
— Opinion

West's true believers must put away the sackcloth and ashes

To preserve a rules-based global order from autocracy, free societies must restore their faith in their moral values.

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Jun 16, 2023 – 1.30am

One further factor that will be central to how autocracies assess the free world's [\[https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/scott-morrison-to-address-oxford-union-on-aucus-trip-20230609-p5dffj\]](https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/scott-morrison-to-address-oxford-union-on-aucus-trip-20230609-p5dffj) resolve is the question of our conviction and belief. If we are to prevail, the West needs more true believers, and I'm not talking about religion, although I do think that helps.

[Henry Kissinger \[https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/henry-kissinger-explains-how-to-avoid-world-war-iii-20230518-p5d9eu\]](https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/henry-kissinger-explains-how-to-avoid-world-war-iii-20230518-p5d9eu) recently observed in his 100th birthday interview with *The Economist* that “no society can remain great if it loses faith in itself or if it systematically impugns its self-perception.”



Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

What was built by our post second world war architects was not a series of transactional and bureaucratic rules cast in a moral vacuum. Rather it was a new and aspirational architecture where power is constrained and even sacrificed for peace, freedom, reason and respect for human dignity.

Some suggest these values are universal. I don't fully agree. While the application, desirability and utility of these values are certainly universal, their origin is not. The values that underpin and preserve our global rules-based order that favours freedom were derived from the western powers that raised a new world from the ashes of WWII.

My concern is that we have entered an age of self loathing and western guilt. The post-war global order produced the greatest lift in public health, human living standards and technological advancement in human history.

This is not to deny our faults or the many egregious injustices they produced. But it is possible to acknowledge our faults without condemning our society.

In our enthusiasm to disown our transgressions we are failing to also appreciate the reasons for our success.

We are surrendering our optimism, frightening our children and forfeiting confidence in our western model of freedom, representative democracy and a market based entrepreneurial economy to overcome the many challenges we face, including climate change.

The enemies of freedom welcome such an appetite for self loathing with open arms. We must assess our past with humility and grace. When we rightly denounce abhorrent practices of the past, let us also be careful how we judge those now in their graves.

It is highly arrogant to think our generation would have easily translated our present-day morality to earlier times had we been there. Our current generation is the beneficiary of centuries of Judeo-Christian moral influence that has thankfully fine-tuned our society's sensibilities.

We like to pretend this modern morality is self-evident, intrinsic to our humanity. This is nonsense. Human history tells a very different story. Our society has become better, we are the moral beneficiaries of this improvement, an advantage our forebears did not have.

The enemies of freedom welcome such an appetite for self loathing with open arms.

Take slavery for example. Slavery and its industrialisation was most certainly an abhorrent western practice, but it was not unique to western society, nor did we invent it.

Slavery is a human invention as old as human history itself. What is remarkable is not that slavery was practised in the west, but that the west recognised it was morally repugnant and abolished it right here in the mother of all Parliaments, at Westminster. That's what the west does.

Western society is fundamentally reformist, guided by our core values. This is a virtue. Western society does not pretend to perfection, but nor is it static. We are just not perfect yet. However, we also recognise in humility that the finish line for perfection will always recede, nonetheless we press on.

Our Western society's reformist nature can be traced to our Judeo-Christian values of repentance, grace and redemption. The realisation that slavery was an evil did not come from enlightened secular humanism, but the transformative impact of the Christian faith on a group of societal reformers known as the Clapham Sect here in the UK, most notably William Wilberforce.

Their wild evangelical activism impacted British society and western society in numerous other areas, including reforms to child labour laws, public education, healthcare, prison reform, support for the unemployed and even protection against cruelty to animals, to name just a few.

Our global rules-based order that favours freedom is a modern miracle that bucks the trend of human history. Peace, security and respect for human dignity is not our natural state as human beings. We must work together to hold it and sustain it.

Our ambition must not simply be to live in a world without fighting, but to live in a world that is worth fighting for, to protect and defend it.

The west must put away the sackcloth and ashes, and get back to confidently championing the freedom, peace and stability that was gained through the sacrifice of a generation during WWII.

By all means be candid about our failures, and reconcile with our past, but not at the expense of yielding advantage to those who would seize our liberty through our weakness or self-doubt.

Let us be at least as diligent, courageous, moral, innovative and compassionate as those who gifted us a world-based order that favours freedom so that we may keep it, and pass it on in good repair.

Scott Morrison is the former prime minister of Australia. This is an edited extract of a speech to be delivered Thursday evening UK time at the Oxford University's Union Society in the UK.



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