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CAN THE WEST FIND FORGIVENESS?

by
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World leaders' interventions in the West's current migrant controversy are rarely helpful. In February 2017, Pope Francis, speaking on the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, seemed to issue an unqualified injunction to admit and assist migrants. He urged the nations of Europe to “welcome, protect, promote and integrate,” extending citizenship “free of financial or linguistic requirements, and . . . offering the possibility of special legalisation to migrants who can claim a long period of residence in the country of arrival.” Europe would then be “responding to the Lord’s supreme commandment—we may all learn to love the other, the stranger, as ourselves.”

But one month later, speaking to reporters on a flight back to Rome from South America, the pope said that governments have the right to exercise prudence on the question, regulating migrant flows when the number of arrivals becomes unsustainable. “This means you have to ask yourself first: How much space do I have? Second: You have to remember it’s not just about taking them in, but also integrating them,” he said.

The pope’s vacillation on this matter reflects a more pervasive problem: The more migrants Europe admits, the more refugees will risk their lives to avail themselves of such “solidarity.” Thus “compassion” causes the problem to grow rather than diminish.

The self-accusations ricocheting around the West of late are rooted in residual guilt concerning the imperial/colonial history of the white man in the world. Right now, Western civilization's history serves as an apparently insurmountable barrier to its survival—because of guilt, but also because of lazy thinking of various kinds. One is the kind that students exhibit when they demand the removal of colonial statues. Another is seen in those who respond that there is nothing concerning in this history: It made civilization possible, and is therefore unambiguously good. By this reading, the colonists rescued their conquered subjects from the misery of their own backwardness, bringing them the benefits of cutting-edge scientific and economic trends long before they would have gotten there on their own.

Are we then to agree with V. S. Naipaul that the “universal civilisation currently led by the West” represented the sole route to global human flourishing, implying that absent this civilization, humanity would have languished in poverty? There may be something in this; for many colonized countries, the boons of improved healthcare and nutrition brought by the colonists probably allowed many to live longer than they otherwise might, suggesting that a more sophisticated moral calculus is necessary than that applied by anti- and post-colonial academe. But the debit side of the line shows an overwhelming negative balance—in the destruction of lives, spirits, languages, cultures, the legacies of dependency, learned helplessness, self-hatred, shame, guilt, and infantilism: all the pathologies of colonialism bearing silently down on the afflicted and by their nature often ensuring that the deep nature of the problem remains obscured.

The hypothesis that colonialism was a sometimes overzealous but essentially well-intentioned attempt to bring civilization to the world's backwoods is ultimately unprovable. It is impossible to calculate the losses of leaving native populations alone and comparing this to the costs of the often barbarous colonial process—which frequently employed terror, torture, and proto-genocide (taking the outward form of famine)—and decide that, on balance, it was not a bad thing. Regardless of its claimed successes, colonialism had little to recommend it. Colonization is first of all a program of imposing the rule of one civilization upon another, supplanting the other's culture with your own. Before we comment on methods, it is clear that this is wicked in itself.

When we add in the methodologies—the invariable racist contempt for the culture of the natives, the raft of pathologies the process imposes, and the way the whole thing is covered over with a mendacious gauze of rationalizations and dishonesty, the scale of the criminality comes into focus.

But this does not mean that colonialism should become the topic of doctrinally-situated victim-pleading rather than a socio-scientific discussion. “Colonization” is a word we hear too much of in all the wrong contexts these days—it provides a pretext not so much for the awakening of the wretched of the earth as for self-centered rage and ideological finger-pointing by new generations of would-be Western flower children who demand the unwriting of the West’s history and the demolition of its icons.

This cannot take us anywhere good. Colonialism and imperialism have bequeathed us a legacy for which nobody living at this moment bears responsibility. The residual guilt suffered by many of the world’s white people is unproductive and misplaced. The expression of Western guilt has the appearance of virtue, but it is a tellingly easy virtue, purveyed without a price tag for the vendors. Such interventions allow the speaker to go home and rest abed without actually doing anything.

All we get is a continuous trial of the past and the incessant accusation of forebears, as though we could at this stage not merely establish the rights and wrongs of all history but also rebalance the equations of justice so that all errors of history would be eradicated. There is here an inequality of arms: We have the descendants of the wronged, who may justifiably lay claim to inherited damage, but we do not have the rightfully accused to put on trial. Even if we had, what form might the reparation take? Who would oversee the process, and in what currency might reparation be made? More important, is the destruction of everything worth a sense of “justice” and vindication? If nothing remains of civilization, how will such “justice” be expressed?

Colonialism, for better *and* worse, is one force that has fashioned our civilization, and this is the only civilization we have or can have. Both victors and victims of imperialism/colonialism have an interest in understanding its nature—to avoid repeating the patterns. In these circumstances,

demands for what is called “compassion” can at best be deemed unhelpful and can plausibly be called suicidal. The demand for open borders does not invite people to be “good” but to act out a verisimilitude of goodness that is ambiguous and may be a complex form of wrongdoing.

Migration requires a number of more complex moral equations: not just its attractions for the migrants, but the potential damage to the host cultures receiving them and the certain long-term depredation in the country being vacated. Where migrant flows are the consequence not of immediate danger, but of opportunism stoked by ideological and exploitative interests, the equations change from simplistic matters of solidarity and compassion to wider questions about the risks of lasting damage to both the migrants’ countries-of-origin and the peoples of their destinations. Not only do we risk destroying the cultures of receiving nations by swamping them with unassimilable newcomers, we also sentence those newcomers to lives of alienated subsistence in likely inhospitable environments. A civilization already struggling for breath is being endangered by a policy rooted more in the self-interest of politicians and the agendas of lunatic ideologues shouting “Racist!” without responsibility.

The student agitators of the present seem to overlook that by the time the pursuit of historical retribution gets into its stride, they themselves will be the ones in the hot seats of leadership, and must confront the most basic question facing their peoples: *Fight or flight?* For the moment, it all seems to come down to a question of justice, but ultimately the question is: Who will survive? And then, if the continents of the West have not already become terminally debilitated by their own self-hatred, it is likely that the newly-favored survival strategies will be themselves borrowed from history.

Peter Carey’s 2018 novel *A Long Way From Home* centers on the 1954 Redex Trial, a round-Australia car rally for amateurs and professionals. Mixed up with a human story concerning one of the participating teams—the Bobs family and their mysterious schoolteacher neighbor—is a theme relating to the historical conquest of Australia and the ruthless suppression of the Aboriginal people. Nearing the end, Mrs. Bobs, temporarily estranged from her husband, visits the pastor

father of the schoolteacher neighbor, bringing with her in a box the skeleton of an Aboriginal child she's picked up on the roadside. She seeks advice and perhaps a blessing. Their conversation brings up further complications involving both the tortured history of Australia and the origins of her neighbor, the pastor's estranged son.

"We did horrendous things, you know that?" the old pastor says.

"Yes," she replies.

"Not only Germans, you understand?"

"Yes."

He offers to keep the skeleton of the baby.

"But it's not the right thing," she says.

"There is no right thing," he answers, "there are just many, many wrong things and sometimes we can do no better than pray to be forgiven."

There is no right thing. There is no point in Europe, America, or any part of the white world seeking to make reparation to the rest of the world by volunteering for obliteration. If Europe becomes part of Africa and America an extension of Mexico, the only outcome will be the disintegration of civilization. Justice will not be served, regardless of how it goes—and we have a pretty shrewd sense of how it is likely to go, with South Africa as an unfolding prognostication. The result will not be civilization's enhancement, but its destruction—not a rebalancing of the scales of justice, but their terminal toppling.

Christianity requires from us that we seek justice for others as for ourselves, but not that we surrender our homes to avoid being called nasty names. There is no right thing—just lots of wrong

things and the merest possibility of picking up the pieces of history and putting them back together in a more coherent fashion for the future. And for that we require not virtue signaling, political correctness and moral blackmail, but honesty and courage and a sense of the paradoxical nature of human progress. Above all, as Carey's pastor said, the West needs forgiveness—not so much from the descendants of its former conquests, but from God and itself, and in that order.

John Waters is an Irish writer and commentator, the author of ten books, and a playwright.

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