



Our Christian Civilization

A group that refers to itself as the “Arkansas Society of Freethinkers” is not in the Christmas spirit. When it caught wind of the fact that Little Rock, Arkansas’ Terry Elementary School had arranged for its students to attend a stage performance of “A Charlie Brown Christmas” at a local church, it began to eye the school up for a lawsuit.

Inasmuch as one of its key characters quotes the Gospel of Luke, “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” you see, has an explicitly religious theme.

That there is no such “separation” clause in the U.S. Constitution has long been established. Yet this episode is telling not because it reveals the atheist’s ignorance of the Constitution. Rather, it is telling insofar as it reveals his ignorance of his cultural inheritance.



The great Catholic writer Hilaire Belloc famously declared that “the faith is Europe and Europe is the faith.” We can paraphrase him by saying just as assuredly that Christianity is the West and the West is Christianity.

It is true that the Western mind is indebted to classical, pre-Christian Greek and Roman sources, but even here, it is primarily to Christian men of learning that we owe thanks for resurrecting and restoring to European civilization the lost riches of antiquity.

For the last two millennia, there has been no aspect of Western existence that hasn’t borne upon it the indelible impress of the Christian religion.

Take science. That it is the Western world within which the sciences first emerged and where they continue to flourish is no coincidence. Prior to the rise of Judaism (from which Christianity spun off), time was conceived cyclically, not linearly — as it still is outside the Christian West to this day. But it is our linear conception of time that inspires the scientist’s faith in the possibility of achieving progress within his craft.

There are still other distinctively Christian concepts from which science has taken flight.

That the universe has been created by an all-good God, and that this God has entrusted its care to the custody of human beings, render it impossible for those who’ve been influenced by these beliefs to deny the reality of the world, as do Hindus and Buddhists, or to assume an attitude of indifference toward it, as did the Stoics. These Christian beliefs make it impossible to proclaim, with Plato and his disciples, that matter is somehow debased and, thus, unworthy of investigation. They make it impossible to deny the rationality of the world and, hence, the knowledge to be gotten from it.

The very (scientific) enterprise at which the scientist makes his living would have been unthinkable in



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the absence of the religious faith that he now ignores, and — far too frequently — disdains. Furthermore, he continues to erect his monuments upon the back of the Christian faith, for the supposition that nature is knowable and worth studying makes sense only within a larger Christian context. Once it has been plucked from that framework, however, then it is about as meaningful as a piece of a puzzle without the puzzle to which it belongs.

And what is true of the ideas underlying science is no less true of those of our morality.

The famed Russian novelist Dostoyevsky had said that if there is no God, then all things are permissible. Dostoyevsky was a Christian. Yet some honest atheists — such as the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre — have admitted that he was correct.

“Indeed,” Sartre wrote, it is precisely because “everything is permissible if God does not exist” that existentialist atheists, such as himself, find life “very distressing.” Since there is no God, “all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him.” There are “no values or commands” that “legitimize our conduct,” there is “no excuse behind us, nor justification before us,” for “we are alone.”

If Christianity is to go the way of the dinosaur, so too must natural law, natural rights, human rights, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and each and every one of our traditional moral ideals go this route, for without the theological gestalt supplied by Christianity, these ideals are reduced to arbitrary human inventions.

This Christmas season, let the “free thinkers” among us recognize that nothing that we take for granted — including our thought — is free. The price we pay for the goods we value is civilization, and for this civilization of ours we owe an eternal debt of gratitude to the very religion that too many of our “free thinkers” are intent upon destroying.



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