

Our Post-Christian Society

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It is often said that we live in a post-Christian society. That is true, but its meaning is generally misunderstood. A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten. In other words a post-Christian society is a particular sort of Christian society. It is quite different, for instance, from a post-Muslim or a post-Buddhist society (if we can imagine such things). At an emotional level, its Christian character explains why many agnostics and atheists nonetheless find Christian hymns suitable and comforting at occasions such as funerals and weddings. Intellectually, its dormant Christian beliefs — notably those about the nature of Man — underpin our ideas on politics and foreign policy, as for instance on human rights. Even the Enlightenment — which strong secularists like to cite as the foundation of Western liberal polities — is an extension of Christianity as much as a rejection of it. In short, though much of what Christianity taught is forgotten, even unknown, by modern Europeans and Americans, they nonetheless act on its teachings every day.

But there are consequences to forgetting truths. One consequence is that while we instinctively want to preserve the morals and manners of the Christian tradition, we cannot quite explain or defend them intellectually. So we find ourselves seeking more contemporary (i.e., in practice, secular) reasons for preserving them or, when they decay completely, inventing regulations to mimic them. When courtesy is abandoned, we invent speech codes, which are blunter in their impact and repress legitimate disagreement along with insults. When female sexual modesty and male sexual restraint are discredited as puritanical, we draw up contractual arrangements to ensure that any sexual contact is voluntary on both sides. This means that sexual relationships (and their consequences) may occur more often but that they do so in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and legal wariness that poisons relations between men and women over the long run. Above all, when we no longer protect and strengthen the family on the grounds that it is a patriarchal institution harmful to the life chances of women, we encourage the family breakdown that leaves women worse off financially, pushes men into an irresponsible life, and damages their children socially and psychologically.

Family breakdown is in fact the largest single social disaster plaguing the post-Christian society. The family is a natural way of regulating and disciplining us and our ambitions in the activities of everyday life. It makes us frugal; it encourages saving, wealth creation, and the deferment of gratification; it compels us to provide for the future; above all it ensures that children are brought up and taught to become self-reliant, and that the weak, the sick, and the elderly have others to succor them.

When the family breaks down, we get crime, drug-taking, impoverishment, psychological problems, and much else at the personal level; and we get a cycle of deprivation, the growth of an underclass, spiraling social-welfare costs, over-government, and severe budgetary problems at a national level. The result of family breakdown is that we have to replace the family with regulation after regulation. Our remedies — easier divorce, better financial arrangements for women after divorce, increased welfare for single mothers, bureaucratic agencies to compel men to make child-support payments, laws and regulations that disadvantage natural family relationships in court decisions on child care and adoption, and much else — never work as well as the stable families they replace. Indeed, very often they make the situation worse.

Let me give you a very recent example: A pregnant Italian woman on a visit to Britain failed to take her regular medicine for bipolar disorder and suffered a panic attack. The police were summoned and took her to a psychiatric hospital. She was then “sectioned” (i.e., legally detained in the hospital against her will but allegedly for her own good). At the suggestion of social workers, a court then ordered that she be compelled to have a Caesarean and, since she was arguably unfit to care for the child, that her baby be “taken into care” and put up for adoption. That was done. The woman has a mother in Italy who cares for her two older children and a sister and an ex-husband in America, both of whom are on good terms with her. At no point did the courts or the social workers attempt to contact them. Nor was any contact made with the Italian Embassy about the detention of, and forcible medical assault on, an Italian citizen. The judge at a later court hearing, where the woman (now on her medicine) was seeking the return of her baby, remarked that she was articulate and competent. But he still decided that her baby should be adopted, because the social workers thought that would be in the best interests of the child. No one now argues that the woman is criminal, or incompetent, or otherwise a danger to her baby. So one has to draw the conclusion that British law now permits agents of the state to force women to give birth prematurely, to seize their babies, and to give them to total strangers more or less at will — or, in the jargon, if they arbitrarily decide that the baby would be better off with those strangers than with its parents (or, in this case, with its mother and grandmother).

What makes this case so terrifying is that the judge, the social workers, the police, and the doctors almost certainly believe that they acted entirely rightly throughout. They cannot see how cruel, arrogant, and unnatural their actions appear to anyone who has not swallowed the Kool-Aid ideology of the “caring” bureaucracies that the state makes a better parent than actual biological parents. Certainly social workers and the police must sometimes intervene to protect children against brutal and abusive parents (though their record on that score is riddled with horrible errors and misjudgments). But most “tug-of-love” child cases don’t involve such horrors. Those that do usually occur in non-marital or non-traditional families where there is no biological link between the abused child and the adult abuser. And the statistics show this. Yet the natural affection between parents and children, which should therefore be the starting point of any discussion of a child’s future, is given comparatively little weight in court and casework decisions. The law now assumes that the social worker knows what is best for the child. And the social worker in turn believes that his decisions are inspired by a professional care for the child that is equal to, even superior to, parental love.

The most effective squelching of this argument was heard in Congress a few years ago when an HHS official told Senator Phil Gramm of Texas that he loved the senator's children as much as the senator did.

"Oh, really?" replied Gramm. "What are their names?"

In short, the best-intentioned regulators cannot replace the family in its most important function of providing sources of order suffused by love. Regulation itself is always a hit-and-miss matter. The best regulation implemented by the most humane and sensible regulators can never match the love of parents who have known a child since the maternity ward. That said, the most effective regulation will be the kind that supports and strengthens families rather than attempting to replace them. And whatever its purpose, regulation is most likely to work sensitively when it is shaped by the moral values of the local community and when its efficacy can be assessed by local people. Mistakes will still be made, but they are unlikely to be the kind of outrageous mistake that was inflicted on the Italian woman, and they can be corrected more readily. That is the practical argument for the principle of subsidiarity. Yet though lip service is regularly paid to subsidiarity in national and European political debate, we are increasingly faced with a world of regulations and laws that are shaped by remote bureaucracies in accordance with social ideologies that we may not share and that are often opaque or even deliberately concealed from the wider public with its Christian and post-Christian sympathies and moral instincts.

Until recently it has been national governments that have imposed most of the moral, welfare, and family policies that run counter to the (post-) Christian traditions of their societies. That has changed since the end of the Cold War and the development of transnational and global institutions that seek to impose on different societies uniform policies rooted in a new interpretation of human rights and international law. In recent years these institutions – U.N. agencies, the European Commission and its expert bodies, the Kyoto process — have expanded their powers in three ways. They have promoted and pushed through international treaties on subjects from maritime law to the rights of children that give them a basis for intervening in domestic politics. They have secured legal expansion of those treaties through judicial activism at both the international and national levels. And they have established monitoring bodies to ensure that signatory countries fulfill treaty provisions which the monitors may interpret quite differently from either those who negotiated the original treaty or those responsible for domestic policies covered by it. In effect, such officials become what Shelley called poets — the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Within Europe the debate on moral issues at the transnational level is further tilted in an anti-traditional direction by emerging "European values" to which national policies are expected to conform. These reflect not the actual values that the citizens of these countries hold in reality but the values of their elites. The two often run quite counter to each other. My favorite example is the warning by the European Commission that a Turkish law penalizing adultery would, if passed, be an obstacle to Turkey's eventual entry into the EU. We cold-blooded Euro-skeptic Anglo-Saxons had long suspected that adultery was a European value, but it was still interesting to see it officially confirmed by the European Commission.

But this goes beyond a joke. The problem with the laws and regulations handed down in this way is that, being remote and undemocratic in origin and reflective of social philosophies that most citizens reject, they are often ill-suited to the needs of the local society. They need to be openly debated at the level where they will be implemented. Whatever we may think of such matters as children's rights, the regulation of political speech, or the prohibition of blasphemy, they are plainly the stuff of domestic political debate. Such debate would expose weaknesses in what initially look like reasonable reforms. Carelessly granting abstract rights to children to make and maintain friendships against their parents' wishes is dangerous at any time but positively reckless in the age of Internet pedophilia. It would hardly survive either parliamentary debate or tabloid vigilance. And that goes for other subjects of transnational moral regulation.

Democratic debate also ensures that the laws governing us will enjoy majority support or, at the very least, not arouse majority indignation and opposition. Once a treaty is ratified, on the other hand, it overrides domestic legislation. The courts may then interpret it to enforce all manner of advanced follies on reluctant regions. Judged politically, these treaties clearly represent the outlook of cosmopolitan liberals rather than those of religious Americans or even non-religious European conservatives. But they are then experienced by entire populations as the edicts of a progressive moral tyranny.

At present, for instance, "progressive" MPs in the European Parliament seek to establish abortion as a human right and to remove any conscientious right to abstain from performing abortions from Christian doctors and nurses, and in particular from Catholic hospitals. This is illiberal and barbaric. It is an attempt to coerce consciences of a kind that was abandoned in 19th-century Europe. But it is also very foolish. Swedish sexual morality cannot be imposed on Catholic Poland any more than Catholic Mass attendance can be imposed on downtown Stockholm. But a great deal of harm and social strife can be created as such policies gradually but inexorably fail. And this is happening today in Europe as a result of transnational judicial decisions and in America as a result of federal judicial decisions — and in both places as a result of a strong and aggressive secularist movement hostile to the traditional moral ethos of post-Christian society.

How can Christians best resist this aggressively secularist movement? How can we best understand its driving force and character? Answering those linked questions is the task of this conference. But I want to suggest two lines of approach.

The first is that we should seek support from a different sort of secular mind. Recent years have seen the rise of those who call themselves "Catholic atheists" or "Christian atheists." Oriana Fallaci was one such. These are people who, though not able to believe in the God of the Christian religion, nonetheless love the society that Christianity created, recognize its worth, and wish to protect it. They are — so to speak — patriots of the post-Christian society. Kenneth Minogue, who died a few months ago, gave one of the most perceptive arguments from this standpoint in his essay "['Christophobia' and the West](#)," published in *The New Criterion*. He there described how the secularized idealism that broke free of Christianity has now turned against its parent. It has evolved into a proselytizing secularism that seeks to banish religion from public life altogether. It is, in effect, an ersatz religion that competes

with Christianity in offering a rival “vision of human betterment to be achieved on a global scale by forging the peoples of the world into a single community based on the universal enjoyment of appropriate human rights.”

Because different religions rarely get on — and because the secularist version of appropriate human rights differs sharply from Christianity’s — this Christophobic secularism increasingly seeks to uproot what remains of Christian tradition from national law and custom within Western countries. Thus, a Christian dating agency in California was sued successfully because it would not match up same-sex couples; Catholic adoption agencies in Britain must now either refer children to same-sex couples or close down; Christian pastors on both sides of the Atlantic have been prohibited from preaching sermons on certain topics. And so on, and so forth. In resisting such attacks, we should seek out allies among “Christian atheists” and promote their arguments. They are fighting for half the truth — for what we might call a genuine social gospel — and we should be grateful for their aid. If all of them are as clever, brave, and principled as Oriana Fallaci and Ken Minogue, we will have recruited powerful intellectual auxiliaries.

The second line of approach is internal to Christian debate. Christians have fallen into sloppy thinking on international issues. We need to recover and update our traditional and enjoined skepticism of the world’s principalities and powers. These include bodies such as the United Nations and NGOs quite as much as nation-states and national governments. Christian liberals have sometimes invested the emotions they would once have devoted to God and religion in such bodies. They see them as world-saving institutions and, as such, above criticism. Even the occasional Church leader has incautiously lent support to this heresy. But this promiscuous respect is mistaken. By their fruits ye shall know them, and, as we have seen, their fruits include some very questionable social policies. They are above neither criticism nor reform — which I now invite this impressive conference to propose.

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