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A nation in decline.(A QUARTERLY REVIEW)(United States of America)

VIEWERS THE WORLD OVER witnessed not long ago the Reagan funeral service at the Episcopal Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, the impressive neo-English Gothic structure in Washington, D.C., popularly known as The National Cathedral. The anachronism of a national cathedral apart, the church does serve as the site of many religious services associated with events of a national character. There can be no national cathedral in a religiously plural nation, let alone a national Episcopal diocese. Lost is the meaning of the word "cathedral" itself, a term frequently applied to any relatively large ecclesiastical structure. By definition, a cathedral church is one in which a residential bishop has his seat or throne. It may be the seat of a simple diocesan bishop or that of an archbishop, metropolitan, primate, or patriarch.

The notion of a national cathedral may have had a symbolic appeal in the eighteenth or the nineteenth century when the country was predominantly Anglo-Protestant, even if not predominantly Episcopalian. But even when the nation could confidently call itself a Christian nation, the divisions among Protestants muted anything that resembled the cohesion of a single diocese.

The decline of Protestantism, and by extension religion, is the subject of a book by Eric P. Kaufmann, entitled *The Rise and Fall of Anglo America*. (1) In Kaufmann's judgment, if the United States once possessed an ethnic core, one may say, an Anglo-Protestant soul, sometime between 1920 and 1970 it lost that soul, succumbing to a the liberal virus that sapped its inner strength. Seventy-five years earlier, George Santayana employed the same metaphor in speaking of Christianity in the West. "Our society has lost its soul. The landscape of Christendom is being covered with lava; a great eruption and inundation of brute humanity threatens to overwhelm all of the treasures that artful humanity has created." (2)

Samuel P. Huntington, in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, (3) and subsequently in *Who Are We?*, (4) presents evidence that the United States remains an overwhelmingly Christian nation. He cites surveys showing that 85 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian, that 92 percent profess belief in God, and that nearly two-thirds of the populace say that religion is very important in their lives. He finds that 65 percent claim membership in a church or synagogue and that at least one-third attend services once a week, high levels of religiosity unmatched by any European country. Although America's Christian identity has been eroded, he is convinced that it is not because of gains by non-Christian religions or that America has lost its religious identity as a result of gains made by professed secularists, atheists, and materialists indifferent to the religious heritage of the nation. He will say flatly, "America remains a Christian nation." (5)

Huntington is not oblivious to the gradual moral and cultural decline of the West, a decline that, like others, he dates to the early twentieth century. As evidence he cites family decay, increasing political disunity, an increase in crime, a diminished work ethic, pervasive vulgarity in the popular culture, and unbridled consumption. He also finds troubling the resistance of immigrant groups to assimilation and their continued adherence to the values, customs, and cultures of their home societies, i.e., the Muslims in Europe and the Hispanics in North America. Even more troubling, in his judgment, is the small but influential number of intellectuals and publicists who in the name of multi-culturalism attack the identification of the United States with Western civilization. American multiculturalists, in effect, reject their country's cultural heritage; they wish to create a country that doesn't belong to any civilization, one devoid of a cultural core. (6) They substitute for the rights of individuals the rights of groups, defined largely in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference. (7) The clash between the multiculturalists and the defenders of Western civilization, he believes, is apt to be the major conflict of this century. Huntington insists that a common political creed, although essential, is not enough. Political principles, he believes, are a fickle base on which to base a lasting community. Shared belief in the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, liberal capitalism and free trade, presuppose something more fundamental. These are European ideas, not Asian, African, or Middle Eastern except by adoption. They make Western civilization unique.

Like Huntington, Kaufmann points to immigration policy that has contributed to the relative numerical decline of the once-dominant WASP, but Kaufmann is more sensitive to the doctrinal retreat of mainline Protestantism. Acknowledging that the causes of the decline are multiple, Kaufmann focuses on the ideological changes that moved mainline Protestantism from its early New England moorings to its current left-liberal egalitarian phase. Kaufmann dates the beginning of the decline to the period between 1905 and 1918 and follows it to its culmination in the early 1970s. He attributes that intellectual shift to the alliance of liberal Protestants with the New York intellectuals of the Village Renaissance period, notably to the influence of John Dewey and his disciples. Dewey's liberal progressive cosmopolitanism, with its emphasis on the common dignity of all human beings, required the United States to accept all cultures on an equal footing. The Protestant Goodwill Movement was but one manifestation of the "one world" cosmopolitan and nondenominational ideology. The international socialism of Eugene Debs, Felix Adler, and Franz Boas was the Zeitgeist of the day. Dewey's liberal humanism of Enlightenment origin found its popular expression in the New Republic, of which Dewey was editor for a time, and other so-called little magazines, notably the Partisan Review, the Menorah Journal, and the New Masses, later to be joined by the Nation, the New Republic, and Commentary.

Kaufmann may overestimate the influence of the New York intellectuals during the interwar years on mainstream Protestantism, yet the New York intellectual milieu may be taken as a representative of an ideological shift that was taking place throughout the West. Clearly by 1970 the cosmopolitan individualism of the multicultural modernists had replaced the outlook of the once-dominant WASP. Speaking of today's intellectual climate, Kaufmann writes, "A strong argument can be made that multiculturalism is the official ideology of the American nation, manifested in school and university curricula, social science and humanities discourse, and political and legal systems." (8) Multiculturalism for the American intellectual mainstream is a liberal, egalitarian strategy aimed at ethnic dissolution and the repudiation of tradition and all boundary-maintaining mechanisms. One may say that Emile Durkheim's dream has become a reality.

What Kaufmann says of Protestantism is to a lesser extent true of Catholicism. Without doubt, the religiosity that Huntington describes is largely superficial, lacking the intellectual firepower needed for self-defense as it encounters the Enlightenment-inspired philosophies that continue their assault on Christianity. For many, even for believers, given the present intellectual climate, the essence of Christianity has been reduced to the social gospel. From a secular perspective, religion may be valued too for its therapeutic effect in a time of crisis, and its rituals may be appreciated to the extent that they add a certain solemnity to otherwise bland civic functions. Its churches may be found useful as welfare dispensaries or as concert settings, but its leaders can be ignored when it comes to the formulation of social policy and legislation. The causes of this emasculation are many. The defense of time-honored moral principles--indeed of the rationality of Christianity itself--is difficult without the recognition of the philosophical underpinnings of both. Religious leaders, lacking the tools provided by a realistic anthropology and classical metaphysics, give ground even in defense of biblical morality. Clearly the secular elites have stripped Christianity of its formerly tutorial role. Power has been ceded through the courts to those interests represented by the American Civil Liberties Union. Although Kaufmann may not have the whole story, he is right in pointing to the influence of the New York intellectuals, who themselves were the proteges of their nineteenth-century European mentors.

In 1955 when Raymond Aron first published *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, (9) the opiate of choice was Marxism. That opiate has since been replaced by a cosmopolitan multiculturalism, but as Kaufmann suggests, the profile of its users has not changed much. The multi-culturalists are the direct descendants of the Marxists and Trotskyists of a generation ago and are similarly motivated by an abstraction that places international above national identity. They remain countryless with no ties to land, national heritage or tradition. They ignore all that forms a people into a nation, its religion and distinctive traditions, and willingly cede authority to supranational institutions such as the Hague Court, the United Nations, and the International Monetary Fund. Beneath the old and new opiates is a common aggressive, secular anti-Christian philosophical outlook espoused by much of the academy and mainstream media.

Can a civilization, let alone a nation survive without the unity provided by a common core of shared conviction? The question has vexed some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century. About seventy-five years ago, philosophers and literary intellectuals

as diverse as Edmund Husserl, George Santayana, and Paul Valery, aware of the declining influence of Christianity, spoke of the "crisis of Western civilization." Apart from the Marxists and other millenarists of atheistic persuasion, the Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, was one of the few who held out hope for the future. Dawson could not imagine the total eclipse of Christianity and its cultural influence and hence the total loss of Western civilization itself. Dawson was convinced that the great civilizations of the world were the product of the great religions of the world. Given his belief that the Church would exist until the end of time, he was convinced that it would never cease to have a cultural influence. But the decline is impossible to ignore. Can it be reversed? Can the "emancipated, atheistic, cosmopolitanism" described by Santayana be challenged without great centers of learning and influence? After all, philosophy can only be challenged by philosophy. Unsupported faith is no defense in the marketplace of ideas. Serious scholars wonder whether Europe, absent an acknowledgment of its Hellenic and Christian sources, can defend itself against a resurgent Islam or the material power of a disciplined China.

While America may still be religious in some sense, clearly it has lost its Protestant soul, and Kaufmann is not unhappy about that. He is pleased that the older America has passed away and that its memory is almost beyond recall. "Those of us who consider ourselves liberal find it very difficult to accept that any group has the right to impose its hegemony over a nation state's realms of political, economic, and cultural activity." (10) Citing Habermas in support, he is convinced that dominant ethnicity must give way to a multiculturalism, but a multiculturalism "garnished with a constitutional patriotism that is highly inclusive and abstract." (11) But what of liberal hegemony? By Kaufmann's own account the once-dominant WASP has been replaced by the illiberal multiculturalist, whose numbers may be small but who controls the organs of opinion through the universities and the media. It has been acknowledged for decades that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the academy and middle America. The 85 percent who in some sense value the religious component of their culture are effectively silenced by a like percentage in the academy who give their allegiance to the left and the programs for which it stands. Voting patterns clearly attest to the overwhelming left-leaning of the academy, but apart from that one need only consult the publication lists of major university presses in the English-speaking world to see how biased the lists are in favor of the politically correct and the irreligious left. Scholarly treatises abound that rewrite Western history, leaving out Christianity.

Kaufmann may welcome the eclipse of Christianity, but he should acknowledge that the earlier ethnicity of Protestant American did not hinder the growth of American Catholicism or prevent the emergence of the anti-Christian multiculturalism movement. It remains to be seen whether the self-proclaimed liberal will be so tolerant? Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, reminds us that a successful republic depends on virtue in the people and warns that a bad moral state, once formed, is not easily amended. The undisciplined will, whether it be that of an individual or of a collective, is not capable of remaining fixed on an appropriate end. It is not likely that an American political creed is capable of replacing the unifying role once played by Protestant Christianity.

Who, indeed, stands to profit from the diminished role of Christianity? It should be evident even to the inveterate liberal that a polity cannot exist without virtue in the people. Has not the marginalization of Christianity been accompanied by a significant moral and cultural decline? What would Kaufmann substitute for biblical morality? The atheistic, cosmopolitan multiculturalism in its revolutionary drive cannot help but bring to mind other cultural revolutions, e.g., that of the French whose drive for *liberte, egalite, fraternite* once achieved, brought on the bloody scourge of the Jacobins; or that of the Bolsheviks, a revolution that was soon followed by Stalin's purges and gulags; or Mao's Marxist triumph that led to the cultural revolution and deaths numbered in the tens of millions. History seems to teach that leftist triumphs bring chaos and destruction in their wake. The political agenda of the multicultural, cosmopolitan left, given that it is so out of touch with the traditions and common sense of the people, can only be implemented through coercion of one form or another. In the West the liberal has achieved his objectives, not through consensus but principally by judicial decree and by financial sanctions imposed by the state. In the pursuit of new goals, boldness bred of past success can only lead to totalitarian rule. A free people will not readily abandon their traditions or embrace the ephemeral goals of the left.

True there can be no return to times past. Although many profess Christianity, religion speaks with a divided voice. There is no common creed or moral code. "Christianity"

is at best a sociological designation, as much an abstraction as "cosmopolitan multiculturalist." Charles Fried, in discussing the role of religion in society, rightly asks what counts as religion, given our heterogeneous population. (12) In speaking of the relationship between church and state, he concedes no value to religion, equating it before the law with unbelief. Whatever deference is paid to religion is a matter of humanitarian grace. (13) This view is ascendant among our intellectual elites.

John Courtney Murray, writing a generation ago and perhaps influenced by the pessimism of Arnold Toynbee, held out little hope that an ideologically polarized America could survive the "new barbarism" of the left that he saw threatening the life of reason embedded in law and custom. The perennial work of the barbarian, he held, "is to undermine rational standards of judgment, to corrupt inherited wisdom by which people have always lived, and to do this not by spreading new beliefs but by creating a climate of doubt and bewilderment in which clarity about the larger aims of life are dimmed and the self-confidence of the people destroyed." (14) Murray in his own day feared the consequences of what he perceived as a moral vacuum and the loss of freedom to which it would inevitably lead. Today he would likely conclude that the prospects for the immediate future are not too bright. The concept "West," he consistently held, has no meaning apart from Christianity. Although the universities have been secularized and politicized in a leftward, anti-Christian direction, Christianity itself remains the strongest element in Western culture. In Murray's view it is to Christianity that the West must ultimately turn for moral and spiritual unity if indeed it is to survive. We are haunted by Murray's prophetic voice.

1. Cambridge, Mass., 2004. 2. *Dominations and Powers: Reflections on Liberty, Society, and Government* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995 [1950]), 208. 3. New York, 1996. 4. New York, 2004. 5. *Wall Street Journal*, Editorial page, June 16, 2004. 6. *Huntington*, 306. 7. *Ibid.* 8. Kaufmann, 228. 9. Originally published as *L'Opium des Intellectuels* (New York, 1962). 10. Kaufmann, 284. 11. *Ibid.* 12. *Saying What the Law Is* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). 13. *Ibid.*, 169. 14. *We Hold These Truths* (New York, 1960), 13.

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