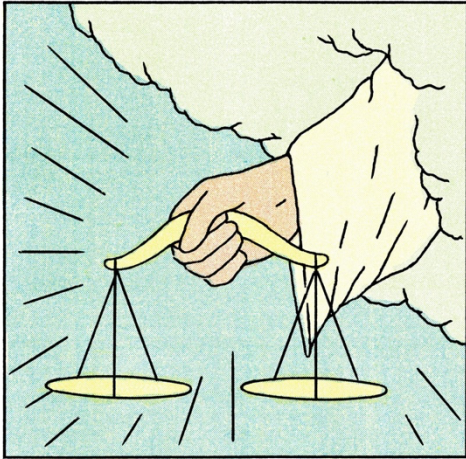


## Does God Control History?

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on

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After [last week's newsletter](#) made the case for the wickedness of Stalinism and the virtues of early Cold War anti-Communism, I thought I might get dragged into a weekend social media debate about Marxism-Leninism. Not so. Instead, I managed to entangle myself in an argument about a different totalitarianism-related question: whether the destruction of Hitler's Germany was a true and righteous judgment of Almighty God.

That question came out of two discussions of far-right politics — one occasioned by Graeme Wood's Atlantic [profile](#) of Bronze Age Pervert, the pseudonymous author and online personality who is a leading voice of "vitalist," or Nietzschean, or, if you prefer, simply fascist thought online; the other by revelations about the writer Richard Hanania, who has admitted to ([and apologized for](#)) a youthful career as a pseudonymous scribbler for racist publications.

The style of far-right thought involved in both stories takes Western decadence as a given, while arguing that Christianity is a weak vessel for any kind of cultural revival. Its big idea is that a conservatism that looks to classical and pagan sources, and embraces some kind of racial identitarianism could be more, well, *vital* in its engagement with the times.

A version of exactly this argument floated around the platform X, formerly known as Twitter, and when someone demanded a rebuttal, I dashed off [a pair of posts](#):

I suppose one response is to note that the last attempt to refound European civilization on the basis of classical-Teutonic heritage and eugenics led to unspeakable atrocities and the total destruction of the European heartland.

The decay and decadence of Western Christianity makes the return of right-wing Nietzscheanism inevitable. But Christians can say with some warrant that God's judgment on that project is evident already.

These posts are minor entries in the [widening debate](#) over what conservative Christians should make of an emergent pagan or post-Christian right — in *all* its various forms, materialist and mystical, populist and intellectual, from extreme characters like Bronze Age Pervert to more mainstream figures, like Jordan Peterson, who seem to wobble on the edge of Christian faith. I've offered [my own comments](#) on our possible pagan futures, including in [an argument](#) earlier this year about euthanasia with Hanania himself (who I think remains an exemplar of a pagan libertarianism, whatever you make of his claim to have evolved into a neoliberal), but there's much more that could be said.

But I want to take a slightly different direction here, because my post about God's purposes and the Nazi Ragnarok inspired [a couple of tart](#) rejoinders from Bronze Age Pervert himself. "If God's judgment is loss in a war or at hand of brutal persecutors, does this mean you think God judged Jesus to be bad and the Romans to be good?" he asked. And then, "does the 30 Yrs' War toll therefore reflect God's judgment on a Europe that was too attached to religion?"

The first question is easy to brush aside, because obviously Christians think that the way to understand God's judgment on Christ's life and message is in the light of his resurrection, not just his death on Calvary. *There was a war on Holy Week, and Jesus won* is a crude statement of the Christian message but not an inaccurate one. And if you want to frame it in terms of a conflict between Rome and Christ, the Roman Catholic especially will argue that the war in question ended with Constantine's conversion rather than the crucifixion, with St. Peter's Basilica standing as a victory monument.

But the various crises and disasters in the Christian world since then, the Thirty Years' War very much included, don't admit of that kind of tidy interpretation. At the same time the serious Christian can't just wave away the question, because we're obliged to believe that history reveals providential intentions and designs.

Indeed, while allowing for the complexity of debates about what God *wills* as opposed

to what God merely *permits*, providentialism is basically inescapable once you posit a divinity who made the world and acts in history. Which is why providentialist interpretations endure among the most liberal Christians as well as the most traditional, with both progressive and conservative theologies justifying themselves through readings of the “signs of the times,” the seasons of history, the action of the Holy Spirit and the like. (And, of course, many theoretically secular worldviews are possessed of the same providentialism [in disguise](#).)

The more absolutely certain these interpretations, the more dubious. Discerning God’s intentions across an individual lifetime is hard enough; discerning them across the arc of history should be done with maximal humility.

But (humbly, humbly) I do, in fact, have a view of what the Thirty Years’ War and its consequences suggest about God’s actions in the modern world. And also of how that case study differs from the Nazi example — starting with the fact that Christianity was not destroyed in the 1600s, the pope did not commit suicide in a bunker while Rome collapsed around his head, and Christian ideas and Christian leaders were not remembered as icons of absolute depravity in the decades and centuries that followed.

Rather, what was broken in the 17th century was a certain idea of *Christendom*, a certain kind of political-religious unity — and I think a serious Christian has to see in that breakage some kind of divine judgment on the Christians fighting to sustain that order.

Not necessarily a judgment on the idea of such an order, which would be the liberal-providentialist position — that Christendom had to die so a superior and more secular civilization could replace it. But certainly a judgment on the fratricidal and ruthless ways that both Catholics and Protestants tried to sustain their competing visions of a Christian order. I obviously think the Catholics had the better theological arguments, but God in his wisdom permitted neither side to claim a certain victory, ensuring that any future Christendom would have to be rebuilt along very different lines.

It could have been otherwise; indeed, just the example of England’s religious history shows various ways that providence could have made things smoother for the Catholic side: Catherine of Aragon could have borne her husband a male heir, Mary Tudor could have had a child, she and [Cardinal Reginald Pole](#) need not have died together (on the same day!), the Spanish Armada could have triumphed. Even much later on (as I [wrote](#) in one of last week’s columns), with better luck and better weather the Jacobite rebellions might have succeeded. One need not claim certainty about God’s purposes to see a repeated closing-of-the-door to certain kinds of Catholic restoration in this story.

But not, crucially, a closing of the door on Christianity itself. From different quarters — Christian and pessimistic, secular and triumphalist, now pagan and anti-Christian — there is an account of modern history that conflates the crackup of Christendom with the decline of Christianity. It assumes that modernity as a whole has to be either a totally wrong turn (the Christian pessimist’s perspective) or a wrong turning that Christianity is responsible for and can’t save us from (the right-wing pagan brief) or else a glorious path toward enlightenment that renders traditional Christianity irrelevant (the secular optimist).

Yet for Christianity, the modern era is actually two stories intertwined: a story of conflict and failure and disappointment for many Christian *institutions*, their division and their weakness in the face of other powers, woven together with the story of the Christian religion’s resilience and global spread. Whether or not liberal modernity represents a “metaphysical catastrophe” (to pluck a phrase from [one of its eloquent religious critics](#)), it has created a world civilization in which the Gospel has been preached in the far corners of the planet; in which there are today, according to one study, [2.6 billion](#) Christians; in which, amid a long-running crisis for Western Catholicism, [more young Catholics](#) attended the just-completed World Youth Day in Portugal than inhabited all of medieval Rome and Paris and London put together.

The extraordinary reach of global Christianity is part of what makes me skeptical of full declinist narratives from my fellow believers and [more inclined](#) even toward certain kinds of techno-futurism, against interpretations of the late modern world as an engine of disenchantment or a [soul-devouring machine](#).

At the very least, insofar as the core commandment of the risen Jesus — [go and make disciples of all nations](#) — has been fulfilled by and through our high-tech and pluralist modernity, any providentialist reading of that history cannot be simply negative. And the fact that so much that’s negative has also befallen the Christian churches in that time suggests the nuanced Christian response to Bronze Age Pervert’s challenge: Christianity’s claim to enjoy more divine favor than 20th-century fascism rests not on the absence of justified chastisements or purifying defeats, but on the faith’s spread both in spite of and through these experiences, its resilience in spite of what its leaders often seem to deserve.

But give Bronze Age Pervert this much: Our era is clearly allowing unexpected space to old alternatives to Christianity, of which his vitalism may be the most illiberal but definitely is [not the strangest](#). What does providence have in mind with these developments? Ask me again in a hundred years.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/11/opinion/god-conservative-history.html>

Kudos and sympathy to Ross Douthat for taking on this topic in a newspaper column. It all revolves around one's view of—not just God's role in human history—but more, how did/could/should the revelation in Galilee have changed over time? In what ways did it, in what ways has it not, could it not?

A key temptation of Jesus in the wilderness after the descent of the Holy Spirit has “the devil” offering him all the kingdoms of the world “for it has been given over to me, and I will give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus, of course, declines. Satan might be a liar and boaster, making the offer suspect, but Jesus never disputes his claim. He never shows any inclination to appeal to the earthly powers of his time; even when in front of the Sanhedrin he is effectively silent. He never tries to drive out any demons amongst them or, elsewhere, with his Pharisee tormentors. No victory or progress is touted through conventional channels; only a Second Coming of cosmic warfare proportions is offered as a solution. The Gospel and the Comforter are to make the Truth clear, to ameliorate suffering, to provide inner deliverance amidst enduring, even escalating, persecution, and to prepare the way for a true “Final Solution” wiping out a hopeless world order.

So the question is whether “God” and “Christ” have anything to do with the affairs of this world at this macro-historical level. We like to think that God helped us defeat the Nazis, to ensure that the South lost to the North in the Civil War. But if so, why were so many Nazis allowed to avoid being held to account, why has fascism survived to thrive again, and why did the divine not follow through to prevent the perpetuation of slavery by other means? A survivor of the War in North Africa left with one arm said (in *Foyle's War*) “I don't know where God was that night, but He wasn't at El-Alamein.” Many may rightly say “If God made sure the Allies won that war, why did He let evil decimate us [in gulags, the Killing Fields, the Congo, Syria, etc.].?” The victims of torture and the Hell of war may be forgiven if they do not feel God with them.

The assertion that the Gospel being preached far and wide, with “Christians” so numerous, testifies to God's plan in world history, neglects what I see here: So many people, even if they came from once-church-going families, have lost the means by which to gain purchase comprehending the Gospel—it grips *you* if you do—and who and what “Christ” is. Things framed in these terms are meaningless to them, and they discount what they don't understand though someone insists this is vital to know. (The “insister” gets discounted too.) Put with often sketchy and, however confident, pathetic presentations of “Christianity,” the Gospel is steadily being rendered meaningless, distorted, discredited, and dismissed. None of the inherited ways of understanding “Gospel” and “Christ” work. Something new and true is the only hope. TJB