**Armour of God**

**Discussion Summary, Notes and Presentation**

**For October 31, 2018**

**A topic summary will be available prior to the meeting/ discussion**

**Presentation:**

Why is the West in Such a Mess?

Restore the Link between Faith and Reason

By Richard Bastien

Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.  Blaise Pascal

The crisis of legitimacy we are currently experiencing is but a symptom of the slow death of Western civilization.

That, in a nutshell, is the key message of a host of distinguished contemporary writers and historians, including James Burnham, Patrick Buchanan, Walter Laqueur, Claire Berlinski, Christopher Caldwell, Theodore Dalrymple, Bruce Thornton and, more recently, Douglas Murray and Jonah Goldberg.

These authors have published books variously titled *Suicide of the West* (Jonah Goldberg, James Burnham), *The Death of the West* (Patrick Buchanan), *The Last Days of Europe* (Walter Laqueur), *The Strange Death of Europe* (Douglas Murray), etc.

The death of which they speak is no figure of speech. It is a real physical, cultural and spiritual death.

Let’s start with the physical death which, written in numbers, is easy enough to assess.

All Western countries without exception currently have sub-replacement fertility rates. This is not the result of epidemics, wars or economic disasters, but of an attitude to life – what Pope Saint John Paul II called a “culture of death”.

In 1930, T.S. Eliot asked British historian Christopher Dawson his opinion on the Anglican Church’s then recent decision to recognize the moral legitimacy of artificial birth control in hard cases. That same year, Dawson wrote an article predicting that it would lead to the demographic collapse of Western Europe. Dawson speculated that Eastern European immigrants might become their replacement. Prescient insight, but he missed out on the source of the new immigrants. Islam is now filling the cultural vacuum of a society that finds no delight in children and family life and that views religion as an opium for the dim-witted. Our official intelligentsia is cheering it on, naively refusing to acknowledge that its own secularist-postmodernist creed is abhorrent to most immigrants.

This secularist-postmodernist creed is what makes the cultural and spiritual death of Western civilization so manifest. That creed can be summarized in five points:

1. There is no objective truth or, as Nietzsche put it, “there are no facts, only interpretations.” Reality is not a “given”, but something fashioned by our feelings.
2. Thinking must not be constrained by logic. There is nothing wrong with contradictions. For example, you may champion the right to human life generally while upholding a mother’s right to kill her unborn child, or favor legalization of marijuana while lamenting cigarette smoking.
3. An individual’s identity and value are entirely defined by his reference group. To be white male is bad and to be female and non-white is good.
4. The male-female distinction has nothing to do with biology. It is essentially a “cultural construct” in the service of power relationships.
5. There is no objective “moral law” written on the human heart. We invent our moral values. The myth of moral absolutes must yield to moral relativism.

Our academic and media elites feel so strongly about this creed that they sneer at opposing viewpoints. If you don’t agree with same-sex marriage, abortion, subsidized contraception, gender theory or euthanasia, you belong to the “basket of deplorables” who still “cling to their guns and Bibles”. Never mind that the opposing viewpoints are shared by virtually all people since the dawn of civilization, our elites know better.

**How did we get into such a mess?**

The question that naturally comes to mind is: how did we get into such a mess? The short answer is that we have severed the link between faith and reason that was prevalent in the foundational period of Western civilization, so much so that we now view the two as being hostile to one another.

The encyclical letter of Pope Saint John Paul II *Fides et Ratio,* published in 1998, opens with these words: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth”.

What this means is that faith and reason are both truth-seeking activities. They are meant to work together, not compete with one another. Faith simply cannot exist without reason and reason itself cannot flourish without faith. Socrates and Abraham are not antithetical. Since both pursue the same goal, which is knowledge of truth, they can live harmoniously in each of us.

There is solid empirical evidence for such a view. It is the existence of universities, which first appeared in the Middle Ages as an outgrowth of the intellectual requirements of the faith.

This was not an entirely new phenomenon. The writings of Christians living in the second and third centuries indicate that they were largely drawn to the faith, not by emotions, but rather by an intellectual quest for the truth.

Reflecting on the reasons for belief in the God of Jesus-Christ was very much a part of their way of being religious. Far from putting aside Socratic self-questioning, they felt it was their Christian duty to develop their reasoning skills in order to find out all that could be known about the truth. It was precisely because of that difficult and unrelenting search that universities came into existence. The medieval universities, which are the ancestors of our modern universities, were a response to an urge to find answers to questions raised by reason enlightened by faith.

Medieval universities did not focus solely on the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. Conscious that the God that is “creative Reason” is also “Goodness itself”, they assumed that Christian Revelation extends not only to what we must know, but also to what we must do. As a result, subject matters included not only philosophy and theology, but also medicine and law.

The marriage of faith and reason found its most perfect expression in the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century monk who was both a philosopher and a theologian. However, it did not take long for this marriage to be broken, first by the Protestant Reformation, whose doctrine of *faith alone* divorced faith from reason, and second by the Enlightenment, whose doctrine of *reason alone* divorced reason from faith.

***The Reformation***

By affirming that the only true source of authority is the Bible, Protestantism unwittingly brought about a kind of religious relativism. As Brad Gregory has shown in *The Unintended Reformation,* Protestantism has never been a unified movement, not even in its early years. Its splintered nature translated into an unending proliferation of irreconcilable truth claims, with no common criteria by which to adjudicate among them. Founded primarily on emotion, Protestantism says that a religious statement is true when it is “experienced” as such. This implies that faith is primarily a matter of “feeling” and that it has little to do with reason. Luther even claimed that “reason is a whore”. But if that is so, then no distinction can be made between a reasonable faith and an unreasonable one. Religion thus turns into a sloppy, syrupy sentimentalism. Today, sentimentalism is rampant not only in Protestantism, but also in some parts of Catholicism.

***The Enlightenment***

Having concluded that the Protestant experience of *faith alone* as a guide to fundamental truths did not work, a large segment of the Western intelligentsia decided in the 17th and subsequent centuries to try out the principle of *reason alone*. This is what gave rise to the Enlightenment, which was an attempt to establish a kind of universal brotherhood based on universal moral principles divorced from any kind of religious faith.

The Enlightenment produced a number of secular prophecies which constitute the core of modern liberal secularism, e.g. the gradual elimination of all suffering through science and technology, the withering of religion through progress in education, the disappearance of wars and conflicts through economic prosperity and world trade, etc. These prophecies were supported by a blind faith in scientific reason, which was expected to drive progress and, under the guidance of intellectuals, lead to human equality.

But this blind faith in reason, science and progress soon ended in disillusionment. In 1929, Christopher Dawson wrote: “The skepticism and unbelief which in the heyday of Liberal enlightenment were directed against traditional religion have now been turned against the foundations of Liberalism itself”.[[1]](#footnote-1)1

Since Dawson wrote these lines, we have witnessed the demise of the two greatest forms of pseudo-science that ever arose from Enlightenment thinking: Marxism and Freudianism.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 Moreover, the Enlightenment proved itself unable to answer basic existential questions: why does the world exist? What is the meaning of life? As authors as different as C.S. Lewis and Allan Bloom have shown, the result has been that “Western rationalism has culminated in a rejection of reason”.[[3]](#footnote-3)3

It is in the wake of this general *disillusionment* brought about, first by Protestantism’s *faith alone* experiment, and then by the Enlightenment’s *reason alone* experiment, that the secularist-postmodernist creed has emerged. In 1967, Michel Foucault, the most cited author in the social sciences according to the Social Sciences Research Network, published *Les mots et les choses,* where he announced nothing less than “the death of man”. Two of his road companions, Martin Heidegger and Richard Rorty, argued that reason is inherently incapable of reaching truth about reality and that feelings were a better guide than reason.

Having killed God and fetishized reason, we now find ourselves inhabiting a broken world, which images our broken souls. The most apt description of our times is perhaps Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming:*

Tuning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

[…] The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

A reordering of the world requires a reordering of souls.

So where do we go from here?

Wherever we choose to go, we must remember two things.

First, we must remember that there can be no reordering of the world without a prior reordering of souls.

Second, we must remember that the Judeo-Christian tradition grew out of the marriage of Judeo-Christian religion and classical Greco-Roman reason, two cultures which became one and gave birth to what used to be called Christendom and is now called Western Civilization. The two most salient facts about this civilization is that it is ours and that it is slowly killing itself by letting the secularist-postmodernist poison spread through its bloodstream.

Abandonment of God is what gave rise to this burst of madness. Only by returning to God will we recover our sanity. The way to sanity is the way of the prodigal son in the Gospel: we must go back to the house of the Father and seek forgiveness. Western civilization was built by men of faith and prayer. We need to rediscover its roots, failing which we will attend to its prolonged agony. More specifically, we must rediscover the great medieval synthesis of faith and reason that was put asunder by the Reformation and the Enlightenment before it was effectively tried out.

The postmodernist-secularist way is the way of despair. The synthesis of faith and reason, the way of hope.

1. 1 Dawson, Christopher*, Progress and Religion*, Sherwood Sudgen & Company, Peru (Illinois), p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 On the demise of Freudian theories, see: Frederick Crews, *Freud: The Making of an Illusion,* Metropolitan Books, New York, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind, Simon and Schuster,* New York, 1987, p.240. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)