

Liberty's Resilience

A Response to Roger Scruton's "Islam and
the West: Lines of Demarcation,"

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Roger Scruton's article, as characteristically eloquent and elegant in its prose as it is conservative in its tone, argues that the West, which Scruton sees as engaged in "a protracted and violent struggle with the forces of radical Islam," is in danger of making too many concessions to its opponent. It has reached this point, he explains, by downplaying the claims of its own cultural inheritance in an effort to show that its intentions are peaceful. Scruton urges the West to assert and more robustly defend seven critical features of that inheritance, each contrasting and even conflicting with traditional Islamic views of society. These are: citizenship as constituted by commitment to the secular rule of law; the idea of nationality as a force for cohesion and identity; the legacy of Christianity; a capacity for irony that looks wryly and tolerantly upon human folly; a capacity for self-criticism that involves allowing oppositional voices to have their say; a propensity

to form free associations with representative forms of governance; and the consumption of alcohol.

Before responding to these points, it is important to adjust the perspective in which they are seen. Scruton's remark that "the West today is involved in a protracted and violent struggle with the forces of radical Islam" is conjoined at the outset with his view that Westerners have lost confidence in their own way of life as a result of a cultural decline that began with the end of the Vietnam War. There are two problematic points here. The first is that Islam is now itself a major Western religion, as a result of the immigration to Western states of significant numbers of people from Muslim countries, together with their relatively high birth rates. Accordingly, the curious hybrid of a geography versus a religion denoted by "Islam and the West" sounds increasingly odd and obscures the fact that the majority of Western Muslims accept many of the "critical features" of the Western comities of which they are now citizens. This is notably true in the United States.

Moreover, Islamists are a minority of Muslims, especially in Europe and North America. Among Islamists, too, an even smaller minority are extremists who seek to achieve their ends through violence. The more intelligent among these latter must know that they are not going to succeed, and therefore the criminal acts of mass murder they perform and continue to seek to perform have to be seen as expressions of resentment, frustration, impotence, and futility; a desire to lash out and cause hurt—very like the behavior of a petulant child, though writ horrifically large. Accordingly, it over-dignifies matters to describe "the West" as locked in a "struggle" (curiously, a word Scruton elsewhere claims to dislike) with radical Islam. The murderous fringe of political Islam is dangerous because of its zealotry and disdain for human life, but opposing, containing, or trying to defeat it is a matter of a twofold strategy of policing on the one hand and seeking to solve the problems that cause it on the other—most of which (and here Scruton is quite right) are inherent to the political and social culture of Islam itself.

The second problem of perspective lies with Scruton's belief that the changes that have occurred in his own and other Western countries during his lifetime represent a decline in a variety of standards and commitments. This is the conservative's standard complaint and regret, prompted as much by a form of nostalgia as by adherence to reflective criteria of the good, the right, and the valuable. Conservative thinkers are of course right in some respects, notably in the case of the decline of educational standards, but they are wrong in thinking that those respects are *all* respects, and in not recognizing the emergence of new positives required by a new world.

Finally, I do not recognize what Scruton describes as a "loss of confidence" in Western values and in the central features of its inheritance, such as the rule of law, respect for liberties and rights, pluralism, individual autonomy, and secularism. These are robust features of the West, as evidenced by the powerful opposition to government efforts in the United Kingdom and the United States to cut corners on civil liberties in an effort to enhance antiterrorist and anticriminal security. The American Civil Liberties Union, for example, has won a number of cases against the American government (under the second Bush administration) in connection with warrantless surveillance, and in the United Kingdom a barrage of criticism from all quarters of the political spectrum together with national campaigns has obliged the government to resile from legislation that compromises aspects of civil liberties. This is evidence of a robust liberal culture, not of decay.

There remains, however, much to agree with in some of what Scruton says. I agree with him about the importance of the rule of secular law, about self-criticism, and about the admission of oppositional voices to the public discourse, which goes together with our adversarial method in law and public debate. I agree with him about citizenship as a relation of rights-bearing individuals to the surrounding society, of which they are members

by consent and commitment. I agree also about the importance of the lack of conformity, most notably of enforced conformity, in the West, which allows for variety, choice, and freedom in individual lives. By the same token, the absence of these positive factors in Islamic societies is part of the problem that a Western critic of these latter finds in them.

Now, I think the article ends in a form of intellectual bathos when Scruton attributes to drink—by which he means alcohol and, as a connoisseur of wine, no doubt wine—the sociability and collegiality of Westerners. If it were true that we could really single out just one aspect of social practice that underlies so large a matter as the diversity in collegiality of Westerners; and if it were true that this aspect is in truth the practice of imbibing liquids, then why not tea, or merely water? Does Scruton really mean to suggest that the toxic effects of alcohol on the brain, with its resulting lowering of inhibitions, are the basis of Western civilization? I suspect he does, for he means to denote the ease, informality, and sociability of many interactions among Westerners, which in turn allows for opportunities and innovation. It is true enough that this can happen at cocktail parties, but it happens in a wide variety of other settings as well, and even in what would normally count as more formal settings, such as business meetings and seminars. The truth is that relaxed attitudes toward socializing and the use of alcohol are merely features of a much more open and labile tradition of socializing, which includes something else with which the Islamic world traditionally struggles: relations, and especially sexual relations, not least among young unmarried adults. Restrictive attitudes toward socializing, alcohol, sex, and relations between men and women generally impose limitations on Islamic societies that are largely absent from Western societies, and the forms of mobility that the latter allow accordingly prove more creative and responsive. If this is what Scruton intends to express, he is right here, too.

Where he is quite wrong, however, is in extolling the supposed virtues of nationalism, and in attributing to the Christian inheritance of what historians now call “Greater Europe” (intended to include North America and Australasia) some of what currently defines Western polities. In this latter

regard, he confuses questions about the history of such aspects of Western civilization as its traditions of art and music with the socio-political organization that has emerged expressly in *opposition* to the monolithic models of pre-modern times, in which the Church and absolute monarchies, in mutually supportive ways, exercised hegemony over peoples kept educationally and economically subordinate. Secularization of society was effected by breaking the stranglehold of the churches. One cannot claim, as Scruton and some others try to do, that the pluralism and secularity of modern Greater European societies owes anything to Christianity other than what was necessary to fight against its effect on individual and communal life. The paradox of the United States is instructive here: A robustly secular polity exists because the various sects that founded the North American colonies desired their independence from each other and any secular power. Hence, they created a non-religious (*a fortiori*, a non-Christian) model state to that end.

As for nationalism, the very idea is condemned by its relatively brief history. Almost all the evils of war, ethnic conflict, outright racism, and concocted divisions and differences between people in European history since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 can be laid squarely at its door. There is scarcely any border in the world that was not drawn in blood and that encloses only a single ethnicity, language, culture, and tradition—unless it is small in population and backward or remote. Accordingly, “nations” are artificial hybrids produced by strife. The merest acquaintance with history shows not only this but also that supranational or larger-scale units have many advantages of the kind that the United States, the Chinese land empire, not a few of the empires in history from the Roman to the British, and the still-emerging European Union exemplify at their best, with all their advantages of scale, diversity, and resources. We need only consider the case of the United States: It is in effect a supranational state, a federation both in political organization as in peoples, cultures, languages, and traditions. Its scale and embrace explain its success to date. If Europe were similarly federated, it would further garner the benefits of scale; until now, it continues to

have the small-minded attitude toward nationalism that is its problem, not its solution. Indeed, nationalism and the efforts of religious groups to regain influence are among the difficulties from which the modern West chiefly suffers. On these points, therefore, Scruton's thesis must be rejected.

The incoherence of Scruton's thesis is still more conspicuous in the case of secularism. The secular dispensation can readily be, and typically is, a pluralistic one; a society dominated by a religion or its cognate, a monolithic political ideology such as Soviet or Chinese communism, cannot by definition be pluralistic. In secular pluralist societies, many different civil society organizations can flourish, meeting the variety of needs and interests that human nature richly exhibits; in monolithic cultures, by contrast, of which Islam is one, there is too little tolerance for such agencies existing outside the purview of the faith and its influence on the state. That is a deep part of the problem with Muslim societies.

But secularism, which Scruton rightly praises as the condition also of an order in which the rule of law can flourish impartially and by the consent of those who obey it for their own benefit, is the result of the struggle *against* the domination of the Church and Church-backed autocratic power. Indeed, the power of both Church and absolute monarch is arbitrary: It is precisely what the rule of law is not, by intent. Note, too, that there had to be a struggle between crown and common law before the latter won: Charles I thought himself above the law, as did most monarchs of his own and previous ages. Here, too, the secularizing, democratizing spirit had to be roused to achieve the freedom of individuals and the better ordering of society.

Europe before Westphalia was Christendom, as today's Islamists think of the Islamic world as Islam: not a place, but a state of faith. This is one of the many ways in which it is possible to describe Islam as reprising the stages of development in societies that were once predominantly Christian: It has yet to have a religious reformation that enables people to see the Koran and the hadith as bound by their time and circumstances, and at the very least

requiring reinterpretation or refreshed application to the conditions of the present. Muslims in non-Muslim-majority countries have to accept pluralism, secularism, and the rule of secular law in return for the benefits of the society to which they have emigrated—precisely in search of the benefits that these factors produce. They have to accept that the nature of the public debate in Western societies is such that ridicule, mockery, satire, disagreement, and differences in point of view and allegiance are the very stuff of the fabric of our societies. These things protect freedom of expression and autonomy of choice, values that lie at the heart of what we see as creating the possibility for good lives. Muslim immigrants even have to see the effect of relatively marginal matters: For example, in the West to cover your face is to hide something, to be a robber or a suspicious person. Halal slaughter of animals upsets Western views about decent treatment of animals. These are divisive though most of the time relatively minor matters, and there is a sharp asymmetry in what Westerners tolerate about Muslim practices in their midst, and what visitors to, say, Saudi Arabia are permitted to wear, drink, or do in public, and even whom they are allowed to meet and in what circumstances. Here we see a liberal and open society contrasted to a restrictive and limited one, an encounter unhappily reprised even when refugees from the latter arrive in the former to benefit from it, but nonetheless bring some of their own restrictions and anxieties with them, and eventually some of the associated problems, too. Dealing sympathetically with this issue is one of the necessities of dealing with the larger problem.

But as to Scruton's prescription for overcoming terrorism—by Christian forgiveness? This is touching almost to the point of naïveté. The West's response to the more violent forms of Islamism, whether homegrown or imported from abroad, has been, as noted above, to march on two legs: by treating it as criminal activity, for that is what the means it chooses amount to, and by seeking to meet the root causes of the resentments and anxieties that foster it. For this, a deeper analysis is needed of the aetiology and nature of the more aggressive wing of Islamism. It has long roots: back to the formation of today's Middle East at the end of World War I,

to the impotence and humiliations inflicted by the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the drawing of lines in the sand by the colonial powers of Britain and France, the institution of Israel, the refusal of Arabs to be party to the massive redistribution of populations in many parts of Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East at the end of World War II, the humiliation of Arab defeats at the hands of Israel, the oppression of peoples by Western-friendly governments around the Middle East, and the pressure of globalization on Muslim sensibilities and anxieties (think of the effect on a traditional Muslim father of daughters seeing a Western film with bikini-clad girls dancing about in it). A full understanding of the background to the problem is a first step in reflection on how to deal with it. That understanding is not hard to get; there is no mystery here. Unfortunately, some aspects of the problem are not made more tractable by the obviousness of their causes.

First and foremost, though, the way to meet Islamism is to demand of Islam that it put its own house in order, not to give in to pressure on our own civil liberties and institutions. In this respect I am wholly with Scruton: Let us by all means defend our way of life in talk, education, negotiation, and example—but not concession. Scruton is anxious that the West, because it is not what he thinks it was in his preferred vision of the past, is in danger of betraying itself for that reason. I think it remains robust, even though it has changed and even though some of the changes are regrettable for other reasons. We are not vulnerable to defeat by small bands of religious fanatics because we have given up teaching Latin in schools. The religious fanatics will not win. Our task is to limit the damage they can do, and that we might do to ourselves by changing some of our practices and diminishing some of our liberties in the process of dealing with them. This last is what we must never do, and by never doing it, we will assuredly win in the end.

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