

A Contemplative Response To the Culture War

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Throughout most of the 20th century American Christians essentially forfeited the culture war through a lethal combination of blissful ignorance, apathy, lethargy, cowardice, misplaced priorities, and the myriad distractions of life. As a result, the consequences are apparent today as we witness the erosion of Christian influence in virtually every area of contemporary life from law and politics to business, education, the media, public civility, private morality, the arts and entertainment, and lifestyles in general.

Regardless of the outcome of the 2008 election, Christians will find that the tide of secularism and cultural liberalism will continue to swamp our society, erode our moral and ethical standards, and pollute our social institutions. As Bob Dylan sang in the Sixties, “The times they are a-changin’,” but the kind of change that politicians are promising for the future gives Christians and other social conservatives more cause for concern than celebration.

America certainly changed in the last half of the 20th century, and the rate of change is accelerating at a frenetic pace. But for the most part it is anything but socially beneficial. We are witnessing a cultural shift that is unprecedented in our history, with the forces of secularism and cultural liberalism generating most of the energy and momentum. Unless a major spiritual and moral renewal occurs, our total cultural collapse is inevitable and merely a matter of time. Meanwhile, most Christians and Christian leaders appear blissfully unaware of what’s happening, and relatively few show much concern.

Prior to the past fifty years, America’s major social institutions generally (if nominally and imperfectly) upheld traditional moral, ethical, political, and economic values, but all of that seems like ancient history now. No longer can we rely upon our educational, political, and legal systems to uphold truth and promote fair, decent and sensible policies, nor can we trust the media for accurate and unbiased reporting. And in no

other sector of American society is moral degradation more obvious and odious than in popular culture – the movies, television programs, popular music and advertising that are so pervasive, so intrusive, and so influential in terms of shaping the character and values of so many children, adolescents and young adults.

Many Christian parents look to the church as a safe haven in the midst of all the cultural degradation we see around us, only to be sadly disappointed. While it is true that, ideally, the church should function as a kind of cultural thermostat, in fact it is little more than a cultural thermometer. Rather than regulating the moral climate in society, most churches merely register it. This is true in evangelical churches, but even more so in mainline Protestantism where the insidious effects of theological and cultural liberalism have rendered many churches and even entire denominations impotent in terms of offering any kind of prophetic witness in the midst of our current cultural deterioration.

What Christians need today is a new paradigm. We can argue the relative merits or demerits of the old nominally-Christian civil religion of the past, but the fact is it no longer exists. Historically, whenever the church has functioned authentically and effectively, it has always been outside the cultural mainstream. True Christianity has never been the status quo, nor has it ever acclimated itself to the forces of wealth, greed, power, coercion and exploitation

that always control mainstream culture.

Through history the true church has always been a countercultural and a prophetic church. But in American history many Christians have assumed, erroneously, that America was (or should be) a “Christian nation.” In fact, America never was a Christian nation in any real sense, just as there has never been a truly Christian nation in all of world history. But America has been uniquely *influenced* by Christian values, and it is the erosion of these values that is the principle cause of our present crisis.

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The Constantinian Legacy

Christianity hasn’t always been what we see around us today. I’m not referring to the familiar comparisons between the state-sponsored Christendom of the Middle Ages and the religious liberty and separation of church and state that has characterized America’s religious heritage, but to a more fundamental comparison between the countercultural Christian communities of the first 300 years and the established state church that was later sanctioned, patronized and subsidized by the Roman imperial government.



Constantine the Great
(r. 312-337)

Historians have long recognized the Constantinian era of the 4th century as one of the great watershed periods in human history. In a matter of a single generation, mainstream Christianity was utterly transformed. Beginning in that crucial epoch, Christian theology and church life departed

from the apostolic tradition and conformed to the needs of the Roman state. It is this form of Christianity – a religious institution preoccupied with cultural acceptance, social and political influence, and economic power – that many assume to be normative Christianity.

Most Christians don’t realize it, but we are the heirs of this original accommodation and absorption. What we see around us, and rarely question, is a highly partisan Christianity that is integrally involved in the social, political and

economic power structures of our day.

Erroneously, mainstream institutionalized Christianity has come to regard itself as essential to the maintenance of the world on terms largely dictated by the world. This is a compromised and acculturated form of Christianity in contrast to the early church which understood that authentic Christianity always exists in tension with the dominant values of its day. As a spiritual reality, the true church – made up of those whose lives have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit – holds beliefs, values, and priorities that are never in keeping with the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times.

When the early Christian community became the Constantinian church, much more was involved than simple political and cultural co-optation. Having supplanted traditional Greco/Roman paganism, the church was now charged with the task of providing an institutionalized religion for the empire. As a result, Christianity was burdened with the functions common to all imperial religions, from providing a comprehensive cosmology to reconciling the coexistence of an omnipotent and benevolent God with the ubiquitous nature of evil and suffering in the world. Furthermore, as the official state religion, Christianity now assumed the responsibility of justifying and blessing the political establishment, the social order, the Roman legal system, and even the empire’s wars.

From that point on Christianity was plagued by a fundamental contradiction: governed by a text that was originally written to guide small countercultural Christian communities until the Eschaton (the End of the Age), it was now stretched to cover a generally non-Christian society and a predatory empire that thrived on conquest, suppression, and exploitation.

The result was general confusion as Christians struggled to make sense of the Biblical material in the context of a pagan and immoral society that was, at most, only nominally-Christian.

Therefore, until the secularization of Europe in the 20th century, Christians lived for over 1500 years under the illusion that Western Civilization and Christianity were inseparable and virtually indistinguishable – just as many American Christians continue to equate traditional American culture with Christianity.

Inevitably, this process of accommodation and absorption involved a kind of theological

imperialism since, as the chaplain of the empire, the church had to cover everything under the sovereign rule of God, who was now thought to be the God and sovereign over the entire Roman world. At this point the church took on a new and ominous responsibility: the explanation of why things are as they are. Originally, the world order had been interpreted eschatologically – i.e., as a sign of the End, as the apostle John had portrayed it so dramatically in Revelation. Now, however, the church promoted the interests of the Roman Empire as if the state were coterminous with the Kingdom of God. With its linkage to the state, Christianity looked and acted more and more like the paganism it had replaced.

The result of this unholy alliance of church and state was a gross distortion of the Christian faith. The church of the first three centuries, far from being mainstream, was a radically eschatological community concerned with the countercultural values of the Kingdom of God. With the Second Coming of Christ, the rule of God would be established over the whole earth, but until that time Christians lived as aliens and sojourners in anticipation of that final Eschaton.

In the process of co-optation and acculturation, of course, there was a direct correlation between the establishment of the Constantinian church and the demise of radical Christian communities. An officially-established religion is essentially a department of the state; it is concerned with justifying the world order as it presently exists, and as such it has little tolerance for those who would question its legitimacy or remain on the periphery of society and culture.

A central question is whether Christianity was ever intended to be an established state religion, charged with upholding the world order as it exists, or whether it was and should always remain the radically eschatological belief system of those who voluntarily separate themselves from the corrosive power structures and relationships of this world for the sake of the Gospel.

Early Christianity represented a particular ideal of a universal society, adaptable to any and all cultures but comfortable in none. Then, in an astonishing display of compromise and accommodation, the church moved into the shell of the Roman Empire and reinterpreted itself as a world society coextensive with the world empire. As a consequence, when the Roman Empire crumbled in the West in the 5th century, the church – as the one and only institution left

standing – emerged as the dominant force in society. In subsequent years, as Germanic “barbarian” kingdoms carved up the carcass of the old empire, new nation-states emerged that integrated Christianity with their traditional animistic and polytheistic tribal folk religions, and in time Europe was reconfigured as a galaxy of hyper-competitive “Christian” kingdoms, duchies, principalities and fiefdoms.

For the next thousand years, following the demise of the early Christian communities and the rise of the imperial church, the Roman Catholic Church succeeded in maintaining intellectual and theological dominance over Christendom. As time went on, dissent and revolts surfaced periodically at an increasing rate that threatened its rule, but for centuries the intellectual agility of its philosophers and theologians managed to contain the inherent contradictions in the system.

The Secularization of the West

Then a major rupture came with the Protestant Reformation, followed by the intellectual convulsions sparked by the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Eventually, with one foot planted in the Gospel and the other in the world system, Christendom began to split apart as the Western world became increasingly secularized until it finally left its traditional religious heritage and worldview behind.

Until recently the situation in America had been distinctly different than Europe. In the 20th century Christians all along the theological and political spectrums sought to use the Gospel to further one ideology or another. Self-appointed spokesmen for the church from Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and James Dobson to Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, and Al Sharpton have lobbied for everything from free-market capitalism and traditional socio/political values to socialism and Marxist-oriented liberation theology. Both sides assume that the kingdom of God can be advanced through the utilization of power politics, but neither the Christian right nor the Christian left has gotten much from the politicians who have courted (and exploited) them so skillfully over the years. As Bruce Cockburn sang years ago, “God can’t be reduced to an ideology,” and neither the right nor the left has a monopoly on righteousness, compassion, social justice, good intentions, or sensible and realistic policies.

I sometimes think that the result of all this Christian political activism has been just more

misspent time and energy and more social polarization. Not that Christians should withdraw from the public square – indeed, we are called to be a source of salt and light in our society. Social and political action is usually a matter of damage control – i.e., supporting candidates and policies that will do the least harm – and we have a moral obligation to do just that. But we must avoid the temptation to link the Christian faith to any particular political party or ideology, realizing that all of these man-made systems are shades of grey. Some are obviously better than others, but all succeed or fail on the basis of power politics, propaganda and manipulation.

Too often the issues are drawn too much from the world's agenda, which is exclusively socio-economic and political. This is problematical on several accounts, not the least of which is that the New Testament offers few specific guidelines on such matters. Instead, Scripture focuses on radically different questions which Christians often ignore because the world is usually not that interested in them. But if we cut ourselves off from our sacred text, we find ourselves constantly improvising a Christianity adapted to the ever-changing political patterns of the modern world to the exclusion of what God has truly called us to do in this world.

The Challenge to American Christians

In a mysterious but real sense, God is working to reconcile all of human history and direct it toward a redemptive climax. God will establish his rule on earth, and those who are attuned to his purpose order their lives accordingly in community. Ultimately, this is the highest and truest calling for the children of God.

For more than a thousand years, beginning in the Constantinian era, church and state worked both in tandem and in tension ostensibly to promote a common cause – the advancement of the Kingdom of Christ here on earth. Jesus taught, and the New Testament confirmed, that these two systems, church and state, were separate spheres, and throughout most of history the relationship of the Christian to the state was more like that of a subject than a citizen. (Hence, Jesus' admonition to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.") Most Christians, and common people in general, had virtually no direct involvement in government other than supporting it through their taxes and perhaps military service. But with the

formation of the United States the situation dramatically changed due to the fact that citizens actually *created* and *participated in* Caesar (i.e., in government). In a constitutional republic such as America, sovereignty resides (at least in theory) in the will of the people. Common folks, including Christians, share formal responsibility for political decisions. This participation may be largely an illusion, but it is a very powerful illusion that conditions how we view our role as responsible Christian citizens.

The result is that in America the classical struggle between allegiance to God and Caesar is considerably more complicated. The usual way of dealing with this tension is to refuse to acknowledge any conflict, or to see oneself as simultaneously both a citizen and a Christian. Many Christian citizens imagine that we owe equal allegiance to each authority, but this is clearly unbiblical, as Peter and John demonstrated when they proclaimed to the Sanhedrin, "We must obey God rather than men."

But for citizens of a modern representative democracy such as the United States, the proper delineation between loyalty to God and allegiance to Caesar can be problematical. Like the double-minded man in the Epistle of James, it is easy to identify too much with the kingdom of this world to the extent that it claims our ultimate allegiance and we absorb its values. But the New Testament is clear that the kingdoms of God and Caesar are fundamentally incompatible, and we must subjugate the one to the other.

Outside of a Spirit-filled life lived in community with like-minded Christians, we are easily pressed into the mold of this world. In the midst of a hyper-competitive society in which greed, power, status, exploitation and injustice prevail, and in the absence of an eschatological Christian perspective, there appear to be only three possible alternatives in terms of how we relate to this world: (1) Ignore the tensions and problems that exist; (2) capitulate, by adopting the values and practices of our culture – which entails abandoning any distinctively Christian values we have; or (3) seek to defeat the world system by adopting its methods of power politics. But the Gospel neither sanctions nor justifies such a choice, so there must be another option.

In his book, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, Jacques Maritain wrote of "the insane mistake" of succumbing to the values and the mindset of this world. This is a common temptation and virtually

unavoidable unless we are constantly mindful that there is a reality beyond what we experience here on earth. This is the final consummation of Constantinian Christianity – the total subjugation of the world of the Spirit to the spirit of this world. In effect, it is the delusion that the Kingdom of God is inextricably connected to the man-made structures of this world, and that our salvation comes through the purification of our social, economic and political systems.

In a world so complex as ours, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the cares and concerns of this life and to lose one's way. But wise people, once they realize they are lost, turn back to their point of departure. There is little reason to believe that mainstream Christianity as it exists here in America is wise, or that it will repent and change course. It is individuals who are converted, not institutions. And converted individuals or individuals desiring conversion seek out other like-minded souls and gather together in supportive communities.

In terms of their own institutional self-interest, most churches can survive statistically and as prominent public institutions only by accommodating themselves to the surrounding society and culture. Churches do this through a variety of ways: by diluting the Gospel; by de-emphasizing theology; by exploiting people's fear of death; by turning worship services into entertainment productions; by manipulating people's emotions; by providing every conceivable kind of program and activity for children, teenagers and adults; by becoming "seeker-friendly" or adopting the latest cultural fads; by preaching upbeat and positive messages; by generating fear and cultivating an "us versus them" mentality vis-a-vis the surrounding culture; by claiming to be the only "true" Christian church; by ignoring corporate (or institutional) sin and focusing exclusively on private sins; or by ignoring private sins and focusing exclusively on corporate (or institutional) sin.

Transformation and Community

Yet in the deepest recesses of our hearts we desire more than just mediocre status quo Christianity. We yearn for transcendence and an intimate personal relationship with God through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, we have many who have gone before us – and even some contemporary examples – from whom we can derive inspiration. Among these is Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), the prominent French philosopher who after years of incessant philosophizing ended his days as a novice of the Little Brothers of Jesus at Toulouse on the Garonne River. There, with his wife, he learned the grace of submission and simple obedience. Like his contemporary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who during World War II found spiritual shelter in the Benedictine monastery at Ettal, and like his friend Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, Maritain became a man of our time by embodying the pilgrimage of those for whom the tensions and pressures of modern life become so great that it seems as though "our heart will break."



We are faced with serious problems today, not the least of which is the moral collapse of our culture and the insidious effects of Secular Humanism, Postmodernism, Political Correctness, Neopaganism and other demonic philosophies that distort reality and corrupt all of life. But we'll never be able to

have much impact or even see our way clear to address these issues until we have been transformed from within. Through spiritual transformation we take on the mind of Christ, as the apostle Paul wrote about, and in the process we gain wisdom, peace, and a new perspective.

Through spiritual transformation, it is said that Jacques Maritain "dissolved philosophy into contemplation, and contemplation, by grace, was dissolved into obedience." There by the Garonne River he met the living Spirit of God, and there the broken heart torn by the tension of endless questions was healed. In reflection he wrote:

Although the Christendom of days gone by has been undone, yet Christ's church has continued to rise. It... has been set free little by little and delivered from the care of civil communities that reject it... Despoiled, stripped of everything, when she flees into a solitude she will take with her all that remains in the world not only of faith and charity and true contemplation, but of philosophy, poetry and virtue. And all these will be more beautiful than ever.

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A Moral Mandate

Constantinian-style civil religion no longer assumes custodial care over civil society, and in a very real sense we should celebrate its demise. It never was authentic Christianity, and with less pseudo-Christian religiosity in public life the ground is being cleared for new expressions of true Christianity to bloom and grow. In effect, the church has been liberated to fulfill what it was originally intended to be: a radical countercultural spiritual community of faith that offers the only hope of true salvation and redemption to a lost and broken world. This is a high calling that transcends the acculturated Christianity of the past, it as such it offers a true and authentic witness to a culture in crisis.

But here is our current dilemma: With the withering of nominally-Christian civil religion comes the corresponding decline in Christian-influenced civility and decency and moral order that, while not authentic Christianity per se, at least functioned as a kind of cultural thermostat to control the very worst of human impulses and behavior. And therein lies the ongoing tension and our greatest challenge, for we are called to be citizens of both an eternal kingdom in heaven and a temporal society here on earth. There is no question which loyalty takes precedence, but the lesser allegiance is no less of a sacred trust.

As Christians, we cannot retreat in the face of the formidable challenges facing our society and culture, and it is irresponsible to concede the cultural war to radical secularists and the forces of moral chaos. History has shown that the Gospel of Jesus Christ can survive and even flourish regardless of the cultural milieu, but as Christians we have a moral mandate to actively promote a decent civil society that is as healthy, just, equitable, ethical, fair and free as possible for the sake of Christians and non-Christians alike.