

# Resurrection or Surrender?: The Crisis of Purpose in the West

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*The West is the land that refuses to go down finally into the dark. Experience has shown that, although every human structure must eventually tumble, the spirit that endures in Western traditions can build something new out of the rubble. This was an insight that came from Jerusalem to Athens, when the city-states of the pagan world had submitted to imperial masters and seemed content to let their energies dissipate. At that moment came men preaching sunrise from the East, where God had demonstrated his ability to make dry bones live. Led by God, the people who fight against nightfall will make their way in time to the dawning of a new day—for the opposite of surrender is resurrection.*

The West is the land of the setting sun. That is its location on a map and its meaning in every language Westerners use to understand themselves. *Erev* in Hebrew means “evening,” so *ma’arav* means “evening-place,” the westward horizon where the light fades. To be “western” in Greek is to be “hesperian”—that is, to be shaded in the dusky tones of *duosis*, the sinking of the day into night. “Hesperian” may well share a root with our English word “west,” and in Latin the “orient,” literally the place of rising, is as far as the east is from the “occident,” or the western world of the fall. Maybe this explains why the West always feels as if it is on the brink of its end. To be Western is to be perpetually asking, with some trepidation, what comes after nightfall.<sup>1</sup>

## Spengler and the Western Lifecycle

Over 100 years ago, the German philosopher Oswald Spengler published his magisterial two-volume classic *The Decline of the West*. Its German title, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, could be more poetically rendered as *The Going Down of the Evening-Lands*. If it is not quite a tautology to say that the evening lands are always going down into darkness, it is at least striking that Spengler considered decline an inevitable process of history. It was a natural stage in any culture's lifecycle, an exhaustion of the possibilities for growth and outward expansion. The French polymath Jacques Barzun would later describe much the same state as "decadence": a dying fall.

Decline comes to all societies in time. Yet Western societies are particularly obsessed with beating it back.<sup>2</sup> Spengler described this restlessness, this unwillingness to succumb to the end, as a fighting spirit pitted against oblivion. He compared Western civilization at its height to an explorer with his teeth set against a vast darkness, searching relentlessly for some illuminating power. Like the insatiable (and at times, maniacal) scientist Faust, the spirit of the West is one that presses into "the void without limits" and seeks "distant night storms above the highest peaks."<sup>3</sup> It is the spirit of the undaunted expeditioner in the pitiless night—the physicist casting his mind into deepest space or the voyager making landfall in the New World.

No surprise that such a culture would not be content with a quiet old age of managed decline. Barzun had Europe in mind when he wrote that a decadent society is "peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance." The West is notably ill-suited to go gently into that good night.<sup>4</sup>

So the West is always dying, like every other culture; but unlike any other culture, it is also always refusing to die. It comes to know itself best when pulling back from the brink of disaster: like the owl of Athena, the eagle of the West flies at dusk.<sup>5</sup> Spengler's book, for instance, was written just before and during World War I. That is when the word "west" came newly to designate a concrete geopolitical region, first in contrast to the Axis powers and later in opposition to communist Russia.<sup>6</sup> The Western World became most keenly self-aware as a political force right when its politics—the politics of representative government and ordered liberty—seemed threatened with annihilation and extinction.

## The Wisdom of Athens and Jerusalem

Similarly, "Western culture," understood as the combined civilizational inheritance of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman antiquity, started to

emerge as a distinct idea when 19th-century enthusiasm for material science and “progress” threatened to eclipse it. “Modern speakers and writers have made us very familiar,” wrote Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, with “how poor a thing this culture is, how little good it can do to the world, and how absurd it is for its possessors to set much store by it.”<sup>7</sup> Arnold insisted to the contrary that “Hebraism and Hellenism,” the twin philosophical forces that Leo Strauss would later call “Athens and Jerusalem,” had together produced a vital tradition of wisdom.<sup>8</sup> As it has taken shape over generations between these two poles, Western culture has always been fraught with tension but therefore also urgently alive.

The ancient church father Tertullian once asked, only a bit facetiously, what Athens had to do with Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Modern defenders of the West, like Strauss, have responded that these two forms of culture need each other. Classical learning infused Christian doctrine with life and erudition; Christian ethics and theology gave new energy and direction to the pagan intellectual project. The interplay between these two wisdom traditions has defined the West; their delicate counterpoise is something to be lovingly preserved against the bulldozer of modernity.

One thing both Athens and Jerusalem have shared since the very beginnings of their respective literatures is a haunting sense of how quickly human things die, combined with a fierce yearning to break the bonds of mortality. “Like generations of leaves, the generations of men,” says the hero Glaucus in Homer’s *Iliad*: “one is born, another passes away.”<sup>10</sup> Yet the towering fighters of that poem do battle with the very gods and seem for brief moments to brush the heavens with their fingers before crashing down to the house of death. “All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man is a flower in a field,” declared the visionary Isaiah. Yet somehow, in the clouded distance of prophecy, “[Y]our dead shall live. Their bodies shall rise.”<sup>11</sup>

## The Unyielding Struggle Against Internal Decay

In other words, the West is always, almost by definition, staving off the sunset—fighting against forgetfulness and senility and obsolescence. Western nations are less vulnerable to external cataclysms than to internal decay: “If destruction be our lot,” a young Abraham Lincoln told his first major audience, “we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”<sup>12</sup> America, as the heir to Europe’s republican traditions and the vanguard of Western culture’s worldwide spread, has also inherited the West’s nagging sense that if it is not growing, it is dying.

“The United States is literally a distillation of the human spirit of exploration,” said the irrepressible billionaire Elon Musk to the biographer Walter Isaacson. When Musk works himself to the point of near collapse in the effort to send rockets to Mars, he is expressing the characteristically unyielding Western drive to fend off decline. “We’ve got this delicate candle of consciousness flickering here...so it’s essential we preserve it,” says Musk, explaining his sense that the whole species will either have to acquire new real estate or risk petering out.<sup>13</sup> Faced with the question of what happens next, the sons and daughters of the West are less afraid of proposing negative answers than of failing to come up with a positive one—less worried about setbacks than about not knowing where they should be headed. If there is no good answer, that alone would spell certain doom.

It is probably a fool’s errand to scour history and ask whether the present situation is the worst it has ever been in this regard. But it has been hard in recent years to look around at the crumbling international order or south toward America’s dissolving border and conclude the West is at a high-water mark of confidence and purpose.

## A Historical Consensus

For a while, in the thrill of victory after the Cold War, a broad consensus seemed to emerge among the leading classes. Politically, America, the benevolent hegemon, would oversee the spread of liberal democracy around the world. Culturally, global commerce would facilitate an easy exchange of ideas among former ideological enemies, as envisioned by Enlightenment optimists like Voltaire, John Stuart Mill, and Benjamin Constant.<sup>14</sup> “The Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian bargain with one another as if they were of the same religion, and bestow the name of infidel on bankrupts only,” said Voltaire approvingly of the London Stock Exchange. Something like that vision, give or take, thrummed in the background of American idealism at the turn of this century: Partisan tension and religious factionalism would melt away into a comfortable fellowship of multi-ethnic rational actors with headquarters on Wall Street.

This was the attitude described memorably in 1992 by political scientist Francis Fukuyama. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy, having survived a two-front global conflict against both Marxism and fascism, was the only viable world order remaining. Though this satisfied the victors of the Cold War intensely, it also left no feasible route for aspiring utopians to progress *beyond* liberalism. “The twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning,” Fukuyama

wrote, “have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty.”<sup>15</sup>

This could be taken as a triumphalist declaration of total victory by wishful thinkers who had not read as far as the second part of the book’s title: They welcomed *The End of History*, but forgot about Friedrich Nietzsche’s “last man.”<sup>16</sup> Blood-soaked from great power struggles and wars of religion, the nations of the West did seem momentarily poised to broker a perpetual peace. But Westerners find quiet stasis inherently enervating and will always take it upon themselves to rage against the dying of the light. Since “[t]he virtues and ambitions called forth by war are unlikely to find expression in liberal democracies,” Fukuyama worried about a future populated by “secure and self-absorbed last men.” At the same time, “the opposite danger exists as well, namely, that we will return to being first men engaged in bloody and pointless prestige battles, only this time with modern weapons.”<sup>17</sup>

Long before Fukuyama, Alexis de Tocqueville saw nothing to prevent both outcomes from happening at once. Surveying the landscape of 19th-century America on his visit from France, de Tocqueville concluded that Americans had a tendency to detach themselves, for good or ill, from the social structures and hierarchies that defined the contours of life for the erstwhile subjects of European monarchies. Unmoored from the strictures and convictions of the old world, adrift in a democratic sea of lonely individuals with nothing but raw desire to guide them, the people of America might become “greater than kings and less than men.”<sup>18</sup> A quick glance at the nation’s most prestigious campuses, where fabulously privileged teenagers now parade in solidarity with Hamas’s genocidal Palestinian mafia, reveals a population becoming at once securely self-absorbed *and* pointlessly violent. The end of history is over.<sup>19</sup>

## The Turning Point

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the levees started to buckle. Maybe it was 8:46 A.M. on September 11, 2001, when American Airlines Flight 11 pounded headlong into the North Tower of the World Trade Center and crashed through the fond illusion that theological disputes might soon cease to be lethal. Maybe it was late 2019, when the first human case of COVID-19 set in motion a chain of events that would reveal how severely the instinct for self-government has atrophied in the supposedly free world.

Maybe it was May 25 of the following year, when George Floyd’s death set off an international firestorm of devotional chanting and violent riots,

thus dampening the hope that racial animosity would melt gradually away in the warmth of brotherly love. Or maybe it was Russian President Vladimir Putin's march into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, or Hamas's massacre of Israelis on October 7, 2023, which sent the West hurtling unwillingly back into an era of deadly territorial disputes.

Since the turn of the millennium, catastrophes like these have punctuated a steady flow of accumulating debt and illegal immigration—both of which betoken a kind of helpless submission to decline. At some point along the way it has become impossible to maintain that America still presides over a healthy world. Like the formation of stars or the bankruptcy of spend-thrifts, the collapse of the old order happened gradually, then all at once.

In the midst of this collapse, several previously comfortable and widespread assumptions are turning out to have been less firm than advertised. Chief among these is the once-fashionable notion that waning religious observance makes people more peaceable and reasonable rather than more impulsive, gullible, and fanatical. It was, of course, already downright irresponsible for John Lennon to imagine that “no religion” meant “living life in peace” when millions had already been starved or tortured to death in Joseph Stalin's gulags.<sup>20</sup>

But Lennon was only retailing the trendy notion, advanced by atheists like Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins, that irreligion and reason were somehow linked.<sup>21</sup> This idea now stands well and truly discredited: It has been stampeded to death by a mob of students and administrators wailing that “indigenous knowledge” (e.g., that the world is held up on the back of a turtle<sup>22</sup>) “is science.” Even the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, already half-submerged in his old age under a flood tide of Islamic extremism from Europe and woke derangement from America, has retreated to the position of calling himself a “cultural Christian.” By this he means he prefers “hymns and Christmas carols” to “any alternative religion.”<sup>23</sup> One may suspect this is too little, too late.

## Relitigating History

At this point, in fact, nothing can keep the contradictions that were always grinding under the surface of the postwar consensus from splitting it open and disfiguring it, probably beyond recovery. Religious pluralism is not the only arrangement that is up for renegotiation. From scholarly critiques like Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and Mary Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress*, to probing retrospectives like Joshua Mitchell's *American Awakening* and Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, the



history and trajectory of the modern West is being dramatically relitigated.<sup>24</sup> This includes the founding moral parable of World War II, which cast Nazism as the unique apogee of all evil and consequently identified racism as the mother of all sins, the touchstone against which every other wrong must be measured.

**Nazism and Historical Revision.** The fact that every Republican president since Ronald Reagan has been loudly compared with Adolf Hitler is a measure of prejudice's fixity at the nadir of contemporary moral hierarchy, with a place of dishonorable mention reserved for American chattel slavery like one of those side pockets at the bottom of Dante's hell.<sup>25</sup>

The Third Reich was indeed an unspeakable abomination. Even so, the modern demonology built around it was doomed to collapse. No merely human drama, however starkly drawn in terms of right and wrong, can bear the full cosmic weight of embodying all mankind's sins and virtues. As this fact becomes apparent, counter-narratives about World War II have started to gain prominence in the public consciousness. Some of these are valuable and rigorous, like Sean McMeekin's recent argument in *Stalin's War* that Soviet ambitions were equally, if not more, to blame than German ones for the worst atrocities of the last century.<sup>26</sup>

In other cases, less honorable cohorts argue that the horrors of the Nazi death camps have been not only fixated upon but exaggerated or even fabricated. Modern Holocaust revisionism is the analogue in the historical sphere to the brutish misogyny of men like Andrew Tate in the cultural sphere: Faced with the absurdities and excesses of second-wave feminist "girlbossery," "manospherists" ricochet to the opposite extreme of unchecked male savagery and naked contempt for women.

Likewise, the overemphasis on Hitler to the exclusion of all other wrongdoers has prompted some to flip the scale of values on its head and position Hitler's hyper-liberal critics as the sum and summit of all villainy. One prominent history podcaster, in a since-deleted tweet, wrote that Hitler was "preferable in every way" to the drag queens who travestied the Last Supper at this summer's Paris Olympics.<sup>27</sup> In revulsion at the moral self-satisfaction of culturally dominant leftism, a number of right-wingers have concluded that truth can be attained simply by inverting the liberal worldview into its mirror image, so that not Hitler but *Hitler's enemies* are the definition of evil.

**Reflexive Iconoclasm.** As others have pointed out, this kind of reflexive iconoclasm is the Right's version of what the Left calls "deconstruction," a technique applied to the story of America's creation by Nikole Hannah-Jones in the *New York Times's* flamboyantly tendentious but rhetorically contagious 1619 Project.<sup>28</sup> No founding myth is perfectly historical, and with

enough discontent in the atmosphere, it is possible to bring each crashing down: the story of a nation's origins, the justifications for its contemporary supremacy, and perhaps even the justifications for its existence at all.

What is less easy is to come up with a sturdy replacement for all those demolished foundations. If the West can no longer stride with America at its helm into an increasingly liberal and rational future, the question becomes what else it can do besides devolve into the lassitude and barbarity that Fukuyama and de Tocqueville warned about.

It is no accident that all this is happening right as generative artificial intelligence (AI) and military robotics are approaching levels of sophistication that prompt fears not just of America's, but of humanity's demise. Even before advanced neural networks could plausibly draw hands, pioneers in the field were fretting over a possible future in which "the AI does not love you, nor does it hate you, and you are made of atoms it can use for something else."<sup>29</sup> If humans are just "ape-brained meatsacks" (as Oxford's Elise Bohan put it in *Future Superhuman*), it is hard to conceive why machines should not supersede humans or rule over them—or simply obliterate them.<sup>30</sup> This is less about whether the tech really can achieve godlike powers than about how quickly people jump to assuming it will, or maybe even ought to.

The persistent suggestion that Western nations have no justifiable right to continue existing gains currency in eerie alignment with the creeping suspicion that *humanity*, as a species, has no right to continue existing. Nikole Hannah-Jones's accusation that "anti-black racism runs in the very DNA" of America is of a piece with environmental activist Les Knight's assertion that "we're not a good species" and should bow out of living altogether.<sup>31</sup> It is hard to imagine a more acute crisis of purpose. At every level, from every corner, across every political and social divide, the question resounds: What are we doing here? It is a question that too often invites answers mired over with sentimentalism or piety. What it cries out for, by contrast, is bone-deep clarity and basic first principles.

## First Principles

The way to get there may be to split the question into parts: First, what are *we*? Second, what are we *doing*? Third and finally, what are we doing *here*?

**What Are We?** To the first question—what is man?—the Western intellectual tradition has provided a number of stock answers. Man is a rational animal, an embodied soul, a creation in the image of God.<sup>32</sup> What all these answers have in common is the idea that every person is two things in one: a physical thing in time and space (animal, embodied, creation) and



a consciousness that somehow transcends both time and space (rational, soul, image of God). Contrary to fashionable opinion, modern science has furnished humanity with absolutely no good reason to doubt the existence of the second part in favor of the first. Just the opposite, in fact: If humans really were just bodies with no souls, they could not do science at all.

It is often pointed out that every thought in every human mind, from “I am the Walrus” to  $e=mc^2$ , corresponds to a series of neurochemical operations in the brain.<sup>33</sup> But that is no great revelation: It is just a newly exact description of the animal, material dimension of human nature.

What remains astonishing, not to say mysterious, is the fact that some activity in the human brain—uniquely, so far as is known, among all other material events in the universe—correlates to the experience of an idea that remains the same everywhere and always. That is why “I am the Walrus” means virtually nothing, while  $e=mc^2$  can help predict and explain the brilliance of stars in far-flung reaches of space. It is possible not only to read a manuscript of Euclid and learn facts which have remained true about every triangle for 2,300 years, but even to make use of those facts *today* in building a skyscraper that will stand *tomorrow*.

In other words, it remains true, on the best scientific evidence, that our material bodies are infused with the power to access immaterial, even perhaps eternal realities. Those realities, which Plato might have referred to as “ideas” or “forms,” endure across hundreds of centuries and billions of light-years. This is a fact which confounds many moderns but fits perfectly in the West’s ancient picture of human nature. Aristotle would not have blinked to learn about the existence of ganglia or serotonin; Richard Dawkins is at a loss to explain the existence of happiness or thoughts. That there is a material component to consciousness is old news; that there is a conscious component to matter is a perpetual wonder.

No one is more stymied by this than the techno-futurist Yuval Harari. “If the entire system works by electric signals passing from here to there,” wrote Harari of the human fight-or-flight response, “why the hell do we also need to *feel* fear?”<sup>34</sup> In other words, if man is a perfectly functional body, why the hell does he also need a soul? The only viable answer is the one Harari cannot entertain: *because that is the whole point*.

To hit upon a “why” that has no further “because” is to approach what Aristotle would have called a “final cause,” a *telos*.<sup>35</sup> The final cause of a hammer, the purpose that shapes its entire structure, is to pound in nails. The final cause of the human organism is the existence and perfection of the soul or, if you prefer, of the consciousness. If physical bodies are set up in just such a way as to make possible sensations, experiences, and thoughts

that have no other discernable purpose, one can reasonably conclude that being conscious and alive in this way is the point of human existence.

**What Are We Doing?** This is an implicit answer to the next part of the question: What are we *doing*? The nature of human beings as creatures is defined not just by reasoning faculties, but, importantly, by emotions and desires, the whole inward life—basically everything that machines do not have and cannot do. A Large Language Model can spit out the words of a poem but not *write* it, per se, just as a calculator can spit out the right answer to a trigonometry problem but cannot *think it through*.

Computing pioneer Alan Turing got it exactly wrong when he proposed in his famous “Turing Test” that a machine could be called conscious once it could produce outputs that look indistinguishable from the outputs of consciousness.<sup>36</sup> No matter how subtly a probability function can generate predictive text or visual imagery that mimics the results of self-awareness, the salient fact is that the function has not gotten even a micrometer closer to actually being self-aware. Humans are distinctive because they are in the business of thinking, desiring, loving, and choosing to act in the best way possible. This is called virtue.

Is such a thing feasible, and what would it look like in the era of deconstruction and disillusionment? Can the nations and peoples of the modern West still wield their scientific ingenuity and political might in service of the ancient virtues, or have conditions now deteriorated so extremely that it is quaint even to speak in such terms? That is the last part of the question: What are Americans and their allies doing *here*, at these particular geographical and historical coordinates?

**What Are We Doing Here?** One thing we cannot do is cobble together a rickety imitation of the good old days. Tempting as it might be to reconstruct the political coalitions of the 1980s or the economic situation of the 1950s, those successes were based on temporary agreements fitted to the conditions of their moment. The Democratic presidential campaign’s war cry for 2024, “We’re Not Going Back,” evoked a familiar anxiety that sinister forces might somehow turn back time, forcing contemporary men and women to huddle in pre-industrial cottages churning out butter and babies.

It is tempting to respond—and this explains the appeal of the “tradwife” movement—that the butter-cottage arrangement would be better than scurrying maniacally through a pointless gauntlet of Zoom calls.<sup>37</sup> But it is not quite that simple. In most places, for most people, the current price of that little cottage demands at least two incomes, which already means a very different kind of family life than the farmstead fantasy that some Republicans fondly idealize and many Democrats implicitly fear.<sup>38</sup> It is

possible to lament some or all of the developments—the sexual revolution, mass migration, the invention of the birth control pill and the Internet, global financialization—that have changed the state of play so entirely. But before Westerners can begin to cope with them, it is necessary to give up on the fantasy of simply reversing or undoing them, as if history came with a CTRL+Z command. A politics based on fear that humanity might “go back” is as beside the point as a politics based on hope that we could.

## Two Roads

Given this, the West is realistically facing two possible routes forward.

**Surrender.** The first is surrender. In practice this would mean quietly allowing ourselves to be submerged under the steady flood of unaccountable immigration that is now the status quo all over Europe and America, where countries are supposed to have forfeited their moral right to borders. This would lead, in turn, to conceding the necessity for totalitarian control, mediated through digital surveillance and exerted over increasingly anarchic populations with no coherent social order except that imposed forcibly from on high.

*Centralized Authority and Immigration.* As the Somali-born activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali recently documented, this is effectively the situation taking shape in Britain as radical Islamists in league with native Leftists take advantage of ethnic street conflict to encourage punitive restrictions on disfavored speech.<sup>39</sup> Ali writes that there are still millions of Britons “who believe the government exists to protect us from foreign enemies and criminals, not to prohibit ideas, words or images that might offend.” But governments themselves, including Britain’s and America’s, default to prohibiting ideas because they are either unable or unwilling to defend against enemies and criminals.

When Mark Zuckerberg admitted recently that the Biden Administration pressured Meta (formerly Facebook) into suppressing skepticism about the COVID-19 vaccine, he was tracing in dim outline a hulking apparatus of digital control wielded in tandem by state and corporate interests.<sup>40</sup> Those who aspire to rule by such means hope that managerial technocracy can supplant the messy uncertainties of deliberative politics, which have been rendered increasingly volatile and unruly by the social and economic stresses of relentless migration.<sup>41</sup>

Vice President Kamala Harris’s flirtation with price controls this summer was a clue to her one prevailing instinct, which is in all cases to micromanage her way to “equity.”<sup>42</sup> She is not alone: Many Western leaders see no

other option than to supplement declining birth rates with open borders and use computing power to automate the process of keeping the resultant masses in check. This is why one possible future is an America that looks like a cross between Brazil and China, and a Europe that looks like a cross between Russia and Iran.

Without hostility toward industrious legal immigrants or even to nations and traditions other than America's, one can say with certainty that this is not the Western way. Americans opted for an utterly different path in the last election; their instinctive revulsion at the prospect of submission helps account for their decisive rejection of Kamala Harris and all she represented. To capitulate meekly to autocrats would have been to allow that the world has simply grown too complex for self-governance, so that personal liberty and human individuality have become matters of quiet rebellion rather than foundation stones of civil society. The West has been through periods like this before—one thinks of Anicius Boethius writing philosophy in prison when the Roman state became too corrupt to let a just man walk or speak freely.

*A Counterbalance.* But centralized authority is always counterbalanced in the West by the spirit of rebellion that produced Magna Carta and Martin Luther's "95 Theses," not to say the United States of America. It is easy to see why: If the wisdom traditions are correct that the point of human existence is to cultivate the virtues of humanity, then systems of order will always be challenged by insistence on liberty. There is no courage, no prudence, no justice, no truly human excellence to speak of unless individuals are able to make choices that arise from the promptings of their unique souls. And for that, man must be free.

**Freedom—With Virtue.** So the other option, besides surrender, is to figure out how to be both free and virtuous in the world as it currently exists. This would mean insisting from the jump on humanity as an end, not a means, and structuring politics accordingly. There is probably no way to do so unless some general religious belief, broadly construed, becomes a fundamental building block of shared public life as it was in the Founding era.

The idea that human beings have a purpose is, at minimum, inseparable from the idea that there is purpose in the universe—not simply as a matter of convenient fiction, but as an actual reality of the world. Luckily, believing this is not only perfectly rational, but also, as noted above, a necessary implication of everything humans do, including science. Since people already naturally act as if they believe they have souls and destinies, it should not be too much of a stretch to say so in public rhetoric, and reason from there.

This will have consequences. The American Founders were explicit that the government should not dictate any particular form of religious observance to its citizens. But that there is a God, whose knowable attributes include devotion to the irreducible worth of human life and liberty, was a belief they not only held in common but invoked to justify their revolution.<sup>43</sup> This much at least is a premise of America's existence as a country and a basic first principle of the West. It can be officially maintained without anything like the establishment of a state religion: Individuals, personally, can attend any church—or none—in a country that is formally committed to treating its citizens as created beings. What citizens of such a nation cannot do is pursue policies that conduce to the termination of their way of life or the abdication of the human species as stewards of the earth. This, too, will have consequences.

## The Way Forward

To begin, nature is there to sustain humanity, not to subordinate it: It is not just a responsibility or a necessity but a God-given right that men should make use of natural resources to support their growth as a species to the fullest extent possible. That means investing in things like nuclear power and space travel without getting distracted and misled by photographs of polar bears.

On the other hand, if the use of technology to heal and correct humanity's defects threatens to distort or undermine humanity, then humanity and not technology must come first. And if the free use of the latest communications media also makes it possible for bad actors to lie and advance despicable views, still the open exchange of ideas—always one of the West's major strategic as well as moral advantages—remains worth that cost.

Likewise, the necessity of national borders remains worth the exertion of force, up to and including the kind currently being wielded against Hamas by Israel. If the West is to continue existing in any recognizable form, then the nations that comprise it will have to commit outright to navigating their current challenges with a view toward making it possible for their citizens to live freely and rightly as creatures of spirit and flesh. Whether the West will be able to muster the political will to do this is an open question. But that is the choice at hand, and it is not impossible to make the right one.

## Conclusion

If the West is the land of the setting sun, it is also the land that refuses to go down finally into the dark. Perhaps this is because experience has shown

that, although every human structure must eventually come tumbling down, the spirit that endures for all time in Western traditions can always build something new out of the rubble. This was an insight that came from Jerusalem to Athens, when the free city-states of the pagan world had submitted to imperial masters and seemed content to let their energies dissipate quietly in protracted philosophical bickering.

At just that moment came men preaching sunrise from the East, where God had demonstrated his ability to make dry bones live. Led by that God, the people who fight against nightfall will make their way in time to the dawning of a new day—for the opposite of surrender is resurrection.

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## Endnotes

1. See “עֶרֶב (*ereb*),” H6153, and “מַעְרָב/מְעַרְבָּה (*maarab or maarabah*),” H4628, *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon*, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew.htm> (accessed December 10, 2024); “Ἑσπέριος (*hesperios*)” and “δύσις (*dusis*),” *Greek-English Lexicon*, Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, eds., 9th ed., <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph> (accessed December 10, 2024); and “Occidens” and “Oriens,” *Lewis & Short’s Latin-English Lexicon*, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=rerum&la=la&can=rerum1&prior=suarum> (accessed December 10, 2024).
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