

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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Without
Religion?**

By Russell Kirk



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202/546-4400

Civilization Without Religion?

By Russell Kirk

Sobering voices tell us nowadays that the civilization in which we participate is not long for this world. Many countries have fallen under the domination of squalid oligarchs; other lands are reduced to anarchy. "Cultural revolution," rejecting our patrimony of learning and manners, has done nearly as much mischief in the West as in the East, if less violently. Religious belief is attenuated at best, for many—or else converted, after being secularized, into an instrument for social transformation. Books give way to television and videos; universities, intellectually democratized, are sunk to the condition of centers for job certification. An increasing proportion of the population, in America especially, is dehumanized by addiction to narcotics and insane sexuality.

These afflictions are only some of the symptoms of social and personal disintegration. One has but to look at our half-ruined American cities, with their ghastly rates of murder and rape, to perceive that we moderns lack the moral imagination and the right reason required to maintain tolerable community. Writers in learned quarterlies or in daily syndicated columns use the terms "post-Christian era" or "post-modern epoch" to imply that we are breaking altogether with our cultural past, and are entering upon some new age of a bewildering character.

Some people, the militant secular humanists in particular, seem pleased by this prospect; but yesteryear's meliorism is greatly weakened in most quarters. Even Marxist ideologues virtually have ceased to predict the approach of a Golden Age. To most observers, T. S. Eliot among them, it has seemed far more probable that we are stumbling into a new Dark Age, inhumane, merciless, a totalist political domination in which the life of spirit and the inquiring intellect will be denounced, harassed, and propagandized against: Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, rather than Huxley's *Brave New World* of cloying sensuality. Or perhaps Tolkien's blasted and servile land of Mordor may serve as symbol of the human condition in the twenty-first century (which, however, may not be called the twenty-first century, the tag *Anno Domini* having been abolished as joined to one of the superstitions of the childhood of the race).

At the End of an Era. Some years ago I was sitting in the parlor of an ancient house in the close of York Minster. My host, Basil Smith, the Minster's Treasurer then, a man of learning and of faith, said to me that we linger at the end of an era; soon the culture we have known will be swept into the dustbin of history. About us, as we talked in that medieval mansion, loomed Canon Smith's tall bookcases lined with handsome volumes; his doxological clock chimed the half-hour musically; flames flared up in his fireplace. Was all this setting of culture, and much more besides, to vanish away as if the Evil Spirit had condemned it? Basil Smith is buried now, and so is much of the society he ornamented and tried to redeem. At the time I thought him too gloomy; but already a great deal that he foresaw has come to pass.

The final paragraph of Malcolm Muggeridge's essay "The Great Liberal Death Wish" must suffice, the limits of my time with you considered, as a summing-up of the human predicament at the end of the twentieth century.

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on July 24, 1992, delivering the second in a series of lectures asking "Can Our Civilization Survive?"

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1992 by The Heritage Foundation.

“As the astronauts soar into the vast eternities of space,” Muggeridge writes, “on earth the garbage piles higher; as the groves of academe extend their domain, their alumni’s arms reach lower; as the phallic cult spreads, so does impotence. In great wealth, great poverty; in health, sickness, in numbers, deception. Gorging, left hungry; sedated, left restless; telling all, hiding all; in flesh united, forever separate. So we press on through the valley of abundance that leads to the wasteland of satiety, passing through the gardens of fantasy; seeking happiness ever more ardently, and finding despair ever more surely.”

Just so. Such recent American ethical writers as Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre concur in Muggeridge’s verdict on the society of our time, concluding that nothing can be done, except for a remnant to gather in little “communities of character” while society slides toward its ruin. Over the past half-century, many other voices of reflective men and women have been heard to the same effect. Yet let us explore the question of whether a reinvigoration of our culture is conceivable.

Surprise Turning Points. Is the course of nations inevitable? Is there some fixed destiny for great states? In 1796, a dread year for Britain, old Edmund Burke declared that we cannot foresee the future; often the historical determinists are undone by the coming of events that nobody has predicted. At the very moment when some states “seemed plunged in unfathomable abysses of disgrace and disaster,” Burke wrote in his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, “they have suddenly emerged. They have begun a new course, and opened a new reckoning; and even in the depths of their calamity, and on the very ruins of their country, have laid the foundations of a towering and durable greatness. All this has happened without any apparent previous change in the general circumstances which had brought on their distress. The death of a man at a critical juncture, his disgust, his retreat, his disgrace, have brought innumerable calamities on a whole nation. A common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune, and almost of Nature.”

The “common soldier” to whom Burke refers is Arnold of Winkelreid, who flung himself upon the Austrian spears to save his country; the child is the young Hannibal, told by his father to wage ruthless war upon Rome; the girl at the door of an inn is Joan of Arc. We do not know why such abrupt reversals or advances occur, Burke remarks; perhaps they are indeed the work of Providence.

“Nothing is, but thinking makes it so,” the old adage runs. If most folk come to believe that our culture must collapse—why, then collapse it will. Yet Burke, after all, was right in that dreadful year of 1796. For despite the overwhelming power of the French revolutionary movement in that year, in the long run Britain defeated her adversaries, and after the year 1812 Britain emerged from her years of adversity to the height of her power. Is it conceivable that American civilization, and in general what we call “Western civilization,” may recover from the Time of Troubles that commenced in 1914 (so Arnold Toynbee instructs us) and in the twenty-first century enter upon an Augustan age of peace and restored order?

To understand these words “civilization” and “culture,” the best book to read is T. S. Eliot’s slim volume *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, published forty-four years ago.

Once upon a time I commended that book to President Nixon, in a private discussion of modern disorders, as the one book which he ought to read for guidance in his high office. Man is the only creature possessing culture, as distinguished from instinct; and if culture is effaced, so is the distinction between man and the brutes that perish. “Art is man’s nature,” in Edmund Burke’s phrase; and if the human arts, or culture, cease to be, then human nature ceases to be.

From what source did humankind’s many cultures arise? Why, from cults. A cult is a joining together for worship—that is, the attempt of people to commune with a transcendent power. It is from association in the cult, the body of worshippers, that human community grows. This basic truth has been expounded in recent decades by such eminent historians as Christopher Dawson, Eric Voegelin, and Arnold Toynbee.

Once people are joined in a cult, cooperation in many other things becomes possible. Common defense, irrigation, systematic agriculture, architecture, the visual arts, music, the more intricate crafts, economic production and distribution, courts and government—all these aspects of a culture arise gradually from the cult, the religious tie.

Out of little knots of worshippers, in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, India, or China, there grew up simple cultures; for those joined by religion can dwell together and work together in relative peace. Presently such simple cultures may develop into intricate cultures, and those intricate cultures into great civilizations. American civilization of our era is rooted, strange though the fact may seem to us, in tiny knots of worshippers in Palestine, Greece, and Italy, thousands of years ago. The enormous material achievements of our civilization have resulted, if remotely, from the spiritual insights of prophets and seers.

But suppose that the cult withers, with the elapse of centuries. What then of the culture that is rooted in the cult? What then of the civilization which is the culture's grand manifestation? For an answer to such uneasy questions, we can turn to a twentieth century parable. Here I think of G. K. Chesterton's observation that all life being an allegory, we can understand it only in parable.

Parable of the Future. The author of my parable, however, is not Chesterton, but a quite different writer, the late Robert Graves, whom I once visited in Mallorca. I have in mind Graves's romance *Seven Days in New Crete*—published in America under the title *Watch the North Wind Rise*.

In that highly readable romance of a possible future, we are told that by the close of the "Late Christian epoch" the world will have fallen altogether, after a catastrophic war and devastation, under a collectivistic domination, a variant of Communism. Religion, the moral imagination, and nearly everything that makes life worth living have been virtually extirpated by ideology and nuclear war. A system of thought and government called Logicalism, "pantisocratic economics divorced from any religious or national theory," rules the world—for a brief time.

In Graves's words:

Logicalism, hinged on international science, ushered in a gloomy and anti-poetic age. It lasted only a generation or two and ended with a grand defeatism, a sense of perfect futility, that slowly crept over the directors and managers of the regime. The common man had triumphed over his spiritual betters at last, but what was to follow? To what could he look forward with either hope or fear? By the abolition of sovereign states and the disarming of even the police forces, war had become impossible. No one who cherished any religious beliefs whatever, or was interested in sport, poetry, or the arts, was allowed to hold a position of public responsibility. "Ice-cold logic" was the most valued civic quality, and those who could not pretend to it were held of no account. Science continued laboriously to expand its over-large corpus of information, and the subjects of research grew more and more beautifully remote and abstract; yet the scientific obsession, so strong at the beginning of the third millennium A. D., was on the wane. Logicalist officials who were neither defeatist nor secretly religious and who kept their noses to the grindstone from a sense of duty, fell prey to colobromania, a mental disturbance....

Rates of abortion and infanticide, of suicide, and other indices of social boredom rise with terrifying speed under this Logicalist regime. Gangs of young people go about robbing, beating, and murdering, for the sake of excitement. It appears that the human race will become extinct if such tendencies continue; for men and women find life not worth living under such a domination. The

deeper longings of humanity have been outraged, so that the soul and the state stagger on the verge of final darkness. But in this crisis an Israeli Sophocrat writes a book called *A Critique of Utopias*, in which he examines seventy Utopian writings, from Plato to Aldous Huxley. "We must retrace our steps," he concludes, "or perish." Only by the resurrection of religious faith, the Sophocrats discover, can mankind be kept from total destruction; and that religion, as Graves describes it in his romance, springs from the primitive soil of myth and symbol.

Graves really is writing about our own age, not of some remote future: of life in today's United States and today's Soviet Union. He is saying that culture arises from the cult; and that when belief in the cult has been wretchedly enfeebled, the culture will decay swiftly. The material order rests upon the spiritual order.

So it has come to pass, here in the closing years of the twentieth century. With the weakening of the moral order, "Things fall apart; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...." The Hellenic and the Roman cultures went down to dusty death after this fashion. What may be done to achieve reinvigoration?

No Substitute. Some well-meaning folk talk of a "civil religion," a kind of cult of patriotism, founded upon a myth of national virtue and upon veneration of certain historic documents, together with a utilitarian morality. But such experiments of a secular character never have functioned satisfactorily; and it scarcely is necessary for me to point out the perils of such an artificial creed, bound up with nationalism: the example of the ideology of the National Socialist Party in Germany, half a century ago, may suffice. Worship of the state, or of the national commonwealth, is no healthy substitute for communion with transcendent love and wisdom.

Nor can attempts at persuading people that religion is "useful" meet with much genuine success. No man sincerely goes down on his knees to the divine because he has been told that such rituals lead to the beneficial consequences of tolerably honest behavior in commerce. People will conform their actions to the precepts of religion only when they earnestly believe the doctrines of that religion to be true.

Still less can it suffice to assert that the Bible is an infallible authority on everything, literally interpreted, in defiance of the natural sciences and of other learned disciplines; to claim to have received private revelations from Jehovah; or to embrace some self-proclaimed mystic from the gorgeous East, whose teachings are patently absurd.

In short, the culture can be renewed only if the cult is renewed; and faith in divine power cannot be summoned up merely when that is found expedient. Faith no longer works wonders among us: one has but to glance at the typical church built nowadays, ugly and shoddy, to discern how architecture no longer is nurtured by the religious imagination. It is so in nearly all the works of twentieth century civilization: the modern mind has been secularized so thoroughly that "culture" is assumed by most people to have no connection with the love of God.

How are we to account for this widespread decay of the religious impulse? It appears that the principal cause of the loss of the idea of the holy is the attitude called "scientism"—that is, the popular notion that the revelations of natural science, over the past century and a half or two centuries, somehow have proved that men and women are naked apes merely; that the ends of existence are production and consumption merely; that happiness is the gratification of sensual impulses; and that concepts of the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting are mere exploded superstitions. Upon these scientific assumptions, public schooling in America is founded nowadays, implicitly.

This view of the human condition has been called—by C S. Lewis, in particular—reductionism: it reduces human beings almost to mindlessness; it denies the existence of the soul. Reductionism has become almost an ideology. It is scientific, but not scientific: for it is a far cry from the understanding of matter and energy that one finds in the addresses of Nobel prize winners in physics, say.

Popular notions of “what science says” are archaic, reflecting the assertions of the scientists of the middle of the nineteenth century; such views are a world away from the writings of Stanley Jaki, the cosmologist and historian of science, who was awarded the Templeton Prize for progress in religion last year.

As Arthur Koestler remarks in his little book *The Roots of Coincidence*, yesterday’s scientific doctrines of materialism and mechanism ought to be buried now with a requiem of electronic music. Once more, in biology as in physics, the scientific disciplines enter upon the realm of mystery.

Yet the great public always suffers from the affliction called cultural lag. If most people continue to fancy that scientific theory of a century ago is the verdict of serious scientists today, will not the religious understanding of life continue to wither, and civilization continue to crumble?

Hard Truth. Perhaps; but the future, I venture to remind you, is unknowable. Conceivably we may be given a Sign. Yet such an event being in the hand of God, if it is to occur at all, meanwhile some reflective people declare that our culture must be reanimated, by a great effort of will.

More than forty years ago, that remarkable historian Christopher Dawson, in his book *Religion and Culture*, expressed this hard truth strongly. “The events of the last few years,” Dawson wrote, “portend either the end of human history or a turning point in it. They have warned us in letters of fire that our civilization has been tried in the balance and found wanting—that there is an absolute limit to the progress than can be achieved by the perfectionment of scientific techniques detached from spiritual aims and moral values.... The recovery of moral control and the return to spiritual order have become the indispensable conditions of human survival. But they can be achieved only by a profound change in the spirit of modern civilization. This does not mean a new religion or a new culture but a movement of spiritual reintegration which would restore that vital relation between religion and culture which has existed at every age and on every level of human development.”

Amen to that. The alternative to such a successful endeavor, a conservative endeavor, to reinvigorate our culture would be a series of catastrophic events, the sort predicted by Pitirim Sorokin and other sociologists, which eventually might efface our present sensate culture and bring about a new ideational culture, the character of which we cannot even imagine. Such an ideational culture doubtless would have its religion: but it might be the worship of what has been called the Savage God.

Such ruin has occurred repeatedly in history. When the classical religion ceased to move hearts and minds, two millenia ago, thus the Graeco-Roman civilization went down to Avernus. As my little daughter Cecilia put it unprompted, some years ago looking at a picture book of Roman history, “And then, at the end of a long summer’s day, there came Death, Mud, Crud.”

Great civilizations have ended in slime. Outside the ancient city of York, where York Minster stands upon the site of the Roman praetorium, there lies a racecourse known as the Knavesmire. Here in medieval time were buried the knaves—the felons and paupers. When, a few years ago, the racecourse was being enlarged, the diggers came upon a Roman graveyard beneath, or in part abutting upon, the medieval burial ground. This appeared to have been a cemetery of the poor of Romano-British times. Few valuable artifacts were uncovered, but the bones were of interest. Many of the people there interred, in the closing years of Roman power in Britain, had been severely deformed, apparently suffering from rickets and other afflictions—deformed spines and limbs and skulls. Presumably they had suffered lifelong, and died, from extreme malnutrition. At the end, decadence comes down to that, for nearly everybody.

It was at York that the dying Septimius Severus, after his last campaign (against the Scots), was asked by his brutal sons, Geta and Caracalla, “Father, when you are gone, how shall we govern the empire?” The hard old emperor had his laconic reply ready: “Pay the soldiers. The rest do not matter.” There would come a time when the soldiers could not be paid, and then civilization would fall

to pieces. The last Roman army in Italy—it is said to have been composed entirely of cavalry—fought in league with the barbarian general Odoacer against Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths, in the year 491; on Odoacer's defeat, the Roman soldiers drifted home, nevermore to take arms: the end of an old song. Only the earlier stages of social decadence seem liberating to some people; the last act, as Cecilia Kirk perceived, consists of Death, Mud, Crud.

In short, it appears to me that our culture labors in an advanced state of decadence; that what many people mistake for the triumph of our civilization actually consists of powers that are disintegrating our culture; that the vaunted "democratic freedom" of liberal society in reality is servitude to appetites and illusions which attack religious belief; which destroy community through excessive centralization and urbanization; which efface life-giving tradition and custom.

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.

So Gerontion instructs us, in T. S. Eliot's famous grim poem. By those and some succeeding lines, Eliot means that human experience lived without the Logos, the Word; lived merely by the asserted knowledge of empirical science—why, history in that sense is a treacherous gypsy witch. Civilizations that reject or abandon the religious imagination must end, as did Gerontion, in fractured atoms.

Restoring Religious Insights. In conclusion, it is my argument that the elaborate civilization we have known stands in peril; that it may expire of lethargy, or be destroyed by violence, or perish, from a combination of both evils. We who think that life remains worth living ought to address ourselves to means by which a restoration of our culture may be achieved. A prime necessity for us is to restore an apprehension of religious insights in our clumsy apparatus of public instruction, which—bullied by militant secular humanists and presumptuous federal courts—has been left with only ruinous answers to the ultimate questions.

What ails modern civilization? Fundamentally, our society's affliction is the decay of religious belief. If a culture is to survive and flourish, it must not be severed from the religious vision out of which it arose. The high necessity of reflective men and women, then, is to labor for the restoration of religious teachings as a credible body of doctrine.

"Redeem the time; redeem the dream," T. S. Eliot wrote. It remains possible, given right reason and moral imagination, to confront boldly the age's disorders. The restoration of true learning, humane and scientific; the reform of many public policies; the renewal of our awareness of a transcendent order, and of the presence of an Other; the brightening of the corners where we find ourselves—such approaches are open to those among the rising generation who look for a purpose in life. It is just conceivable that we may be given a Sign before the end of the twentieth century; yet Sign or no Sign, Remnant must strive against the follies of the time.

