

The Shattering/Un-Shattering

Christianity's Decline & Totalitarian's Eclipse

by [Patrick J. McCloskey](#) (February 2026)



Nigredo (Anselm Kiefer, 1984)

On June 13, 1965, Groucho Marx headlined a memorial event for T.S. Eliot five and a half months after the Nobel Prize-winning poet's death. Groucho had formed an unlikely friendship with Eliot when the poet wrote him a fan letter in 1961 asking for a photograph. The high-brow writer and low-brow comic actor corresponded and then met for dinner at Eliot's house in England, six and a half months before Eliot's passing.

The memorial, billed as a "Homage to T.S. Eliot," was a full-

scale theatrical event held at London's famous Globe Theatre. The program included Eliot's poems, selected by W. H. Auden and read by such renowned actors as Sir Laurence Olivier and Peter O'Toole. Stravinsky's musical tribute to Eliot was performed, and a Henry Moore sculpture punctuated the staging.

Before Groucho read from Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats," he began with: "There's an old vaudeville story about a man who was about to be hanged, and they brought him out on the scaffold and put the rope about his neck, and the minister in the prison said, 'Have you any last words before we spring the trap?' The thing was kind of shaky, and he looked up and said, 'Yes, I don't think this damned thing is safe.' That's precisely how I feel coming out here tonight surrounded by all these great actors."

It's easy to understand Groucho's insecurity. There he was, a 7th-grade dropout, performing with the world's best actors for the most sophisticated audience on the planet, perhaps ever. Given Groucho's penchant for imaginative leaps and Eliot's legacy of profound insight, it would be natural to see that shaky executioner's scaffold as a symbol for the modern state of Western Civilization: Not only have such cataclysmic events—such as World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII)—literally shaken the foundations of societies worldwide during Eliot's lifetime, the underlying ideologies that spawned such catastrophes continue to fester on an apocalyptic scale.

More than a century after the start of WWI and the Russian Revolution, it's time to ask why the 20th century was the most tragically ruthless in human history. How did the cradles of Bach and Beethoven, of da Vinci and Michelangelo, of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, become mass executioner's platforms?

This is especially urgent now as WWIII looms and totalitarianism metastasizes.

Shattering of the Cross

What happened in the 19th and 20th centuries? Eliot provided an answer in "The Wasteland" (published in 1922), writing, "There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home." He saw clearly how empty and unstable our culture was becoming as religion waned from hallowed to hollowed.

That might not seem the key to understanding at first glance. But consider what Heinrich Heine, one of Germany's preeminent poets and authors, wrote in *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, published in 1834:

Christianity—and that is its greatest merit—has somewhat mitigated that brutal Germanic love of war, but it could not destroy it. Should that subduing talisman, the cross, be shattered, the frenzied madness of the ancient warriors, that insane berserk rage of which Nordic bards have spoken and sung so often, will once more burst into flame. This talisman is fragile, and the day will come when it will collapse miserably. Then the ancient stony gods will rise from the forgotten debris and rub the dust of a thousand years from their eyes, and finally Thor with his giant hammer will jump up and smash the Gothic cathedrals. Do not smile at the visionary who anticipates the same revolution in the realm of the visible as has taken place in the spiritual. Thought precedes action as lightning precedes thunder. German thunder is of true Germanic character; it is not very nimble but rumbles along ponderously. Yet, it will come and, when you hear a crashing such as never before has been heard in the world's history, then you know that the German thunderbolt has fallen at last. At that uproar, the eagles of the air will drop dead, and lions in the remotest deserts of Africa will hide in their royal

dens. A play will be performed in Germany, which will make the French Revolution look like an innocent idyll.

Eighty years later, those brutal gods awoke with a terrible start to smash cathedrals while waging WWI. "When [World War I] was over," wrote Winston Churchill in *The World Crisis: 1911-1914*, "torture and cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilised, scientific, Christian states had been able to deny themselves; and these were of doubtful utility."

Exactly 100 years after the publication of Heine's book, Hitler became Führer of the German Reich and, over the next 11 years, outdid the French Revolution in brutality and destruction on a scale far surpassing Heine's imagination. During WWII, the Nazis and their fascist allies (principally Italy, Hungary and Japan) instituted torture on a methodically massive scale and certainly cannibalized their own populations—perhaps even literally in the reported use of the skin of Jews murdered in concentration camps to make lampshades—with the Final Solution in Europe and pervasive mass killings by Japanese forces throughout Asia. As many as 10 million Chinese, Koreans, Indonesians, Filipinos and Indochinese were slaughtered by the Japanese military, including more than one million people in forced-labor projects.

For decades, the Soviet Union instituted torture throughout its police apparatus and cannibalized its citizens in like manner via large-scale purges, political prisons and forced-labor camps.

Not Brad Pitt

In 2011, Paramount Pictures released "Thor," a superhero film

based on the Marvel Comics character. The lead was played by Chris Hemsworth, whom many fans mistook for Brad Pitt. Not coincidentally, the two actors look quite similar. But just as Hemsworth is not in fact superstar Brad Pitt, the movie's depiction of Thor was not that of the real ancient brutal god, no matter how much viewers might believe the veracity of comic-book and cinematic depictions.

There are just wars, for example to defend one's country. But elevating warfare to the level of a savage cult, such as Thor's, gives sanction to wars of aggression and to rape, pillage and plunder as just deserts.

Thor was a popular god among Nordic tribes prior to Christianity. These tribes were far from unique, however, as tribes, nations and empires worldwide paid homage to war gods. The Romans had Mars, and Celtic tribes honored dozens of war gods.

Then, as Heine noted, Christianity "mitigated that brutal ... love of war." How so?

Christian Revolution

Consider the world Christ was born into. Oppression was ubiquitous, as it had been throughout recorded history. Athenian democracy, indeed, flashed brightly in the 5th century B.C. But that experiment wasn't for everyone in Greek society and lost its vitality before being crushed. To be impartial: "In the second century of the Christian Era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind," wrote Edward Gibbon at the beginning of his masterpiece, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

But there was no such thing as human rights, freedom or democracy, as we understand them today. Roman law brought

civil order and measures of justice, at least for Roman citizens. But there was no regard for the individual beyond social standing, which determined value. Slaves, as the expression goes, did not have faces. Fate—cold and usually cruel—determined where a person fit into society and the cosmos. Religion consisted of ritualistic adherence to the cult appropriate to one's station—without moral obligations beyond ritualistic demands, which involved forms of swearing loyalty to the emperor.

In startling contrast, the Christian revolution offered the most radical proposition on a scale even larger than the Roman Empire: intrinsic equality for all. On the surface, this is an absurd idea, which most Romans initially thought laughable. People are not equal in ability or by any other measure. But they are equal, in the Christian view, in the unmeasurable: in that each is equally a child of God. As such, every person deserves to be treated with kindness, love and dignity. This precipitated a culture in which charity became the supreme virtue and institutions—such as orphanages, hospitals and schools—were founded for all and especially for the poor. The Christian revolution was so successful that today we take for granted this view of the human person and the human rights this view entails.

Even so, Christianity was always inconvenient—as Christians discovered. There were many injustices in the ancient world that weren't immediately rectified. Slavery was considered an unfortunate component of society, but the moral demand in the Church's early centuries was on treating slaves well, not on abolishing the institution.

Eventually, the unbearable contradiction became obvious. Beginning in the 4th century, Christian leaders, such as St Gregory of Nyssa (335-395 AD), began speaking out forcibly against slavery. Such contradictions reverberated throughout society in the Church's early centuries, but there was no guarantee the Christian approach would prevail.

Not until 1807, did the British Empire finally outlaw slavery, and the Emancipation Proclamation wasn't declared in the U.S. until 1863. Full civil rights took another century to realize here. Humans are, as the Bible put it, "stiff-necked" in the extreme.

The most important point is less the years it took to achieve legal equality than that getting there was a moral imperative implicit in the essence of Christianity. There was no such imperative in the ancient world, nor in other civilizations then or today. There are many more slaves, especially in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, than during Middle Passage.

Please note that the thrust of this article is not to suggest any form of theocracy or measures that would discriminate against non-Christians.

The State as God

At the same time as Christianity's implicit promises were being fulfilled, as Heine observed, elites throughout the West began rejecting the basis of democracy and human rights: Christianity and the belief in God. Without God, the state became absolute—as formulated by German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel in the early 19th century: "The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth."

As Hegel correctly perceived, democracy is messy. That's largely by design. The American republic, for example, was set up deliberately with checks and balance that create gridlock—in order to necessitate deliberation and prevent oppression. The American Revolution was carried out both for independence and against absolute British monarchy.

Hegel's "Divine Idea" (statism) was formulated to circumvent democracy's inefficiency and Christianity's even greater obstacles to achieving the state's political goals. As

societies began to industrialize, which involved organizing workers, tasks and machinery on ever larger scales as factories, leaders ached to organize entire nations according to singular goals. Standing in the way were democratic institutions, individual rights, the traditional family and Christianity.

The two most important applications of statism (or socialism) were communism and fascism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels transformed Hegel's idealism into atheistic, materialist communism—with a real state as absolute. To formulate fascism, Adolph Hitler did much the same, focusing on race instead of class and scapegoating Jews instead of the bourgeoisie. “[W]hen Hitler says that ‘the State dominates the nation because it alone represents it,’” wrote Albert Jay Nock in *Our Enemy, the State* in 1935, “he is only putting into loose popular language the formula of Hegel, that ‘the State is the general substance, whereof individuals are but accidents.’”

By positing the state as absolute authority, both communism and fascism were thoroughly totalitarian from the outset. Individuals completely lost their intrinsic value, becoming mere instruments for the Soviet Union's mass attempt at creating a worker's paradise and the Nazis attempt at European conquest and founding a new Aryan empire.

This resulted in more death and destruction in the 20th century than all the religious wars in history combined. Published in 1997, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* documented that communist governments had killed more than 94 million people worldwide. Estimates of the number of soldiers and civilians killed in WWII, which fascist regimes initiated, range from 70 to 85 million. It is telling to note that casualty rates were especially high in battles between Nazi and Soviet forces, partly because Soviet battle tactics were indifferent to protecting their soldiers' lives.

Both Nazis and Communists embraced ideological war as utterly

unsparing and total: to the death—that is, of the masses. Totalitarian leaders understood they were creating new political religions, and new religions require martyrs to complete the overthrow of the status quo. But there was a stark and telling contrast between Christianity's beginnings and those of statist religions. Christians freely sacrificed themselves as martyrs—from peasant to bishop—for their beliefs, whereas communist and fascist leaders freely sacrificed their followers and then entire populations, but seldom themselves.

Our Failures

In the 1950s, C.S. Lewis, author of *The Narnia Chronicles*, *The Screwtape Letters* and many other acclaimed literary and theological works, exchanged letters with Fr. Don Giovanni Calabria, an Italian priest who dedicated his life to the plight of the poor. The letters were written in Latin, which, as the common language throughout Christendom, had once facilitated the Church's universality. Looking back at the carnage of two world wars, the rise of fascism and communism, and the loss of faith in the West, Lewis wrote:

But (this) did not happen without sins on our part: for that justice and that care for the poor which (most mendaciously) the Communists advertise, we in reality ought to have brought about ages ago. But far from it: We Westerners preached Christ with our lips, with our actions we brought the slavery of Mammon. We are more guilty than the infidels: for to those who know the will of God and do not do it, the greater the punishment. Now the only refuge lies in contrition and prayer. Long have we erred. In reading the history of Europe, its destructive succession of wars, of avarice, or fratricidal persecutions of

Christians by Christians, of luxury, of gluttony, of pride, who could detect any but the rarest traces of the Holy Spirit?

Indeed, more than 350 wars have been fought in Europe during the Christian era, and much blood has been spilled in the Americas. Some wars were just and others were initiated by invading armies, such as the Mongols in 1223. But most conflicts involved Christians brutalizing other Christians.

More than Half the Story

One might be tempted, as many have, to conclude that Christianity is the problem. But evil deeds are less than half the story. For example, at the same time as the Nine Years' War raged in Europe and throughout European empires worldwide at the end of the 17th century, the Lasallian Christian Brothers were beginning to do the unthinkable: educate the poor. Until then, the lower classes were considered impervious to learning. Soon, teaching religious orders were formed throughout Europe and then in the Americas. This precipitated the most astounding social revolution in history, which again we take for granted today.

In contrast, people are mere fodder in totalitarian regimes. There is no hypocrisy because the state decides right and wrong, with no recourse to a higher, transcendent authority. The Final Solution was an administrative challenge rather than a moral dilemma within fascist logic.

The history of war in the West highlights both our "sins," as indicated above, and the fact that most Western elites throughout history accept Christianity only in so far as it facilitates gaining and keeping power. Communism and fascism appealed to the vanity of intellectuals and lust for control

of ruling classes. The rise of Hitler, as well as the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, would have failed without massive funding by European and American bankers. Money and resources, not people, have intrinsic worth among power brokers, no matter their religious affiliation or even position in church hierarchies.

Spiritual Declension

Totalitarianism's grand bargain—total care for total control—first surrenders freedom and then falls apart. Total control leads inevitably to zero care for all but the elite. In 1935, as Hitler was vying for power, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen described the West's "spiritual declension" as: "Christ, who is God, has been reduced to a mere man. Man, who is made to the image of God, has been reduced to a mere animal. And an animal, which is a living thing has been reduced to a mere atom. And this is called progress!"

Today, 89 years later, we are still trapped in this declension. As David Bentley Hart explained in "Christ and Nothing:"

[W]hat is the consequence, then, when Christianity, as a living historical force, recedes? We have no need to speculate, as it happens; modernity speaks for itself: With the withdrawal of Christian culture, all the glories of the ancient world that it baptized and redeemed have perished with it in the general cataclysm. Christianity is the midwife of nihilism, not because it is itself nihilistic, but because it is too powerful in its embrace of the world and all of the world's mystery and beauty; and so to reject Christianity now is, of necessity, to reject everything except the barren anonymity of spontaneous subjectivity.

What Hart meant by “too powerful” is that Christianity’s grasp on culture, language, the arts and all other aspects of Western society was so profound and comprehensive that its withdrawal takes everything of value with it, like a receding tsunami.

Is not this “spontaneous subjectivity,” either monstrous or vapid, the supreme value and operating principle for most of today’s progressive culture, politics, media and much of what passes for education? It has become axiomatic that society is no more than a loose confederation of egos who define their own morality, identity and belief or non-belief systems.

Reclaiming Truth

“The only cult that can truly thrive in the aftermath of Christianity,” Hart wrote, “is a sordid service of the self, of the impulses of the will, of the nothingness that is all that the withdrawal of Christianity leaves behind.”

There are two ways this slide into “sordid” subjectivity can end. One way is that ego-driven progressivism and consumerism continue their naïve support for socialism—as if we could enact workable laws making everything and everyone completely free—to the point of utter domination. Ultimately, only a totalitarian state (already manifesting as politically correct speech, thought and super-surveillance) can order a society that has shattered into hundreds of millions of autonomous, self-centered, conflicting shards.

The other way initiates an effective return to a Christ-centered culture. Un-shattering Western Civilization does not entail establishing a Christian theocracy or measures antithetical to non-Christians. Fundamentally, a Christ-centered society means recovering our shared history, moral

standards, and understanding of the human person and role of institutions as guarantors and facilitators of human freedom and dignity. The overwhelming majority of principled believers, regardless of denomination, share in the Christian heritage and perspective.

This applies equally to non-believers. "The thinness of the new atheism is evident in its approach to our civilization, which until recently was religious to its core," wrote Theodore Dalrymple, author, retired physician and atheist. "To regret religion is, in fact, to regret our civilization and its monuments, its achievements and its legacy."

This razor thinness was admitted by Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, when he declared being a "cultural Christian." In a radio interview in 2024, he said, "If I had to choose between Christianity and Islam, I'd choose Christianity every single time. It seems to me to be a fundamentally decent religion, in a way that I think Islam is not." Dawkins clarified that he referred to doctrines not individuals.

Cultural Christianity is a start, albeit feeble, for non-believers and accurately describes the functional faith of most adherents. Yet this weakness reinvigorated might suffice to topple the executioner's scaffold we have built for our civilization.

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, gave the 2013 Erasmus Lecture in New York City. Sacks recalled a lecture by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who became Pope Benedict XVI) in 2004, in which he compared Europe to the Roman Empire just before its collapse. In response, Ratzinger called for Christians to act as a "creative minority" to reclaim the best of our heritage. Amplifying this appeal, Sacks said:

The task of a creative minority in the Judeo-Christian tradition is always to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols, whatever the age. The idols of our age are many—materialism, individualism, consumerism, relativism, a loss of the sense of the sanctity of marriage and the non-negotiable dignity of the human person. So being a minority does not mean that you believe that truth is relative. What it means is that every age has its idols, and it needs prophetic voices to show the way to a deeper truth.

We must seek out and heed such prophetic voices. For they light the way to renewing ourselves, our families, culture, institutions and society. The free, just society we all want to live in cannot be sustained without a Christian foundation.

A major challenge is discerning these voices because so many church leaders have betrayed Christianity. We, the congregants, cannot rely on their leadership. What that implies is not certain. I grew up Catholic and hardly recognize the Roman Church, for example. Priests and bishops who stand up for Catholicism are silenced, even excommunicated. Yet, they remain in the shadows as if anchored on the River Styx.

When will Christianity's "back to the future" moment fully emerge? Something far deeper than a mere revival is swelling—and being attacked, as Charlie Kirk and his martyrdom showed. Whither is the new Rome where all roads lead?

East & West of Eden

Many non-Christian cultures, primarily in the Middle East, Asia and parts of Africa, never accepted the intrinsic worth of all humans and easily fell prey to the worst ideas from the

West—fascism and communism—that took root with ease and caused the slaughter of tens of millions, along with ruthless oppression and building of total surveillance states. Today's Islamic radicalism is in reality a fusion of Naziism and Marxism with a Muslim veneer.

In the West, not only did the rejection of Christian principles precipitate these vile ideologies, that rejection feeds the growing war on Christianity. Consider, as examples, the increasing suppression of free speech in the Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, along with the growing practice of classifying tradition Christian beliefs as hate crimes. These are preliminary stages, which most of the Democrat Party in the U.S. fully embraces, to the re-establishment of totalitarian rule—this time within an all-encompassing digital gulag.

Truth, however, has an irrepressible ring. Secretly often, the number of converts in Muslim countries is growing significantly. After and before all, who doesn't want to be treated as a child of God?

The people answer in the affirmative, and history will be determined by how successful leaders and institutions are in fulfilling or negating this sacred charge. More accurately, history will be determined by how successful the people are in forcing rulers to comply. The world need not convert wholesale to Christianity, even if it is humanity's telos. Basic philosophical Christianity is sufficient to establish peace and prosperity. The proposition that every human has intrinsic worth transformed the Roman Empire and became the foundation for good in Western Civilization.

We have not, as is often claimed in the West, entered a post-Christian era. There is nothing after Christ—literally in the form of nihilism, the most irrational delusion in human history.

The way home? “I must say I find television very educational,” said Groucho who, no doubt today, would include social media and the entire media/propaganda industry. “The minute somebody turns it on, I go to the library and read a good book.”

“The very existence of libraries,” Eliot wrote, “affords the best evidence that we may yet have hope for the future of man.”

Today’s libraries are available for pennies in seconds. The entire 71 volumes of the Harvard Classics can be downloaded for \$2.99. For little cost, you can—and should—purchase and/or listen to Tom Holland’s *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. The long list of worthwhile texts paves the road to the new Rome, the new Jerusalem.

And keep this Japanese proverb in mind: “To know and not to do is not to know.”

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