



Man's Upward Reach

This is a powerful indictment, especially in the wake of the destruction of the World Trade Center. It may be tempting, therefore, to agree with the secular thesis that it is time to abandon religion for the good of civilization. To the contrary, however, religion is a fundamental building block of Western Civilization. Without it, science as we know it would not have developed, philosophy would be emaciated, the arts would be left without key elements in both subject and execution, and the freedoms we cherish, divorced from their conceptual foundations, would evaporate.

Simply put, religion is the most basic manifestation of mankind's innate upward reach. That upward reach, implanted in man by God, can never be totally extinguished, no matter how far man may stray from immutable truths or how oppressive the state may become. But the closer man comes to the truth, the more he is able to realize his full, God-given potential.



Freedom and the Law

Civilization, for its perpetuation, requires the recognition of the dignity of each individual. This requires that the societies that comprise civilization formulate means by which the interaction of individuals is regulated in a fair and consistent manner. This has been a nearly intractable problem due to the natural tendency of man to seek dominion over other men. Some means of moderating and taming this impulse needed to be created. In the earliest reaches of Western Civilization, this was thought to have been accomplished by the gods, or, by God.

The most ancient laws of Rome, for instance, were said to have been given to the Roman king through divine interview. The historian Livy thought this tradition a deception, but recorded it anyway. He wrote that the Roman king Numa Pompilius strove "to inculcate fear of the gods as the most powerful influence that could act upon ... a barbaric people.... [H]e pretended that he had nocturnal interviews with the divine nymph Egeria; and that it was on her advice that he was instituting the religious ritual most acceptable to Heaven, and was appointing special priests for each major deity." The laws of Numa Pompilius, it was thought, brought 40 years of peace to the Romans.

There is a similar religious backing to another set of famous laws, those of the code of Hammurabi. As in ancient Rome, the ancient Mesopotamians saw law as derived from the gods. "The people of ancient Mesopotamia attributed the origin of law to the gods, in particular to the sun-god, who dispersed all darkness and in his course across the heavens looked down upon all the deeds of man," observed



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English historian H.W.F. Saggs in *The Babylonians*. This was true of Hammurabi. His code, inscribed on a stone monument found at Susa in 1902, depicts the king receiving the laws from Shamash, the sun-god. The prologue, inscribed on the monument reads:

When the lofty Anu, King of the Anunaki, and Bel, Lord of Heaven and Earth, he who determines the destiny of the land, committed the rule of all mankind to Marduk ... when they pronounced the lofty name of Babylon; when they made it famous among the quarters of the world and in its midst established an everlasting kingdom whose foundations were firm as heaven and earth — at that time Anu and Bel called me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, the worshipper of the gods, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, ... to enlighten the land and to further the welfare of the people.

Similarly, and more importantly, the laws of Moses, the Ten Commandments, were handed to Moses by Yahweh. In many respects, the important ideas that form the American legal philosophy of limited government stem from this source. The power of the Mosaic law lies not alone in its impact on ethics and right relations between individuals and between those individuals and God, but in the symbolic notion that the law itself stems from a power higher than that of man. This puts a divine limitation on the potentialities of human political power.

In addition, the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular teaches that man is created in the image of God. Consequently, each person is endowed with a certain divine dignity and with specific rights that flow from that divine well of dignity. The Judeo-Christian recognition of the importance of the individual raised the status of all individuals in society, laying the foundation for the notion that the state is not omnipotent, that laws of God transcend those of the state, and that the state must not violate the God-given rights of each individual. This Judeo-Christian concept contrasts sharply with earlier despotisms that had envisioned the monarch as the supreme, and unaccountable, ruler of his domain.

In his eventually unsuccessful defense of placing the Ten Commandments within a public space, former Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore discussed this essential Judeo-Christian aspect of the U.S. legal tradition. “The institutions of our society are founded on the belief that there is an authority higher than the authority of the State,” Moore said, “that there is a moral law which the State is powerless to alter; that the individual possesses rights, conferred by the Creator, which government must respect. The Declaration of Independence stated the now familiar theme: ‘We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’”

Freedom itself is an extension of sound religious principles recognizing the proper relationship among God, man, and the state; and free societies — as our own American experiment in liberty aptly demonstrates — unleash man to achieve much greater heights than he otherwise would.

Fides Christi Scientia

The Latin phrase *Fides Christi Scientia*, translated, means “faith in Christ is knowledge.” For the Christian faithful, this means that there is a certain knowledge inherent in faith in Christ. The believer *knows* that salvation lies in that belief. The phrase, however, may be taken to have a second, broader meaning as well — specifically, that religious faith leads to rational inquiry which itself leads to knowledge. The concept was put most succinctly by theoretical physicist, mathematician, and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne. In his book *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, Polkinghorne argued that “if reality is generously and adequately construed, then knowledge will be seen to be one; if rationality is



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generously and adequately construed, then science and theology will be seen as partners in a common quest for understanding.”

Our current advanced, scientific, and technological age stands on the shoulders of those, beginning with the ancients and especially with those of the Renaissance and later, who sought to investigate the natural world precisely because doing so was a means of coming to a faith informed by reason. These early pioneers were able to accomplish great feats of investigation because of the motivation of faith. The natural world, the temporal creation, was, they thought, an expression of God’s will and goodness, and gaining understanding of it a means of gaining religious insight. This was the view of Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly, a learned scholar of the 15th century whose treatise on geography, the *Imago Mundi* of 1410, bolstered Columbus’ view that the Atlantic could be crossed. This book, says historian Will Durant, “was but one of half a dozen works that this alert ecclesiastic wrote on astronomy, geography, meteorology, mathematics, logic, metaphysics, psychology, and the reform of the calendar and the Church.” The cardinal was accused of spending too much time on secular studies. To this he replied, says Durant, “that a theologian should keep abreast of science.”

The relationship between scientific advancement and religion has roots far more ancient than the Renaissance. Many ancient civilizations, for instance, looked to the skies to find portents of things to come and to harmonize cycles of sacred time. “Mesoamerican astronomical interests,” writes Dick Teresi, author of the book *Lost Discoveries*, “were inseparable from religious and sociopolitical ones.... As in ancient Mesopotamia, China, India, Greece, and Italy, astronomical gods form the core of the pre-Columbian pantheon.” From the ancient cultures of the Old World in particular, the astronomical knowledge gained in the pursuit of religious ends was passed down to later cultures to become part of civilization’s growing store of scientific understanding. “Ptolemy remarked,” Teresi notes, “that the earliest observations available to him came from the reign of [Babylonian] King Nabonassar (747-734 B.C.), and he used eclipse records from that reign in his own computations.”

This ancient relationship between religion and science was continued into the so-called Age of Reason following the Renaissance and the Reformation in Europe. This was an age of rapid advancement and discovery, especially in the fields of geography and cosmology. In the former, the revolution was led by the Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Christopher Columbus. In cosmology, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei led the way.

For Columbus, exploration was a divinely appointed task. “He took his first name seriously,” says Professor Timothy Ferris in *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*. “[He] thought of himself as *Christophoros*, the ‘Christ carrier,’ whose mission it was to discover ‘a new heaven and a new earth.’” Columbus spared no effort in convincing the Spanish monarchy to finance his expedition. To that end he devoted himself to study. “I have made it my business to read all that has been written on geography, history, philosophy, and other sciences,” Columbus said. He concluded, as the result of his study, that the distance to be crossed from the Canary Islands to the Indies totaled 3,550 nautical miles. This was far less than the actual distance. Nevertheless, Columbus was convinced of the expedition’s feasibility: “Thus Our Lord revealed to me that it was feasible to sail from here to the Indies, and placed in me a burning desire to carry out this plan.” At length the Spanish monarchy was convinced, and the expedition set sail, finally sighting land on October 12, 1492. Columbus’ religious faith led him to America and opened up for Europeans the possibility of vast new acquisitions of knowledge of the world.

In a similar fashion, the revolution in cosmology — begun with Nicholas Copernicus and continued by



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Johannes Kepler and Galileo — was motivated as much by an interest in understanding the created order as by the flaws of the Ptolemaic model of the universe. Until Copernicus, the Ptolemaic system with its Earth-centered universe was the standard cosmology in Europe. Copernicus sought to simplify things by placing the sun, rather than Earth, at the center of the system. Though he succeeded, flaws remained. Johannes Kepler, working in the laboratory of another great astronomer, Tycho Brahe, improved upon the Copernican system by introducing the notion that planetary orbits were elliptical rather than circular. In the preface to his book, *The Harmony of the World*, a prideful and defiant Kepler admitted that his work had uncovered truths about God's creation:

What I promised my friends in the title of this book ... what, sixteen years ago, I urged as a thing to be sought — that for which I joined Tycho Brahe, ... to which I have devoted the best part of my life — I have at length brought to life.... It is not eighteen months since the unveiled sun ... burst upon me. Nothing holds me; I will indulge my sacred fury.... If you forgive me, I rejoice; if you are angry I can bear it. The die is cast, the book is written, to be read either now or by posterity, I care not which; it may well wait a century for a reader, as God has waited six thousand years for a discoverer!

What Copernicus created and Kepler improved, Galileo proved by direct observation. Galileo also defended his studies as being part of God's will. His subsequent pugnacious promotion of his work, not his work itself as many have asserted, brought him into conflict with ecclesiastical authorities who wanted to proceed more cautiously. These asked for dialogue and debate before accepting the Copernican universe as proven. Galileo would not compromise, and the result was a famous head-on collision with the Inquisition. Despite the current perception that Galileo was the secular standard bearer fighting against prevailing superstition, the fact remains that the scientist himself thought it natural to investigate creation with the God-given human faculty of reason. "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forego their use," Galileo wrote.

The Arts

Gains in natural philosophy, as once science was called, are not the only hallmarks of civilization, nor is it the only arena in which the influence of religion has been felt. Western Civilization is the inheritor of a uniquely robust legacy in art, from painting and illustration to sculpture and architecture. For more than two millennia this culture of art has been driven by religion.

The architecture of Periclean Greece is a case in point. During this great age of progress in Hellenic civilization, cities strove to outdo each other in the erection of magnificent temples to glorify the gods. Perhaps the greatest achievement came in Athens with the Parthenon. Constructed at the cost of seven hundred talents, it housed the golden sculpture *Athene Parthenos*. Work on the edifice began in 447 B.C. using marble from Mt. Pentelicus. The construction was meticulous. Mortar was unnecessary as the marble blocks were so finely finished that each seemed to meld with the next. Beyond this was the marvelous attention to architectural detail, ably described by historian Will Durant in volume two of his monumental *Story of Civilization*:

Each column swelled slightly (three quarters of an inch in diameter) from base to middle, tapered toward the top, and leaned toward the center of its colonnade; each corner column was a trifle thicker than the rest. Every horizontal line of stylobate and entablature was curved upward towards its center, so that the eye placed at one end of any supposedly level line could not see the farther half of the line. The metopes were not quite square, but were designed to appear square



from below. All these curvatures were subtle corrections for optical illusions that would otherwise have made stylobate lines seem to sink in the center, columns to diminish upward from the base, and corner columns to be thinner and outwardly inclined. Such adjustments required considerable knowledge of mathematics and optics, and constituted but one of those mechanical features that made the temple a perfect union of science and art.

And this union of science and art came together under the motive power of religious belief and devotion.

This is true of art even more so during the Christian era. At the end of the first millennium A.D. and well into the second, the piety and charity of Christendom brought about one of the signal achievements in history, namely, the building of multitudes of magnificent cathedrals. These supreme achievements of the Christian faith called the pious to worship, provided sanctuary to important religious relics, and served as landmarks and destinations for those on pilgrimage. Moreover, they were massive undertakings, often taking centuries to build. Notre Dame at Paris covered 63,000 square feet. Amiens covered 70,000 and Cologne 90,000. St. Peter's was even larger, covering 100,000 square feet.

As much as religion motivated architecture, it also motivated those involved in the other decorative arts, particularly in painting. As the abstract Byzantine style gave way to innovators like the incomparable Giotto, subject matter remained largely religious in nature. His best work was done, perhaps, in the Arena Chapel in Padua. The small chapel was built for the private worship of the wealthy Scrovegni family. Its interior is covered with Giotto's frescoes. These, according to historian Helen Gardner, comprise "one of the most impressive and complete pictorial cycles of Christian redemption ever rendered."

Giotto is but one example of a trend too wide and deep to chart adequately within a small space. But those artists whose works were motivated by a religious age and feeling and whose subject matter stems nearly entirely from Christian tradition are among the giants of art history. They include greats such as Fra Angelico, Masaccio, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Andrea Mantegna, and, in the 16th century, giants like Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and Tintoretto. And this list hardly does justice.

Charity and Civilization

In all of these concrete ways, in science, in art, and in the law, religion has played an indispensable part. And yet, this but scratches the surface, and, indeed, does an injustice to the more subtle, and perhaps more important, personal aspects of religion. Belief in God and in the teachings of the great religions have led those who might otherwise tend toward selfishness to great acts of charity that have benefited mankind. There are, for instance, any number of religious charities operating to great effect today, just as there have been for centuries. In the Middle Ages, Christendom experienced a rapid growth in the number of hospitals. "The Greeks had had *asklepieia*, religious institutions for the treatment of the sick; the Romans had maintained hospitals for their soldiers; but it was Christian charity that gave the institution a wide development," notes historian Will Durant. This tradition continues to the present day, in every Christian institution that brings relief to those in need and in every one of the faithful who seeks to serve his fellow man, in ways large and small.

In every way, then, religion permeates and maintains civilization. It is the driving force of innovation while simultaneously being the common ether that permeates the whole. Those secularists who in recent days see religion as the implacable foe of progress and who work for a day when religion is relegated to the role of historical curiosity suffer from a dangerous myopia. Without religion, civilization



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itself would be impossible. Were it to disappear in the modern world, civilization itself would give way to a new age of barbarism.

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