

# *The Harbour League*



## A STRATEGY FOR WINNING THE WAR OF IDEAS

### **Perspectives for the New Administration**

by Herbert I. London

January 8, 2009

Great changes are afoot in Western culture. The world as we've known it is becoming a markedly different place, and a more dangerous one, where the very basis of our civilization is increasingly challenged. Let me begin by identifying some of the intellectual and moral factors that are altering our cultural landscape.

The first is multiculturalism, an attitude that proclaims the equality of all cultures but paradoxically assumes that non-Western cultures are somehow more equal, more worthy, than their Western counterparts. This Orwellian phenomenon preaches the gospel of equality, but proceeds as much from self-loathing as from egalitarianism. If women in America on average earn less than men, that is a form of oppression; but if an African culture indulges in ritual mutilation in the form of clitoridectomy, that, for the multiculturalist, is simply an expression of cultural difference.

A second factor precipitating cultural change in the West is the decay of religion. European churches are now more museums than places of worship. And even the much-touted religiousness of Americans is often more a function of social activity rather than spiritual observance. In the precincts of elite culture, anyway, the moral and spiritual teachings of Christianity have been in large part interred and replaced by a tepid relativism or various "new age" or "spiritual" outlooks. A third shift in attitude is that extreme form of liberalism in which the traditional liberal virtue of tolerance has degenerated into an

unwillingness to discriminate. According to this anesthetic philosophy, right and wrong are archaic concepts that belong to the ash heap of history. What counts is “openness,” that perversion of tolerance that, as Allan Bloom observed in *The Closing of the American Mind*, is indistinguishable from indifference.

Radical Secularists nurture a hope that rationalism, now that it has supplanted religion, can solve all problems. If only people—or their more far-sighted representatives—are playing on the same field, then all the world’s heretofore unsolvable problems can be solved. This is the fourth shift, a utopian delusion that has led to the rise of transnationalism. In our time, the chief example of the trend is the effort to reduce or eliminate the national heritage of European states through continental harmonization. This effort has had the unintended consequence of making citizens rudderless, robbing them of their national identity and undermining their patriotism. In the United States, transnationalism has adherents who argue that the American experience should be recast as merely one species of world history. But such proposals invariably lose sight of American exceptionalism, suggesting that the United States is like all other nations.

The last factor in the West’s cultural shift is a loss of existential confidence that is at the same time a failure of nerve. The retreat of apostolic teaching is a case in point. Catholicism, despite many new converts, is culturally in retreat, not only as a religion but as an authoritative voice of moral conviction. Pope Benedict XVI was utterly correct when he told a youthful audience, “The great challenge of our time is secularism,” adding that “Society creates the illusion that God does not exist, or that God can be restricted to the realm of purely private affairs. Christians cannot accept that attitude. This is the first necessity: that God becomes newly present in our lives.”

Implicitly, the Pope was arguing that the philosophic underpinnings of the West are under assault as much from the privatization of belief as from external enemies. If the vigorous liberalism cherished by America’s Founding Fathers underwrites our political freedom, its degeneration into relativistic “openness” has left us prey to the blandishments of fanatics.

Of course, faith comes in many forms. Radical Secularism itself is a kind of faith, as is the dogmatic commitment to scientific rationality, to which so many secularists appeal in the hopes of answering moral and ontological questions that were once answered by religion. Even what the sociologist Robert Bellah, and Rousseau before him, called “civil religion” involves faith in the achievements and existential vitality of our republican traditions, including its religious traditions.

For the secular humanist, the fact that the mass of humanity may be unable to live without religion is not dispositive. In considering this matter, however, the secularist disinters a “religious” canon of his own, one that has a distinct value system even as it rejects Christianity and Judaism. Of course, the secularist challenge to religion has been an important social force since the Enlightenment. What is different today is the unwitting collusion between some of the attitudes fostered by secularism and those promoted by the enemies of the West. As Bernard Lewis, a great scholar of Islam, and others have observed, democracies around the world face an imminent danger from elements within their own

societies that often pose as pro-peace and human rights. In the West, the leftist naiveté that exaggerates the imperfections in democracy has fueled the Islamic agenda that challenges the West.

Certainly part of the reason for the recent tumult is the belief circulating in the Islamic world that a secular West no longer has the will to resist Islamic jihad. The compromises and willingness to accommodate Islamic factions in European societies are interpreted as signs of weakness. The more open and liberal the society, the more likely it is a target for jihad. It was no accident, as the Marxists used to say, that Denmark and Holland, two of the most radically secular countries in Europe, should have been the site of some of the most violent Islamic outrages in recent years: in Denmark, the destructive riots that exploded in the aftermath of the publication of cartoon caricatures of Mohammed in the *Jyllands-Posten*; in Holland, the grisly murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh on the streets of Amsterdam.

For Islamists, the moment for a triumphalist campaign has arrived, a moment not unlike the jihad Mohammed launched against the three Jewish tribes in Arabia in the seventh century. That the West considers this Islamic fanaticism a form of acting out over deplorable conditions faced by Muslims within their own borders also plays to Islam's strength. Believing that there must be a rational explanation for seemingly irrational behavior, Western leaders and opinion makers bend over backwards to contrive exculpatory explanations. Rarely do they come to the conclusion that the violence is fomented by religious zealotry no liberal concessions can possibly mitigate.

There is a civilizational fatwa metastasizing around the globe, from Hamburg to Tehran, from Nablus to Malmo, from Copenhagen to Islamabad. For Muslims, jihad is in the air and the more it manifests itself in orchestrated street theater, the more it will highlight the weakness of the West. The confrontation between radical Islam and the West is fast becoming the defining test of our age. How that contest unfolds remains to be seen. But if the West cannot marshal the strength to defend its core values, these contemporary Crusades will assuredly end in disaster. Part — a large part, in fact — of that task is spiritual. It involves challenging the gospel of radical secularism, according to which the goal of human life is entirely defined by material well-being.

What the political philosopher James Burnham observed about the West's confrontation with Communism is even truer with respect to its confrontation with radical Islam. "No one," Burnham wrote, "is willing to sacrifice and die for progressive education, Medicare, humanity in the abstract, the United Nations, and a ten percent rise in Social Security payments." And yet such "bloodless abstractions" essentially exhaust what secularism has on offer. "Things fall apart," Yeats wrote in his famous poem, "the centre cannot hold." It is not yet certain whether Yeats's dour vision is more a news report or a warning. I believe that we still command the resources to salvage the spiritual center of our civilization. But to accomplish this we must have the courage to challenge the seductive tenets of radical secularism and revivify the traditional values that informed and nourished America.

It is one thing, however, to discuss the principles that undergird western thought and, quite another matter to identify the policy perspectives needed to defend the civilization and offset the challenge offered by radical Islam. What the next administration should do is develop a program that specifically

deals with a defense of American principles and Western Civilization. This would involve educational curricula devoted to the American founding and a National Humanities program devoted to a nationwide conversation on "what we should defend and why."

**Herbert London** is president of Hudson Institute and professor emeritus of New York University. He sits on the Harbour League's board of Trustees. He is the author of **Decade of Denial** (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001) and **America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion** (Encounter Books, 2008). London maintains a website, [www.herblondon.org](http://www.herblondon.org).

