



A Review of “Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society”

A new book by the editor of the *First Things*  magazine is dedicated to defending a challenging premise: that a discernibly Christian culture could once again become a predominating element of American society. [Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society](#) is R.R. Reno’s contribution to a discussion about the prospects for a revived Christendom, which includes works such as Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option* (2017), Anthony Esolen’s *Out of the Ashes*, and Douglas Wilson’s *Empires of Dirt* (2016). While each author offers his own approach to understanding the current state of American culture and his own proposal to address the troubles which confront that culture, the shared concern and commitment to a Christian future for the Republic is, in itself, a cause for encouragement.

Reno finds his inspiration in T.S. Eliot’s 1939 work, *The idea of a Christian Society*, and Reno believes that our culture faces a decision like that which confronted the West in the 1930s: “... Eliot saw that a more fundamental response was required as well — a decision. Would the West seek a Christian future or a pagan one? We face a similar decision today.” Reno maintains that what is needed today is “to restore genuine freedom. ... We also need to recover solidarity, limited government, and a sense of the transcendent.” It could be argued that there is a nebulous character to such a quest; but Reno is not pursuing the implementation of a specific, itemized, “bullet point” agenda: he is calling the reader to reflect on that which, broadly-speaking, makes a particular culture recognizably “Christian.” As the author observes near the conclusion:

This book is essentially an argument that post-Protestant WASP culture is failing, that it promises freedom, but delivers tyranny. It may work well for the top end of society, but it’s hell on the weak and vulnerable. It makes a fuss about diversity but can’t deliver solidarity. Its false view of freedom undermines the authority of the two institutions that can limit government: marriage and the church. Its this-worldly focus distracts us from the higher things that give us a firm place to stand and from the higher loves that make us free.

Much of Reno’s analysis of the cultural divisions within American society borrows heavily from Charles Murray’s book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*. Reno believes that elite culture is heavily invested in the process of de-Christianizing American society in ways which are directly detrimental to the poor. In short, Murray’s distinction between wealthy, elitist “Belmont” and an increasingly morally and economically impoverished “Fishtown” is a cultural war with a religious component:

We are living amidst a cultural transformation comparable in magnitude to economic globalization,



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and it too favors the powerful. Today's "progressive" is committed to expanding lifestyle freedom, which the rich tend to manage, like economic freedom, to their advantage. But while the benefits of economic freedom do in fact extend even to the poor, what trickles down from lifestyle freedom is dysfunction, disorder, and disarray. ...

The talented and educated are enjoying an expansion of their economic opportunities while old moral strictures on their pursuit of pleasure melt away. ... Yet the life expectancy for white people without a high school diploma has dropped catastrophically since the 1990s — down by five years for women, three years for men — suggesting a cultural crisis among poor whites akin to that in Russia after the Soviet Union collapsed. Yet the morally breeding powerful, confident in their own supposedly progressive views, largely ignore this collapse and the people suffering from it. When bureaucrats or journalists occasionally take notice, they offer every explanation except the obvious one: white, secular progressives have dismantled traditional morality, disempowering and disorienting the weak and vulnerable.

Reno declares that "Our culture wars are driven by the rich, who insist that our shared moral culture serve their interest by promoting freedoms that benefit them and harm the poor." As the progressive agenda advances, it uses government power to crush all resistance. This means that the state will inevitably be at odds with the church and the family as long as it continues to force a cultural agenda which wages war against a morality informed by the Christian faith. In this war against the Christian verity, the progressive agenda which guides big government is relentlessly hostile to the faith. Thus, in the context of the American Republic, a return to small government is a crucial aspect of the fight for religious liberty:

As religious freedom is constricted, government power advances. As it expands, government power is limited. The institutional freedom of the churches, therefore, is decisively important for our political culture. Apple, General Electric, and other giant corporations are creatures of government, owing their existence to our laws of incorporation and contract. They can be hobbled by regulation, strangled by taxation, or simply nationalized. That's not true of the Christian churches and other religious communions, which existed before modern nation-states came into being. They can be harassed by hostile governments but cannot be controlled or destroyed, as the underground church in China demonstrates.

Reno also maintains that while big government thrives on playing groups of citizens against each other, religion offers a cultural solidarity which is currently lacking in America. Even when memorializing the death of Americans at the hands of enemies of the Republic, the progressive elite is incapable of appealing to the solace offered by the Christian faith. Thus, for example, the faith-less 9/11 Memorial in New York City epitomizes the agenda of the progressives:

The absence of religious symbolism in the memorial is an acknowledgement of America's, and especially New York City's, pluralism, but the memorial also rejects national symbolism. There are no flags, no eagles, no emblems of American identity. ...

The faceless, placeless, symbol-shorn architectural vocabulary of the 9/11 site tells us we are naked and homeless in the global system that produces vast wealth but no public meaning. We're alone in the great scramble for wealth, alone in our grief over the ruthless power of death.

It is the hopelessness of progressivist ideology that opens the way for a restoration of the influence of the Christian verity, and Reno believes that the signs of a resurgence are readily apparent:



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A reprise of Christendom is unlikely, but a religious counterculture unimaginable 50 years ago has emerged in America. Though it sometimes expresses anger and despair over what has happened to our society, it is fundamentally confident, even hopeful. This religious counterculture, you see, is not really counter. We Christians recognize the value of the secular and the importance of man's temporal welfare, but soulcraft is more important than statecraft. Our ambition is not to become the next establishment but to influence, directly or indirectly, the moral and spiritual outlook of the current one, turning it in directions that promote wellbeing for everyone, not just those who live in Belmont.

Reno's argument has merit, and although it is not an exhaustive examination of the genesis of the American crisis, nor does it offer a programmatic approach to countering the war against the church and the family, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* is an important book in the ongoing discussion of the future of the American Republic.

R.R. Reno, [Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society](#) (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Faith, 2016). Hardcover. 215 pages.



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