

BOOK REVIEW

of

Meic Pearse,

Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage,

IVP Books, 2004.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

I spent 2½ years in the Far East while in the military years ago, mostly on the island of Okinawa, but with temporary duty assignments in Thailand, Taiwan, and Japan. Although, I suppose, most of the local residents knew that their personal experience with Americans was only a small snapshot of the total picture, I certainly wondered what they thought of us, based on the many carousing GI's with seemingly little regard for morality and with money to spend. In many respects I thought way too many of us were very poor ambassadors for America. Just what do non-Westerners think of America and Americans? Based on many poor examples of those they have come into contact with, based on motion pictures and Western television programs, perhaps not very highly. But, on the other hand, America is also known for our impressive prosperity, our freedom, our stable government, and for our generosity. Meic Pearse attempts to analyze just how America is viewed by non-Western nations, and why many of them feel threatened by us, and many others go beyond that and hate us. Meic Pearse, at the time of writing this book, was associate professor of history at Houghton College in Houghton, New York. He received his D.Phil degree from Oxford University in ecclesiastical history.

The book has a Preface, an Introduction, eight chapters, and a Conclusion. The chapter titles are as follows: 1. Barbarian Juggernauts, 2. On the Importance of Being Earnest, 3. How to Be Sinless: *Human Rights and the Death of Obligations*, 4. Killing the Past: *Tradition, Progress and Unprogress*, 5. Impersonal States, 6. Imagined Communities, 7. Divided Lives, Infantilized Culture, and 8. Observations in Passing?

Many of us Americans think, and frequently say, that America is the best country on planet earth, and we do so with patriotic pride, and we seem to be amazed that not everyone around the globe agrees with us. We seem to think that everyone, and we do mean everyone, wants to be an American, and if they don't, there must be something wrong with them. To entertain even for a moment that we Americans may be culturally, or in any other way, inferior is something that we will not or can not do. Yet Pearse asks us to do just that, and even near the beginning of the book. In the Introduction he writes "there are several factors that make it increasingly urgent for Westerners to obtain a clear view of what makes their own culture tick so that, seeing themselves, they can more clearly understand why the rest of the world considers them – as it most assuredly does – to be dangerously seductive, but domineering, barbarians." Lest I start getting hate mail for even reviewing this book, let me assure you that I am a patriotic American and there is no other place that I would rather live. However, I am also a Presbyterian, so the idea of introspection and self-critical analysis is not foreign to me without feeling that doing so necessarily means condemnation. Pearse is also obviously of this opinion. A passing reference to the possibility that we might be barbarians in the eyes of others might be hard enough to let go without expressing our own rage, but Pearse has a whole chapter on the subject.

In Chapter 1, Pearse repeats the charge again, but with much more detail: "The truth is that Westerners are perceived by non-Westerners (if we can make such a huge generalization about a truly global phenomenon) as rich, technologically sophisticated, economically and politically dominant, morally contemptible barbarians." There, he said again. But he goes on, suggesting that we are gleefully oblivious to our own imperfections (of course, all present readers excluded), writing as follows: "Very many, especially Third World, people have the sensation that everything they hold dear and sacred is being rolled over by an economic and cultural juggernaut that doesn't even know it's doing it . . . and wouldn't understand why what it's destroying is important or of value." Clearly not everyone is going to agree with this assessment, but it would perhaps be useful to at least consider his arguments before dismissing them. To appreciate his arguments, of course, requires reading the book. This review cannot contain the details. However, a brief selection may be of help: "Why barbarians? For despising tradition, the ancestors and the dead. For despising religion, or at least for treating it lightly. For the shallowness and triviality of their culture. For their sexual shamelessness. For their loose adherence to family and, sometimes, also to tribe. For their absence of any sense of honor."

In Chapter 2, Pearse discusses hypocrisy and suggests that postmodern Western societies have, to some extent, thrown off hypocrisy, but at great expense in doing so. "When Jesus denounced hypocrisy in the Pharisees, he did so while speaking to an audience who believed, as he did, in traditional moral codes in their full rigor. He called on his followers to be above hypocrisy. If postmoderns are guiltless of this failing, however, it is *not* because they are above hypocrisy – but because they are beneath it. Without in the least detracting from Jesus' denunciations of Pharisaic moral double-dealing, I would venture to suggest that our circumstance is one that the gospel writers – indeed, any premodern sources – did not entirely envisage. To be guilty of hypocrisy, one has first to accept the validity of the morals upon which it is predicated – and our culture, uniquely, does not." Maybe the term "barbarian" isn't so bad after all. That term suggests some sort of cultural inferiority. To suggest that America is morally inferior is an even greater outrage. But before we dismiss it, perhaps some reflection may be in order.

Chapter 3 gets even worse, while more subtle. Pearse claims that the concept of "human rights are essentially an invention of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment." He further claims that a human right is "a moral right that is claimed simply by virtue of one's existence. This, we have observed, is a concept foreign to Scripture, and indeed to the entire world before the eighteenth century." So what's wrong with this? "The only obligations, in human rights discourse, are corporate, not personal." What is needed to meet human rights, where they are championed, are governmental programs, entitlements, and increased taxes. Such things are not to be called charity, as charity would be an affront to the rights of the recipients. That is at least one reason why faith-based programs are opposed by some. For not only is charity potentially an affront to the recipients, it also carries the implication of personal obligations to those

providing the charity. Our society seems to revel in group guilt, while it denies personal guilt. "As members of a group or groups, we are full of ridiculous self-loathing: as individuals, however, we acknowledge no shortcomings (certainly no specific ones) at all. To do the latter would be to accept the burden of obligations, which would be to hamper our freedom, and to compromise our rights." "We wish not for people to give to the poor but that financial support to be supplied; not for individuals to care but for care to be given; not for people to provide for the needy but for provisions to be made." We carry this even to the care of our elderly parents, as if it is the government's responsibility and not our own. It is the government's responsibility to provide us with health care, and to rebuild our homes after being destroyed by natural disaster and we failed to have appropriate but available insurance. The trend is to remove all personal obligations whatsoever. This is how, in our society, to achieve sinlessness. The only sins are corporate, of the group, none for the individual. Now, of course, this is presented somewhat as a hyperbole as our society is not homogeneous, but, in my opinion Pearse is making a valid point. "Little wonder that the sense of personal sinfulness, even among Christians, is largely superficial. And that superficiality is reflected in our lives." So what does Pearse charge those of us in the West with in this chapter? He charges us with being superficial. We are superficial, immoral, barbarians that just happen to have a lot of money and power. Perhaps we are beginning to see why others may not think so highly of us.

In Chapter 4, Pearse charges that Westerners have separated themselves from the past. So absorbed with progress, there is no room for tradition. Part of this, in America at least, is the result of our melting pot society.

Chapter 5 isn't so much a criticism of the West as it is an explanation of how we differ from many other societies. In my opinion it describes one of the ways in which America has excelled. The American political structure is law-based almost to a fault. We sometimes complain about how there is a law controlling or regulating almost everything, and one cannot possibly know all of these laws. But what is the alternative? Pearse refers to our society as an impersonal state, whereas many others may be referred to as personal. As he describes it, in a personal state elected or appointed officials have personal authority, as opposed to simply applying laws that have been enacted. This has been very helpful to me in understanding other societies that can seem arbitrary and even corrupt but where that is not necessarily the case. There may not be a library full of laws. Rather, a local official is charged with using his own good judgment in making routine decisions to uphold order and administer justice. While I think the impersonal method of the West is superior in that it is less arbitrary, more just, and less open to corruption, his analysis is very helpful in understanding differences. For example, as Pearse explains, "The world over, outside of the sheltered confines of a few Western countries, it is expected as a matter of course that policemen will use their authority to extract payment from members of the public." That is, in such societies the simplest form of taxation is often used: extracting payment for services on the spot. This can, of course, lead easily to corruption, but it is helpful information.

The rest of the book, in my opinion, fades away with a confusing whimper. Or at the very least I am not willing to follow the author. It is one thing to step back and review what is good and bad about our society, to think critically about who we are and how others may perceive us, but it is quite another thing to seemingly long for a premodern, personal society as if it has been demonstrated to be superior. Clearly, at least Christians in the West are not at all adverse to evaluating the society in which we live, however imperfect we may be in that evaluation. It is a good exercise, and this book is helpful in doing it. However, the lessons learned from such an evaluation are another matter. I think Pearse has contributed to an understanding of why the rest may hate the West, but the reasons he discusses do not necessarily indicate that all the blame resides with us. For one thing the West is very diverse, and not everyone in America, for example, hold to uniform values, as Pearse readily recognizes. Many in America are moral, and hold traditional and family values every bit as much as those he describes in other societies. What's more, many of those in other societies immigrate to America and continue to hold to their values even though there may well be pressure in America against those values. Also, I think it must be said, and Pearse does not say it, not very well anyway, that even with the differences that Pearse describes between the West and other societies, hatred is not justified!