

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *THE LONDON RIOTS IN PERSPECTIVE*

Our son, Jonathan, lives in London, UK and this August my wife and I were in London for his wedding. It was a very special time for our family. But during the time we were in London we saw the London police carrying machine guns and other weapons, something I had never seen in all the times I have been in London. This public display of weapons and force was due to the riots and anarchy in some of the UK's major cities. These riots were shocking and rather abnormal for the society one typically sees in the UK. Prime Minister David Cameron and his government have tried to explain the riots and the larger social disturbances as a manifestation of the dysfunction and brokenness of British society. Is Cameron correct? Let's think about this.

- First, a few comments on the causes of such random violence. Was it a manifestation of injustice? Was it a response of the weak and the oppressed to the strong and the wealthy? There seems little evidence to that effect. In fact, listen to columnist Peggy Noonan: "The British press, left and right and center, was largely united in a refusal to make political excuses for the violence. Almost all agreed on the cause and the nature of what happened. The cause was not a revolt of the downtrodden masses, breaking into stores for food. The causes were greed, selfishness, a respect for and even a lust for violence, and a lack of moral grounding." In the leftwing paper, the *Guardian*, Shaun Bailey wrote: "Young people have been looting the shops they like: JD Sports and mobile phone shops have been hit, yet Waterstone's [a bookstore] has been left alone. These young people like trainers [sneakers] and iPhones; they are less interested in books. This is criminality in a raw form, not politics." Theodore Dalrymple of the *City Journal* was perhaps the most poignant of British commentators: "[Due to the welfare state's entitlement mentality and the degenerate state of British popular culture we] have a population [that] thinks (because it has often been told so by intellectuals and the political class) that it is entitled to a high standard of consumption, irrespective of its personal efforts; and therefore it regards the fact that it does not receive that high standard, by comparison with the rest of society, as a sign of injustice." Interesting observation! Apparently, dependency on the state does not foster gratitude but rather acute, violent resentment!
- Second, these riots establish a disturbing contrast within British society and culture itself. In April, the British nation (and the world) fixated on a wedding of a regal prince and a radiant princess; and in less than four months that same nation (and the world) fixated, in the words of Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, "on hooded youths [running] riot down high streets, smashing windows, looting shops, setting fire to cars, attacking passersby and throwing rocks at police." Sacks observes as well that it was "shopping with violence, consumerism run-rampage, an explosion of lawlessness made possible by mobile phones as gangs discovered that by text messaging they could bring crowds onto the

streets where they became, for a while, impossible to control.” Poignantly and profoundly, Sacks argues that “in every Western society in the 1960s there was a moral revolution, an abandonment of its entire traditional ethic of self-restraint. All you need, sang the Beatles, is love. The Judeo-Christian moral code was jettisoned. In its place: whatever works for you. The Ten Commandments were rewritten as the Ten Suggestions. Or as Alan Bloom put in *The Closing of the American Mind*: ‘I am the Lord Your God, Relax.’” Sacks likewise cites some rather frightening statistics that cannot be ignored, even in America. In the UK, 40% of all children are born outside of marriage. British society is characterized by whole communities without fathers and without meaningful male role models. He writes that “this has led to new forms of child poverty that serious government spending has failed to cure. In 2007, a Unicef report found that Britain’s children are the unhappiest in the world.” British society places the entire burden of raising children on women, for “91% of single-parent families in Britain are headed by the mother . . . [which] is practically absurd and morally indefensible. By the time boys are in their early teens they are physically stronger than their mothers. Having no fathers, they are socialized in gangs. No one can control them: not parents, teachers, or even the local police.” Furthermore, evidence coming from the arrests of the rioters shows that 60% had previous criminal records and 25% belonged to gangs. The riots manifest something much deeper about British society: “The collapse of families and communities leaves in its wake unsocialized young people, deprived of parental care, who on average—and yes, there are exceptions—do worse than their peers at school, are more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse, less likely to find stable employment and more likely to land up in jail.” If we are intellectually honest with ourselves as members of western civilization, we are now living with the consequences of the moral and ethical revolution of the 1960s. That revolution produced a civilization that has proclaimed that “you can have sex without the responsibility of marriage, children without the responsibility of parenthood, social order without the responsibility of citizenship, liberty without the responsibility of morality and self-esteem without the responsibility of work and earned achievement. . . There are large parts of Britain, Europe and even the United States where religion is a thing of the past and there is no counter-voice to the culture of buy it, spend it, wear it, flaunt it, because you’re worth it. The message is that morality is passé, conscience is for wimps and the single overriding command is ‘Thou shalt not be found out.’”

- Third, let me place this in historical perspective. As the Industrial Revolution came to Britain and then later to the US, a similar crisis among youth occurred. One of the effects of the industrial revolution was a disruption of family life as people transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Due to the pervasive practice of child labor, young people were cut off from their families and no longer under their control or discipline. Alcohol consumption increased as did crime and violence. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Sacks summarizes that “there was an unprecedented growth in charities, friendly societies, working men’s institutes, temperance groups, church and synagogue associations, Sunday schools, YMCA buildings and moral campaigns of every shape and size, fighting slavery or child labor or inhuman working conditions. The common factor was their focus on the building of moral character, self-discipline, will power and personal discipline. It worked. Within a single generation, crime rates came down and social order was restored. What was addressed was nothing less than the re-moralization of society—much of it driven by religion.” Indeed, when Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in 1831 he was astonished. Because of the separation of church and state in America, he expected to see a thoroughly secular society. He did not.

Religious devotion was what he observed. He saw a strong non-religious state buttressed by a profoundly religious society, where religious conviction strengthened the family, taught morality and encouraged active citizenship. Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist, recently published his now famous book, *American Grace* (2010). Sacks summarizes his conclusions: “Religious people make better neighbors and citizens. They are more likely to give to charity, volunteer, assist a homeless person, donate blood, spend time with someone feeling depressed, offer a seat to a stranger, help someone find a job and take part in local civic life. Affiliation to a religious community is the best predictor of altruism and empathy; better than education, age, income, gender or race.”

- Finally, what does all this say to America in 2011? The solution to all of America’s challenges is not the state! We have created, in this nation, an entitlement culture. What has occurred in the UK is also occurring in this nation. History, as does common sense, teaches us that the state cannot change the lives of people; it cannot make marriages work better or transform hapless individuals into responsible citizens. The change agent of culture, of civilization is spiritual transformation. Spiritual transformation results in altered behavior, a new set of ethical values, self-control and the concern for others, and the other-centered love that Jesus described and commanded. The moral transformation of the individual is not the role of the state and never will be. One additional comment: The moral revolution of the 1960s that I mentioned above resulted, I believe, in another revolution—a re-ordering of our financial sensibilities. As people in American culture believed they could pursue personal morality as licentiousness, so gradually they transferred that kind of thinking to finance. Many people believed that they could live a lifestyle based on debt—a lifestyle of spend more than you make. Such an ethos fueled the home mortgage boom, the unprecedented rise in consumer spending and the culture of “you deserve it!” Hence, consumer debt skyrocketed, as did corporate debt—and especially government debt. With reckless abandon, the state grew and financed its social programs via debt (e.g., the Bush drug benefit added to Medicare). We are now living with all of those consequences. In my judgment, there is a straight-line connection between the moral bankruptcy of western civilization and its pending financial bankruptcy. As Sacks reports, the Chinese have been observing the United States for the last few decades especially, trying to explain our extraordinary success. At first they concluded that it was our military power or perhaps our democratic society, or perhaps our free-market capitalism. One of the members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, who thoroughly studied American civilization, concluded that it was none of these factors; instead it was the religious foundation of America, specifically the ethical and moral underpinnings of the Judeo-Christian faith. Mao established the Peoples Republic of China in 1949—founded on atheism. It failed. Today, the Chinese are exploring a degree of religious freedom because of what they have observed in America. There are, for example, more Christians than there are members of the Communist Party in China. The Party has learned something from America. One Chinese leader said to me personally: “We are becoming more like you in America. What I do not understand is why you are seeking to become more like what we are abandoning.” The challenges that America (indeed all of western civilization) face are fundamentally spiritual in nature. Thus, the solution to these challenges is also spiritual. The riots in the UK are a loud wake up call to western civilization. Will we heed that call?

See Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (13-14 August 2011) and Jonathan Sacks’s enlightening essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (23 August 2011).

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

### *THE IMPORTANCE OF WORLDVIEW ISSUES*

This edition of *Issues in Perspective* is devoted to worldview issues—the thoughts, ideas and convictions that explain the nature and qualities of organized civilization. If you believe that there is no God to which you are accountable or that there is no God who has provided redemption for you, you will live your life quite differently than one who affirms such propositions. Consider the very famous British philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—Bertrand Russell, one of the founders of analytic philosophy. One of his most famous books was *Why I Am Not a Christian*. For Russell, there is no God. What was absolute for Russell was the material world, which is all that there is. If one traces the origin of all things, one arrives at impersonal matter and nothing else. There is no spirit or material world and there is absolutely no personal God. The God of the Bible, to Russell, was myth and human concoction. His worldview actually did not produce optimism or a sense of anticipation for the future. Instead, his worldview produced acute despair. From his book mentioned above, he wrote: “[*Here then*] is the world which science built for our belief: That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins. . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built” (p. 107). How tragic!

Contrast Russell’s despair with the hope and purpose of biblical Christianity. The Bible makes clear that humanity does die, but that reality is due to sin and rebellion against God. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, preceded by His substitutionary sacrifice for sin, paid the penalty for sin and conquered the mortal enemy death. God did all of this because He loves His creatures and seeks to reconcile not only humanity but all of the physical creation to Himself. The Bible helps us to see reality the way God sees it: There is sin; there is salvation through faith; there is hope; there is eternal life; and there is a God who created us, desires to fellowship with us and provides an abundant, purpose-filled life.

So, humanity must choose: Either the despair-based view of only materialism or the hope-filled salvation through Jesus Christ offered by the living, transcendent and loving God. Blaise Pascal, a brilliant French thinker during the Scientific Revolution, posited his now famous “Wager:” “If there is no God but I have believed that there is one, when I die I have really lost nothing. But if I believe there is no God and I die, I have lost everything. Which proposition are you willing to embrace?” [My paraphrase.] I have been in an academic ministry virtually my entire adult life. I am more convinced than ever that worldview does matter: What you believe about creation and the origins of all matter; whether there is indeed a God; and whether the condition of humanity requires a plan of salvation are critical issues. They are important—indeed, they are eternally significant!

See John Piper’s essay on Russell in *World* (24 October 2009), p. 46.