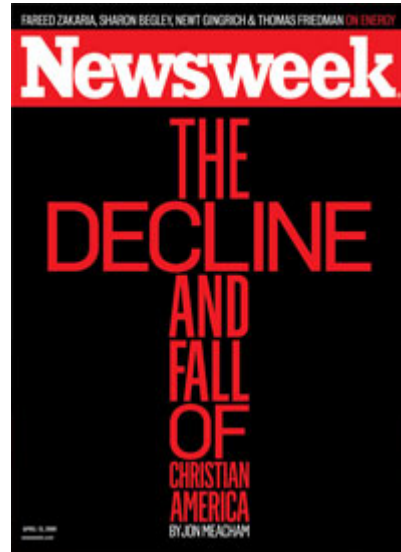




## Newsweek Celebrates Christianity's Decline

Ever anxious to create controversy, *Newsweek*, in its April 13 cover story, has proclaimed “the decline and fall of Christian America.” The number of Americans who consider themselves Christians has fallen 10 percentage points in two decades, *Newsweek*'s Jon Meacham reported with scantily-disguised glee. “Our politics and our culture are, in the main, less influenced by movements and arguments of an explicitly Christian character than they were even five years ago,” Meacham wrote. “I think this is a good thing — good for our political culture, which, as the American Founders saw, is complex and charged enough without attempting to compel or coerce religious belief or observance.”



Fair enough. But Meacham and *Newsweek* (not to mention ideological fellow-travelers like atheist Christopher Hitchens — mentioned approvingly in the *Newsweek* article — and crusading secularists of many stripes) do not share the Founding Fathers' enlightened detachment. As decades of militant secularism have shown, today's apologists for a religiously and morally neutral commons are not merely interested in ensuring minority religions and unbelievers have an equal voice. They want to wipe Christian religion and culture from the American landscape and replace it with a sort of diluted, nonthreatening, big tent spirituality that embraces everything from Native American shamanism to New Age earth worship.

All of these alternative spiritualities have in common a rejection of “binding authority,” pointed out R. Albert Mohler, Jr., the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to *Newsweek*. “The post-Christian narrative is radically different,” Mohler said. “It is based on an understanding of history that presumes a less tolerant past and a more tolerant future, with the present as an important transitional step.” To which Meacham, with a rhetorical smirk, responded that “the present, in this sense, is less about the death of God and more about the birth of many gods.”

Actually, Meacham is more correct than he is probably aware. What would now be acclaimed as exemplary tolerance was a conspicuous feature of polytheistic religion in pre-Christian classical Greece and Rome. Many polytheistic belief systems maintained (and maintain) that unknown gods from other faiths are perfectly acceptable, inasmuch as they may simply be one's own gods by different names. In this way were foreign cults, such as those of Isis, Cybele, and Mithra, easily introduced into the classical world.

A recurrent theme in the narrative of Roman history after the advent of Christianity was the Romans' difficulty with the notion that there could be only one true God. The deity of the three monotheistic religions has never brooked any spiritual competition, something that the pagan mindset has always been unable to grasp.



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But then paganism (speaking in general terms; there are of course exceptions) has always been less about a unifying moral authority than about pageantry and transcendence. There are no Ten Commandments for Hindus or Zoroastrians, any more than there were for their counterparts in the ancient world. The unifying, normative force characteristic of monotheism is very dilute in pagan societies: there are no churches are such; there are only the gods, and they are to be venerated but not acknowledged as purveyors of moral order. That role, in the pagan world, is relegated exclusively to the state.

State and religion in the pagan world have always complemented and reinforced one another, whereas in the Judeo-Christian tradition, they have usually been perceived as rivals, the state seeking ever to encroach on the prerogative of the church or to absorb it altogether.

American Christianity in particular was religion born of dissent — minority faiths like the Puritans who wanted no truck with established churches. Even Catholics in early America — like the original American ancestor of this writer — typically came not from majority-Catholic countries but from parts of Europe where they had become a persecuted minority. Consequently, most of the Founders were robustly opposed to the mingling of sectarianism and government, although several states had established churches until decades after independence.

But Meacham, like so many of the secularist persuasion, confuses sectarianism with morality. It is one thing to assert that government ought not to impose doctrinal conformity — to insist, for instance, that only the sacraments of a particular strain of Christianity be acceptable. It is quite another to inveigh against a moral code that has its origins in religious belief, as those now crusading on behalf of so-called “same-sex marriage” are doing. In point of fact, all morality, even outside Christian civilization, has its roots in religious belief of some sort; for unless there is something spiritual, divine, or transcendent in man, what possible basis can there be for moral behavior? The very word “culture” comes from Latin *cultus*, “religion,” and, as Spengler, among others, has observed, all of the world’s high cultures originated with religious belief. The very notion of “secular culture” is therefore a contradiction in terms.

So, on the eve of Easter weekend, what are we to make of *Newsweek’s* latest screed? Only that Christian religion, morality, and culture are indeed in decline in contemporary America, in no small measure because of decades of tireless effort on the part of entities like *Newsweek* to persuade Americans that Christianity is a moribund belief system associated with a false and ineffectual god.

But America — like her parent European nations, at least formerly — is predominantly a Christian nation, in the moral if not necessarily the doctrinal or sectarian sense. Those of other faiths, or no faith at all, who reside here, have always enjoyed the benefit of living under a system of laws and institutions that arose from her Christian foundations. The very notion of a separation of church and state, though not the strict separation so exaggeratedly celebrated and exploited by the enemies of faith, is a profoundly Christian idea, even though seldom put into practice before the inception of the United States. For it was Christ — not the Buddha, not Confucius, and not Ashoka — who counseled his followers to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” It was the God of Israel who warned his people against idolatry, including worship of the state. And it was Christ who upheld religion as something liberating, whose sweet truths had the power to free men from bondage — a notion that would-be secular autocrats still find abhorrent.

Christianity may be in decline, but America is still a far more Christian society than most of old Europe. While *Newsweek* and its epigones are doing their utmost to marginalize believers and even to



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extinguish belief, the flame of faith still burns brightly in many hearts. This may not be evident from the secular environs of Washington, D.C., New York City, and Hollywood, but it is very much on display on Main Street America where — as in my modest home town — church bells still ring every morning, noon, and evening.



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