

"Lest You Forget" (Dt 4:9, 23)

Romans 1:18-23

I. "MEN HAVE FORGOTTEN GOD" (Alexander Solzhenitsyn explaining 20th century ills)

- A. Political portents
 1. Bolshevik, Maoist savagery; *Black Book of Communism* estimates 100,000,000 world-wide
 2. E.U. refuses to acknowledge Christian components of European culture
 3. American courts routinely disregard Christian standards—from abortion to same-sex marriage
 4. Democrat Party platforms since 2012 consistently ignore God
 5. Alarming data re "nones"—especially among millennials
 6. David Horowitz's *Dark Agenda* and Kenneth Starr's *Religious Liberty in Crisis* document threats
- B. Scholarly analyses re Christian Culture's erosion
 1. Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West* (1919)
 2. T.S. Eliot: *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939)
 3. Christopher Dawson: *The Judgment of the Nations* (1942)
 4. Arnold Toynbee: *A Study of History* charts (1950s)—rise & fall of multiple civilizations
 5. Robert Bork: *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* (1996)
 6. Rod Dreher: *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (2019)
 7. Joshua Brumfeld: *The Benedict Proposal: the Church as a Creative Minority* (2020)

II. AWARENESS OF TRANSCENDENT DISSIPATING

- A. Reality of Transcendent, non-material Reality uniquely proclaimed first by Plato, then fully integrated into theology of Church (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin)—as with creation *ex nihilo*, distinctive view
- B. This-worldly, immanent ontology asserts its claims throughout history (illustrating ever-present inclination to idolatry)
 1. Hindu pantheism (C.S. Lewis says chief rival of theism)—"karma" etc.
 2. Despite hydra-headed appearances, ancient pagan religions united in concern for this world, with its gods fully embedded in it; though "spiritual" aspects, severely limited to this world
 3. Pre-socratic philosophers consistently monistic, confining reality to physical—Thales *et al.*
 4. Pantheistic perspectives (notably the Stoics) proclaimed World Soul basic to and inseparable from natural world—Emerson & Thoreau, John Muir, animal rights devotees
 5. Modern science rigorously naturalistic ("cannot allow a divine foot in the door")
 6. Modern philosophy, whether atheistic or pantheistic (e.g. Thomas Hobbes & Friedrich Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza & Teilhard de Chardin *et al.*)—anti-metaphysical consensus
 7. Marxism totally this-worldly & pervasively powerful (e.g. today's "cultural marxism"), seeking not to understand but world but to change it (constant theme in various progressivisms)
- C. Illustrations of turn-to-immanence, horizontal emphases in churches
 1. Miraculous, supernatural dimensions neglected if not repudiated (e.g. explaining Jesus feeding 5000 as an illustration of how we should share with others)
 2. Protestant Liberalism, Catholic Modernism seek to accommodate Gospel to current fashions (whether democracy or natural selection or nationalism or environmentalism)
 - a. Roman Catholic
 1. Contrast Vatican I (1870) with Vatican II (1960)
 2. Eucharist teaching shifts from Real Presence (thus communion with God) to good fellowship (communion with others)
 3. Priests turn from mediators to co-laborers—thus facing congregation rather than the altar during Holy Communion, increasing commitment to laity participation (and perhaps control) rather than apostolic succession and magisterium Authority
 4. Soul-salvation sidelined to emphasize "social justice"—less penance than apologies
 5. Church architecture reveals shift from Transcendent to immanent
 - b. Evangelical Protestant
 1. Music shifts from doctrinally-rooted hymns to self-expressive choruses
 2. Preaching shifts from "sin and salvation" to self-helps for parenting, from self-abnegation to self-esteem—E. Brooks Holifield: *A History of Pastoral Care in America—From Salvation to Self-Realization*; Martha Whitten: *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism*
 3. Pastors cease proclaiming Truth to engage in counseling, coaching, inspiring,

CHRISTIANS & PAGANS

In *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac*, Steven D. Smith, contends that many people today share beliefs with ancient Romans. They may be “godless” from a theistic perspective, but they passionately revere such things as racial equity and sexual freedom and environmental purity. They have sacred spheres, but they are all within the natural world, rather than the supernatural realm dear to Christians and Jews. They are the “modern pagans” T.S. Eliot described in his 1939 lectures, and they are as likely to shun or persecute Christians today as they were 20 centuries ago.

We are, by nature, *homo religiosus*—as deeply religious as we are rational or tool-making or playful. Throughout human history there’s been an insatiable craving for meaning and purpose in life, for answers to the great “why” questions. So it’s never a question of whether or not we’ll have religious concerns but rather how these concerns will develop. Consequently, in the ancient world, both pagans and Christians were equally religious, but pagans sought meaning in the visible, physical, world while Christians and Jews discerned it in an invisible, metaphysical one. With all their gods and goddesses, temples and public ceremonies, Romans were in many ways “the most religious people in the world” (p. 87). In its grandeur Rome certainly featured military, architectural and cultural riches, but it also displayed distinctly religious goods—“meaning, sublimity, and communal connection to the sacred” (p. 105). These goods were fully present in the natural world, with its beauty, order, and awe-inspiring fecundity.

Then Christians boldly challenged this Roman religion with an offensive theology and ethics. Over the centuries Rome had tolerated various tribal deities and mystery cults, but Christianity was something else. Above all, it insisted to uniquely possess “the way, the truth, and the life.” It was not simply one of many ways, which would have been most congenial to the Romans, but it was The Way! Importantly, whereas the pagan gods only inhabited this world, Christians worshipped “the creator of the world, which he guides in its course and maintains in its existence—an invisible, hidden, spiritual god who dwells beyond time and space” (p. 146). For pagans, this world only is our home, and we should settle in and enjoy its goods. For Christians, however, a heavenly home awaits us as pilgrims. Beholding the heavens, the pagan “exclaims, ‘How divine!’ The theologically fastidious Christian looks up and says, ‘What a sublime manifestation of the divine!’” (p. 152). To the pagan, the good life meant good food, casual sex, comforts of various sorts. But Christians would forego all temporal goods so as to gain “eternal life.” Pagans disdainfully rejected any notion of the resurrection of the body. Death simply ended, once and for all, one’s life. But St Paul exclaimed: “O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?”

Inevitably these two worldview clashed. The greatest analysis of this conflict, of course, was St Augustine’s *City of God*, showing how the earthly city constituted itself by loving self rather than God, whereas the heavenly city was composed of those who disregarded this-worldly matters in pursuit of everlasting well-being. Though generally tolerant of religious diversity, when pressed Rome resorted to persecuting Christians when they too clearly threatened the stability of the “earthly city.” And when Christians became politically powerful in the fourth century, A.D., they often (and generally half-heartedly) sought to eliminate paganism. Christians, of course, prevailed and subsequently established the Western Christian Civilization that so shaped Europe for a millennium.

And yet, Smith thinks: “In a certain sense, the Western world has arguably always remained more pagan than Christian. In some ways Christianity has been more of a veneer than a substantial reality” (p. 251). During the Renaissance and Enlightenment paganism revived. Indeed Peter Gay interprets the Enlightenment as ‘the rise of modern paganism.’ And how exactly were the Enlightenment thinkers ‘pagan’? Primarily, in Gay’s telling, in their forceful criticism and rejection of Christianity. “The Enlightenment amounted to a ‘great campaign against Christianity’” (p. 264). This was on full display amidst the furor of the French Revolution, when Notre Dame was rededicated as a “temple of reason,” the clergy vilified and martyred, and Christianity widely denounced.

Many think today’s secularism simply eliminates religion, finding nothing sacred, not even human beings. There is no ultimate purpose or “telos” to anything, just an evolutionary unfolding of a material world. But many “secular” thinkers such as Ronald Dworkin long for a “moral realism” giving some basis for ethics as well as something “sacred” to endow his life with some sort of meaning. And in his final book he “explicitly embraced ‘religion’—albeit ‘religious atheism,’ as he called it” (p. 296). There could be nothing transcendent, so he found comfort in the views of Spinoza and Einstein, “whose philosophies he offered as representative of the kind of ‘religious atheism’ he himself advocated.” To Spinoza God and the world are one and the same. And Einstein “did not believe in a personal god, . . . but he did ‘worship’ nature” (p. 298). In the disenchanted world of modern secularism, Dworkin prescribed re-enchanting it with nature-worship” (p. 330).

Today’s “culture wars” pit traditional believers committed to a transcendent Authority against a progressive cohort locating all moral authority within this world, those open to the Transcendent versus those concerned only with the Immanent. The struggle involves symbols (crosses in public spaces), sexual standards, and religious freedom, with progressives winning the war, primarily in the nation’s courtrooms.