

# Civilisation and **GIGANTIC** cubes



Jason Briant reviews  
*The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America and Politics Without God*  
by George Weigel  
(Basic Books, 2005,  
202 pages)

Anyone who takes an interest in foreign policy will know that the relationship between the United States and continental Europe has been becoming increasingly rocky over recent years. Growing disagreement over foreign policy across the Atlantic has been at its most obvious since the argument over whether to go to war with Iraq, although tensions have been rising for a much longer period of time.

If we do not learn from Europe's mistakes, we may be doomed to repeat them.

The reasons for this transatlantic split were analysed a few years ago by Robert Kagan in his short but brilliant book *Of Paradise and Power*. His basic thesis was that after the horrors of the twentieth century, Europe had decided to move beyond power politics into post-history, a 'self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation'. In doing so, Europe became increasingly hostile to the exercise of military power, even by traditional allies such as the United States. However, in this lay a great paradox—it was only because the United States remained mired in history and was still willing to continue to exercise military power in the Hobbesian world

outside of Europe, that Europe was actually able to enter into post-history.

In *The Cube and the Cathedral*, the noted Catholic thinker George Weigel has made a further contribution to this debate. While acknowledging the brilliance of Kagan's analysis, he thinks that it does not go far enough, and that the roots of the growing transatlantic divide are in fact much deeper. Furthermore, those deeper differences, when properly understood, raise a whole set of new issues not addressed by Kagan that go to the heart of the future of Western civilisation.

Fundamental to Weigel's thesis is the idea that culture, including religious belief, is the primary driving

force of history. To understand what has happened in Europe requires an understanding of the cultural and religious forces that have been working in the continent over many centuries, rather than a conventional economic or political analysis such as that undertaken by Kagan.

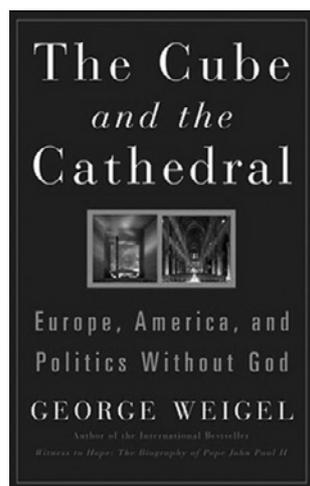
Weigel begins by contemplating La Grande Arche in Paris: a gigantic cube almost 40 stories tall built as a human rights monument to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. La Grande Arche is so large that it would swallow the Cathedral of Notre Dame in its entirety. Thinking about this gigantic monument causes Weigel to wonder which culture would better protect human rights and more firmly secure the moral foundations of democracy—the culture that produced the stunning but featureless cube or the earlier and now rapidly fading culture that produced the cathedral.

It does not take long to ascertain that Weigel believes it is the cathedral that would in fact better protect human rights and democracy. It is clear, however, that Europe has in fact gone down the opposite path and turned its back on the cathedral—as Weigel puts it: ‘European man has convinced himself that to be modern and free, he must be radically secular’. In a historical *tour de force* that takes up most of the book, Weigel then suggests that it was the development of atheistic humanism over a period of hundreds of years that led to the horrors of World War I, which has in turn led to a resulting crisis of ‘civilisational morale’ that has been afflicting Europe ever since, although this crisis has only become visible since the end of the Cold War.

The implications of the crisis of civilisational morale that has engulfed

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Europe are enormous—perhaps the most obvious one being that it is failing to reproduce itself. Fertility rates in many European countries have dropped to extremely low levels. As a result, Europe will soon no longer have the workers to pay for its enormous and ever-growing welfare state. Furthermore, the demographic vacuum is being rapidly filled with immigrants from Muslim countries, a growing number of whom are adherents to fundamentalist Islam. These are developments that threaten to completely change the very nature of Europe within the next one or two generations.

For those who don't live in Europe, why does this matter? Weigel suggests three answers to this question. First, as members of Western civilisation, we should not be indifferent to our European cultural roots. Second, Europe's demographic meltdown and the possible filling of the vacuum by

an increase in the influence of militant Islamic populations in Europe would represent a profound threat to the security of the United States (and, by implication, much of the rest of the world). Third, there are numerous disturbing parallels between what has already happened in Europe and what is increasingly starting to happen in the United States (and again, by implication, many other Western democracies). If we do not learn from Europe's mistakes, we may be doomed to repeat them.

Even though written from a Catholic perspective, people of other faiths or even no faith at all should still find the over-arching thesis to be extremely thought-provoking. Weigel fills an important niche in this broad topic by not being afraid to talk about religion in his attempt to understand what has happened to Europe. Indeed, it is almost a certainty that religion is going to be one of (if not the) defining influences of the twenty-first century, with the increasing influence of Islam in the West and the rapid rise of Christianity in the South. Those who neglect the impact of religion will find the world an increasingly difficult place to understand as the twenty-first century progresses.

There is an important warning for both Australia and other Western democracies in this book. We should not forget our cultural roots and where we have come from. If we do, we run the risk of creating our own crisis in civilisational morale.

**IPA**