberalism has now been radicalized into hyper-individualism, Europe in some sense has become more divided into smaller fragments than it has ever been before.

The Islamist War and Its Three Fronts

Europe and the West more generally are now again at war, with Islamist terrorists. Indeed, it is becoming evident that the West faces a war with Islamist movements more generally, such as Salafism and Wahabism, and the

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (New York, 1926).

transnational networks which they support.⁶ And of course Muslim youths have engaged in episodic riots and endemic street crimes in many Western European countries in recent years, on an especially large scale in France in October-November 2005.



Muslims protesting in front of the Danish consulate in Dusseldorf after the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, Feb. 11, 2006. Banner reads "Hate against Muslims is hidden behind freedom of press." (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

This war is being fought in three distinct areas or arenas, which can be conceived of as the central front, the eastern front, and the western front. The latter front is the West itself, where the decisive campaigns between the West and Islamism are being waged.

The *central front*, the Middle East, is the most familiar. It in turn consists of two major theatres: Israel/Palestine, where the central interests and issues are largely political; and the Persian Gulf, where the central interests and issues are largely economic. The 9/11 terrorists were all from Arab countries in the Middle East, and the manpower and money to support global networks of Islamist terrorists still largely come from this area.⁷

⁶ Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002); James Kurth, "The New Protracted Conflict: The War and the West," *Orbis*, Spring 2002.

⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

The *eastern front* comprises Southwest and Southeast Asia. It also consists of two major theatres: Afghanistan, which hosted Osama bin Laden and the Taliban and which continues to include a substantial Islamist population, particularly among the Pashtun ethnic group; and Pakistan, which continues to host elements of Al Qaeda and, more importantly, which possesses its own nuclear weapons, “the Islamic bomb.” Further east, of course, is Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, which potentially is a vast reservoir of Islamist terrorists.

The *western front* is the home front, i.e., the West itself. It also consists of two major theatres: Europe and the United States. The 9/11 terrorists were organized as cells within Europe, and since then Islamist cells have carried out or prepared several major terrorist attacks within Europe, including the Madrid train and London subway bombings. There are now immense and growing Muslim communities in most of the countries of Western Europe, with the younger (often underclass) members of these communities being considerably more Islamist than their elders.⁸ In this essay, we will be focusing upon the western front and primarily upon its European theatre.

Muslim Communities in Western Countries: Differences between Europe and the United States

The war between the West and Islamism has focused attention on Muslim immigrants in Western countries. These immigrants form communities that have long been hostile to the culture—whether seen as Christian or as secular—of the host countries, and they now pose serious problems for domestic security. Muslim immigrants thus have an anomalous position in both Europe and the United States. The particular nature of the anomaly is different, however, in the two theatres of the West.

For Europe, Muslim countries comprised major parts of the British, French and Dutch empires. Accordingly, Muslim communities comprise at least 3 percent of the population of Britain, 10 percent of that of France, and 6 percent of that of the Netherlands. Muslims also comprise more than 5 percent of the population of Germany, Sweden, and several other Western European countries. European political leaders now have to take Muslim political demands into account, and Muslim leaders may gain veto power over some policy issues, most obviously in regard to foreign policy toward the Middle East.

For the United States, in contrast, Muslim countries have not been long-established parts of the American sphere of influence. Even such putative allies

⁸ Zachary Shore, “Europe’s Muslim Problem,” *Orbis*, Summer 2005, and *Breeding Bin Ladens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, forthcoming, 2006); Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have often engaged in independent, unfriendly, and distinctly un-colonial behavior toward the United States. Accordingly, Muslim immigrant communities comprise only a very small part (about 1 percent) of the U.S. population. Furthermore, given the uninviting environment in America for Muslim immigrants since 9/11, Muslim immigrant communities probably will not form a much larger part of the American population anytime soon. Consequently, American political leaders will not have to take Muslim political demands into serious account. On the contrary, they very likely will reject any such demands, particularly in so far as they conflict with those put forward by American Jews, most obviously in regard to foreign policy toward the Middle East.

The clear differences between Europe and America in regard to the relative strengths of their Muslim and Jewish communities—Muslims being strong in Europe and weak in America, and Jews being weak in Europe and strong in America—have already helped to crystallize a great divide between Europe and America with regard to their respective policies toward the Middle East and their respective strategies in the war with Islamism (though that divide has other sources as well). It will take major efforts on the part of both European and American statesmen to ensure that this double and reverse asymmetry in communal structure does not contribute to a great permanent divide between Europe and the United States on how to wage this war.⁹

The European Theater and the Liberal Ensemble

As we have seen, the principal identity of people in the West, including Europe, is now defined by an ensemble of liberal ideas: (1) liberal democracy; (2) the free market; (3) the open society; and (4) an individualist culture. These ideas, which are now seen as the essence of Western civilization, have worked to inhibit and weaken the West, and particularly Europe, in its war with Islamist terrorist networks.

First, and most obviously, the elements of liberal democracy, open society, and individualist culture make it very difficult to legitimate security measures directed at Islamist networks and therefore to implement these measures in a consistent and persistent way. Security measures can be undertaken, but because civil-liberties groups always contest them, they are rendered more episodic and random than effective and sustained.

Second, and more fundamentally, the element of the free market has made it almost impossible to establish a stable equilibrium between Muslim communities and European peoples. For more than four decades, market forces (supply and demand for cheap labor to perform menial tasks) have brought about the mass immigration of Muslims into Western Europe, but they

⁹Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

have also largely confined these immigrants within a working class, or even within an underclass.

Third, the element of the open society has encouraged continued Muslim immigration, even when and where the economic demand for such labor has much diminished. European governments have then adopted policies of opening their borders to asylum-claimants and to workers' families (and then to the families' families). Even if the economic rationale for Muslim immigration (promoted by the business-based right) has been discredited, the social ideology of human rights (promoted by the academic and media-based left) has kept immigration at a high rate.

This working out of the free market and the open society was thoroughly reinforced and validated by the liberal worldview. More than any other ideology, liberalism is supportive of unrestrained immigration. The origin of this attitude lies in the Enlightenment, whose ideas still continue to guide many Europeans, including not only the liberal political parties, but the social democratic and socialist ones as well.

The Enlightenment, especially in its French but also in its Anglo-American version, has been especially committed to the idea of universality, and with it a disdain for the particularities of time, place, culture, and religion. It holds that religious or cultural traditions provide no good reason to exclude anyone from immigrating to an enlightened society. Consequently, the Enlightenment thinker has not traditionally taken the Muslim religion or culture seriously, but rather has tended to assume that a Muslim who is exposed to or immigrates to an enlightened society will eventually give up the Islamic faith and become an enlightened, universal individual like everyone else. The Enlightenment worldview has taken very seriously the imperative of universalism. The indiscriminate admission of immigrants, including Muslim immigrants, into European nations has not only been permitted by this particular, and peculiar, European worldview; it has been seen as its fulfillment.

Finally, and most fundamentally, the ensemble of liberal ideas has also undermined and dissolved the cohesion of the European peoples themselves. This process has been the result of long and deep historical developments, and it is worthy of extensive discussion.

The European Catastrophes of the Twentieth Century: Diagnoses and Prescriptions

After the great catastrophe of the Second World War, Europeans were determined that nothing like it should ever happen again. But among many Europeans, and particularly among the European elites, the diagnosis for that war, as well as for the earlier and devastating First World War, was that they were caused by nationalism. It was not long (particularly by the 1960s) before this diagnosis was extended and applied to national identity itself. The solution

for war, accordingly, was to extinguish national identity. For almost four decades, European intellectual, economic, and even political elites have been engaged in a determined assault upon the identities of the various and different European nations. By now, for much of the European population, the only identity remaining is an individualistic, even hedonistic, one.¹⁰ From a liberal perspective, this is the perfect identity, but it is hardly a solid basis upon which to build legitimate policies to limit Muslim immigration or to promote Muslim assimilation.

Further, after the great class conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century and particularly of the Great Depression, Europeans sought ways that these too could be left behind. The need to do so was enhanced by the great Cold War conflict between capitalism and communism. Among most Europeans, the diagnosis for the class conflicts was that they were caused by unrestrained capitalism and the class polarization and mass poverty it produced. The solution was to construct a blend of capitalism and socialism, e.g., the mixed economy, the social market, and especially the welfare state. However, in recent years it has become increasingly evident that this solution, and particularly the welfare state, has seriously debilitated European peoples and rendered them dangerously weak in their growing conflict with Islamism.

The Demographic Consequences of the Welfare State

The welfare state did much to solve, or at least dissolve, the problem of class conflict in Europe, but it turns out that some of its measures have created a whole new range of serious social problems. Some of these are crucial with respect to the strength of Europe in its war with Islamism.

To begin with, there is the familiar argument that the welfare state, particularly its generous unemployment benefits, has led to higher unemployment in the European nations, particularly among the young. In several major European countries and for two decades or more, the unemployment rate has been roughly twice that of the United States, and the unemployment rate among the young has been roughly twice that of the general population. For more than a generation, vast numbers of young Europeans have spent years with no serious employment and little prospect of it. This has led to even more fecklessness among European youth than is normally found among young people.

However, a much more serious consequence of high unemployment has been its contribution to an actual reduction in the numbers of the young. Since the 1970s, European couples have been having far fewer children than in previous generations. Demographers employ a particular statistic, the “fertility” or “reproduction” rate, which refers to the average number of births

¹⁰ George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

per woman. A reproduction rate of 2.1 results in a population that is numerically stable. For more than two decades, however, the reproduction rate for most European countries has been considerably below this equilibrium rate of 2.1. Indeed, for the past generation, the reproduction rate in Germany, Italy, and Spain has been normally about 1.4 or less. This means that the population of these countries will actually begin to decline within a few years and that a couple of generations from now their populations will be only two-thirds or less of what they are today.¹¹

What explains this dramatic decline in the willingness of European couples to have children? We have already noted the longstanding high unemployment rate among the young; this means that young people are normally seen not as economic assets but as economic burdens. Perhaps even more fundamental, however, has been the consequence of the old-age benefits (“social security”) of the welfare state.

Traditionally, of course, a couple relied upon their children to take care of them when they became old and infirm. With the pension and social-security systems of the welfare state, however, the state itself promised to take the place of the children in carrying-out these responsibilities to the old. Children might remain economically useful, but they no longer seemed economically necessary. It is not surprising that some couples decided to have fewer of them, especially since they were becoming burdens in so many ways. The fact that today many persons are coming to see the promises of the state to be false does not mean that they were not once seen to be true by many couples when, decades ago, they were in their child-bearing years.¹²

The economic calculations produced by the welfare state have, of course, been greatly reinforced by changes in the methods and the politics of birth control. At the same time that children were becoming less necessary and desirable, the means of preventing them (new birth-control technologies, such as the pill, and abortion) were becoming far more effective and accessible. For the first time, large numbers of women, indeed the vast majority of the female population, could actually choose not to bear children, and vast numbers chose not to do so.

The Demographic Consequences of Liberal Individualism

These demographic consequences of the economics of the welfare state and the technologies of birth control were greatly reinforced by ideological and cultural developments. In the 1960s, the traditional theologies and ideologies that put family and community obligations at the center of the meaning of life came under attack and were replaced with the new and

¹¹ Pavel Kohout, “Population, Prophets, Pensions, and Politics,” *Orbis*, Fall 2005; James Kurth, “Demography is Destiny: Family and Civilization,” *Orbis*, Spring 2003.

¹² *Ibid.*

extremely liberal ideology of expressive individualism. This transformation of values was of course especially pronounced in the baby-boomer generation, what Europeans sometimes call "the Generation of 1968."¹³

Since the above economic and technological changes were probably inevitable, some kind of ideological and cultural changes were probably inevitable as well. However, the specific and radical changes in ideology and culture that actually occurred were not inevitable; there is a good deal more contingency and choice in regard to changes in the mental realm than in the material one. In particular, the adoption of the new liberal ideology of extreme individualism was a matter of social choice.

In any event, the logic of individualism by itself leads to demographic decline. Persons who see themselves first and foremost as freely choosing individuals will normally choose to have few children. Many individualists will choose to minimize the sacrifices that they have to make to have children. Rich individualists (and there are many of these in contemporary Western societies) will be able to sacrifice money (since they have a lot of it), but they will be much less likely to sacrifice time (of which they have much less, and certainly not enough to expend on more than one or two children). What is the case with the affluent individualists applies to the less affluent ones as well, who are less able to sacrifice money and who are also unwilling to sacrifice time. When all of these individual free choices are added up at the societal level, there are fewer children in each successive generation.

The conjunction of economic calculations, technological solutions, political rights, and, above all, individual freedom of choice makes the story of birth control over the past three decades a triumphal narrative of the fulfillment of liberal ideas. Unfortunately, one consequence of this triumph has been the demographic decline of the European peoples, and this too will have consequences. The narrative of the unfolding of these consequences is now beginning. It will be a narrative in which the Muslim peoples in Europe, who have had no demographic decline but just the opposite, will be major actors. And in this new narrative, it is not likely to be the liberal ideas and free-choosing individualists of Europe that will triumph.

The Transformation of the European Working Class

The narrative of Muslim immigration to Europe actually begins with the great transformation of the European working class, which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century.

During the Western European economic boom of the 1950s-1960s and the Southern European economic boom of the 1980s-1990s, European workers began to receive incomes that enabled them to engage in some

¹³Uwe Siemon-Netto, "The '68er Regime in Germany," *Orbis*, Fall 2004.

semblance of middle-class consumption. Not long thereafter, the very jobs of European workers were upgraded so that they became more like middle-class jobs. In a sense, over the past several decades, the old European working class has been promoted into the European middle class, at least with respect to jobs and consumption. Surely, one of the most effective ways to resolve the old and destructive class conflicts in Europe has been to dissolve the working class into the middle class.

Unfortunately, even in a highly developed, modern economy, there are still tasks to be performed that are physically demanding and socially demeaning, i.e., the menial labor or “dirty work” of the economy. These include jobs in construction, grounds maintenance, hospital services, waste removal, and agriculture. These tasks are still necessary for the functioning of society, and they have to be performed by someone. Since the European working class was no longer there to do the dirty work, and the European unemployed youth did not have to do it because they were supported by the welfare state, it would have to be done by immigrants.¹⁴ As it happened, the nearest and largest source of such immigrants was the Muslim world.

The Creation of the Muslim Working Class

Thus while the old European working class was being promoted into the European middle class, a new Muslim working class was being produced to take its place. This new working class was even less integrated into European society than the old one had been, and the differences between the working class and the rest of European society were even more numerous and more pronounced. To the old class conflicts were now added religious and racial conflicts as well. Indeed, much of the new Muslim working class was more like an underclass.

In summary, in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the European states appeared to be highly successful in solving the problems of the first half of that century—the problems represented by the successive great catastrophes of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War. It was these very successes, however, that have made Europe weak and vulnerable in dealing with the new problems of the twenty-first century.

A Tale of Two Nations

As for the future, the prospects are for a continuation of low reproduction rates among European peoples, and therefore a steady and severe decline

¹⁴James Kurth, “Who Will Do The Dirty Work?” in Andrew J. Bacevich, editor, *The Imperial Tense: Problems and Prospects of American Empire* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003).

in their populations. Conversely, there may be a continuation of substantial immigration of Muslims into the European countries, and very likely there will be a continuation of higher reproduction rates among the Muslim communities in Europe than among the European peoples themselves. Consequently, there will be a steady and substantial rise in the populations of these Muslim communities, both in absolute numbers and in percentages of the populations of European countries.

Many European countries will therefore become two nations.¹⁵ The first will be the ethnic-European nation, or more accurately, given its rejection of European and national traditions, the ex-European nation, one merely descended from a European people; it will be secular, even pagan, rich, old, and feeble. The second will be the Muslim and non-European nation, descended from non-European peoples; it will be religious, even Islamist, poor, young, and virile. It will be a kind of overseas colony of a foreign nation (a familiar occurrence in European history, but this time the foreign nation will be the umma of Islam, and the colonized country will be Europe itself), and it will form the beginnings of a kind of settler state. The two nations will regard each other with mutual contempt, but in the new, Muslim nation there will be a growing rage, and in the old, ethnic-European nation there will be a growing fear. They will provide the perfect conditions for endemic Islamist terrorism, or at least for a terrified ex-European people.

If Europe continues to adhere to a liberal identity—i.e., an identity based upon the ensemble of liberal democracy, the free market, the open society, and individualist culture—its prospects are bleak. As we have seen, these four elements have each worked to undermine the cohesion of the European peoples and to weaken them in the war Islamism has brought to them. The eventual result will be what might be called “the politics of demographic despair.” The European peoples will dissolve into a steadily shrinking and aging collection of individuals. At the end of the day, Europe will die not with a bang, but with a whimper.

The Revival of Alternative European Identities?

Are there alternative European identities that could provide for a more promising, and a more vital, future? Among the hypothetical options would be a revival of one or more of the European identities that were so prominent in the past. These include the socialist, the nationalist, and the Christian identities.

The socialist identity. Whatever the strengths of the socialist identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is little prospect that it will have any strength in the near future, and this is because it has been so discredited in the recent past. The last years of the Cold War, the failures of communism in Eastern Europe, and now the failures of the social-welfare systems in Western

¹⁵ I presented a longer version of the following section in my “Demography is Destiny.”

Europe have all combined to make the socialist alternative unattractive to most Europeans, including the young.

The nationalist identity. As we have seen, the nationalist identity had enormous strength in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, here too there is little prospect that this identity will have any strength in the near, or even the far, future, for several reasons.

First, and as we have seen, the very strength of the nationalist identity led it into great excesses and ultimately into the great catastrophes of the two world wars. Even if the anti-national reaction has itself been excessive, it is firmly embraced by the Generation of '68, which now comprises a powerful antinational establishment.¹⁶

Second, and more fundamentally, European nations are now too small to be economically viable, politically inspiring, or even culturally vigorous. In particular, no distinctively national culture is now being produced in any of the European nations. The most vigorous culture in Europe is of course the youth culture, which is hardly European, and hardly a culture. Conversely, while the European Union may be large enough to be economically viable, its pervasive bureaucratic structure and mentality makes it both politically boring and culturally bland. Europe is nowhere near being a nation.

Third, a revival of nationalist identities would once more divide Europe. Such divisions would be debilitating, if not devastating, for Europe in its war with Islamism.

The Christian identity. The Christian identity of Europeans, or at least of much of the European elites, was eclipsed by their socialist and nationalist identities for much of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Today, Christianity for most Europeans seems to be long ago and far away.¹⁷

The story of the decline of the Christian faith in Europe is complex. Despite the dubious efforts of some partisan writers in recent years to put the blame for the Holocaust upon Christianity (rather than upon the pagan racism of the Nazis), few Europeans seem to blame Christianity for the catastrophes of the twentieth century. In any event, hardly anyone did so in the 1950s, on the eve of the big decline in religious faith. The real reason that the Europeans of the baby-boomer and later generations abandoned Christianity is that it explicitly stood in the way of their expressive individualism, their self-centered desire to be free of any religious and communal restraints. In short, Europeans abandoned the faith of their ancestors not because of the force of historical events (which largely was why they abandoned their nationalist ideologies) but because of a free act of will (or of willfulness).

¹⁶ Siemon-Netto, "The '68er Regime in Germany"; Paul Gottfried, "How European Nations End," *Orbis*, Summer 2005; also his *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral*; Kenneth Minogue, "'Christophobia' and the West," *The New Criterion*, June 2002.

The Resources of Catholic Social Thought

Beyond the issues of lost identity, what would have been the policies and practices of a Christian Europe? The best source for addressing this question may well be found in the long and rich tradition of Catholic social thought, particularly the social encyclicals of the popes. These encyclicals began in 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of the Working Classes*), and by now social and cultural issues have been addressed in almost two dozen major encyclicals. Pope John Paul II, in particular, issued a series of fundamental and comprehensive encyclicals dealing with contemporary problems. These included *Laborem Exercens* (*On Human Work*), 1981; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (*On Social Concern*), 1987; and *Centesimus Annus* (*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*), 1991.¹⁸

The papal encyclicals have consistently and systematically critiqued each of the other identities we have discussed: liberalism, including its extremes of capitalism and individualism (instead, the popes have emphasized the full development of the human person); socialism, including its extreme of communism (instead, the popes have emphasized social responsibility and community); and nationalism, including its extreme of Nazism (instead, the popes have emphasized patriotism, but also international cooperation). Indeed, the papal encyclicals have offered an entire body of social thought as an alternative to these secular ideologies. The encyclicals of John Paul II developed such concepts as social solidarity, political subsidiarity, the family wage, and the culture of life.

A Counterfactual European History

What would have happened if Europe had adopted and practiced the precepts of Catholic social thought from the 1950s, including the precepts of the culture of life from the 1970s to the present? There would have been coherent and consistent efforts to address most of the social problems that have resulted in the bleak condition in which Europe finds itself today:

High unemployment. There would have been a commitment to integrate all able-bodied persons into the economy, in accordance with the concepts of social solidarity, the just wage, and community respect for all forms of honest work (including menial labor and “dirty work”). A variety of employment policies in accordance with these concepts (including much more public work and community work projects) would have resulted in much lower unemployment and, most importantly, much lower youth unemployment and its especially pernicious consequences.

¹⁸ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (HarperCollins, 1999); James Kurth, “The Vatican’s Foreign Policy,” *The National Interest*, Summer 1993.

Demographic decline. Similarly, there would have been a commitment to establish the economic, social, and cultural conditions that maintain families and encourage childbearing. At minimum, there would have been vigorous and sustained efforts to maintain the equilibrium reproduction rate of 2.1. The welfare state would have been designed around the family, rather than the individual, as its basic unit.

High immigration. If the above employment and demographic policies had been implemented, European nations would have needed far fewer immigrants, including those to do menial labor, than it did.

The Muslim underclass. Those Muslim immigrants who were admitted into the European nations would have been admitted on a much more thoughtful, selective, and practical basis. The principal reasons for admission would have been to conduct business or to receive higher education, not to seek employment. These immigrants also might have been defined as “sojourners” (a Biblical concept), with extensive civil rights, but with little prospect of permanent residence or citizenship. These measures would have precluded the creation of a large and permanent Muslim underclass. This in turn would have precluded what has become the major base for Islamism and Islamist terrorism in Europe.

In addition, if Europe had retained or revived its Christian identity during the latter decades of the twentieth century, there also would have been more clear and coherent answers to some recent political and diplomatic issues:

(1) Any proposed constitution for the EU would have confidently and comfortably incorporated into its preamble explicit references to Christianity as a fundamental source of European identity and civilization.

(2) The EU would have been able to confidently and reasonably tell Turkey from the beginning that it could not be admitted into EU membership. The Turks would never have developed their current great expectations, expectations that are very likely to be dashed in the future, with serious anger and acrimony as the result.

(3) The Danish-cartoon affair in the winter of 2005–06 would have taken a very different course. From the liberal perspective, the issue raised by newspaper publication of cartoons of Mohammed was the right of free speech. The result was a full-scale clash of cultures between liberalism and Islam. However, a Christian perspective would have seen things differently. Christianity of course rejects some of the basic tenets of Islam, but it does take other religions seriously. Even though some Christians want to convert Muslims if possible, they see little reason to offend them by mocking Mohammed and a basic tenet of Islam (against depicting God or his Prophet). Indeed, such mocking is likely to make conversion efforts far more difficult. From a Christian perspective, the Danish cartoons were pointless and juvenile. The teachings of the popes have rebuked the frivolousness and recklessness that are so often products of contemporary liberalism.

From Counterfactual Past to Potential Future

Pope Benedict XVI clearly has a special understanding and sensibility in regard to Europe. The very papal name he chose evokes that of Saint Benedict, who, in the midst of the wreckage of the Roman empire, founded the first great Catholic monastic order and the abbey of Monte Cassino (529 CE) and whom the Catholic church has designated as the patron saint of Europe. Many of Benedict XVI's writings before he became pope addressed the social and cultural disorders and debilities of contemporary, secular Europe. In his new exalted position, he will certainly try to promote a revival of Europe's Christian identity for the future. However, he probably believes that it will take divine intervention for this to occur.

A European Christian identity cannot be revived merely because it would be a useful resource in the war with Islamism. It is the essence of religious or spiritual identities that they must be ends in themselves and not merely means to worldly ends. The right relationship between Christian identity and the Islamist war is a more subtle one: had the Europeans of the last two generations first freely chosen the Christian identity as an end in itself, then out of this prior, and primary, spiritual choice would have come the material resources with which to best meet the Islamist threat. Or, as the Christian scripture says, "Seek you first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33.)

Thus, in an alternative, counterfactual European history, the revival of Christian identity and adherence to the principles of Catholic social thought would have given Europe a sound religious basis on which to confront the challenges posed by that other great religion, Islam. For in order to win the war with Islamist terrorists and movements, the West will probably have to do something analogous to what it did to win World War II and the Cold War. Then, to win against fascism and national socialism, it had to become more national than it had been before, and to win against communism, it had to become more social than it had been before. Now, to win against Islamism, an extremist form of religion, the West will have to become more religious than it has been before. But in this case, the "before" only means the last four decades, when Europeans willfully threw away their Christian heritage, a legacy that would have also provided them with the most effective antibodies to protect them from the social illnesses and terrorist attacks that lay in their future. The supremacy of the liberal identity has been only a short moment in the long history of Europe, but if it continues, it will abolish Europe's future and bring its long history to an early end. The best way for Europe to regain its future is to reclaim its history. That means to return to the Christian faith that attended and vitalized Europe for almost two thousand years.

