

# ISI Lecture Program

## Lecture Archive

### *The Importance of Religion to the Development of the West*

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In light of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, it may seem odd for us to be focusing this evening on the importance of religion in the development of the West, and not the challenge of religion—more specifically fundamentalist Islam—to the continued existence of the West. The latter topic deserves careful study by someone who is an expert on the Muslim world; and though I have visited Muslim countries and talked with various Muslim intellectuals over the years, I am not such an expert. So I want to avoid being drawn into a debate that we cannot deal with very intelligently here. When Craig Beebe asked me in last spring if I would be willing to come and speak to you, neither of us had any idea of how the world situation would change by October 2001. Yet sticking with our original topic will shed light both on a longstanding problem for the proper appraisal of our civilization and on some of the concerns that have arisen in the past few weeks.

Let me start, then, with a perception that is common today in the Muslim world, but that many of us would dispute. From a distance—which is to say through the medium of American popular culture including television, films, and music—the United States appears to be an atheistic, hedonistic, and quite self-indulgently corrupt nation. For many people abroad, and not only Muslims, the great power of our popular culture is frightening. A Brazilian who runs a think-tank in Sao Paulo asked me a few years ago when I was lecturing there what we were going to do about American popular culture? He prefaced the question with an acknowledgment that Brazil, as a wild carnival culture, was in no position to criticize any other nation for moral turpitude, and professed affection for America, where two of his daughters live. But that said, he put the point forcefully: "What are you Americans going to do about your popular culture? You are making the abnormal normal!"

Now if that is a true perception to people in other countries, as it certainly is to some extent, it can only be because our popular culture has made the abnormal normal here at home first. You would never guess—and most foreigners never do—from American popular culture that the American people are among the most religious in the world, in the same category with India in terms of popular practice, that high percentages of us identify ourselves as Christians, Jews, Muslims, and members of other faith groups. Peter Berger has characterized our nation as somewhat like a bunch of Indians ruled by an elite of Swedes. Obviously, given the commercial success of popular culture, this raises a question about the quality of religious commitment in this country. But just as obviously, the virtual invisibility of religion in American public life to those abroad who do not know this country well and to many in the intellectual and governing class at home should give us pause.

But this invisibility and absence of religion in the way we have come, fairly recently, to think about American history and current society is merely a particular case of a more general breakdown. For various reasons—worries about denominational conflicts, intellectual superciliousness towards religion, and current cultural etiquette—we rarely look at the very palpable role that religion has played in the emergence of our Western civilization any longer. The absence—and therefore the way to recovery of the true role—takes two

forms: one intellectual the other social. It used to be that the impact of religious ideas on the philosophical and political principles of pagan, barbarian, and other societies was thought good material for intellectual work. I find this is much less the case at colleges and universities than formerly, and it represents a real intellectual lacuna in institutions that claim to be inclusive and open to all truths. In part, this absence stems from the fact that we have a less living sense of the power of ideas than did past generations. We tend to think in terms of economics, political power, technology, everyday life, and so forth, which is to say social machinery.

There is nothing wrong with this approach per se. Indeed, one quite fruitful way to gauge the importance of religion to the development of the West is to look at how everyday social interactions changed under the impact of religious ideas and practices. This is not merely some exercise in antiquarianism. Many of you no doubt read of Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's remarks in the aftermath of September 11th that the Christian civilization of the West is superior to the Muslim civilization of the East. Berlusconi received a great deal of criticism for expressing badly what is a difficult comparison to make in any case: the two civilizations are just too different, too much a matter of apples and oranges—as we usually say—to admit of easy comparison. I myself would not like to lose sight, in the firestorm that ensued, of the fact that we indeed do judge all the time whether different societies treat their people and foreigners better or worse, allow for economic growth and intellectual freedom, or provide good or bad social morals. But that is a complicated argument for another occasion.

What we might look at more productively along the lines Berlusconi suggested, however, is, say, the difference between the Italy that he presides over and the one that existed at the time of the birth of Christ. By the time, for example, that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, that empire was already largely Christian despite persecution and official discouragement of what the Roman historian Tacitus, in one of the first surviving comments on the new faith, called a "depraved superstition." To Tacitus and other intelligent and relatively virtuous Romans for some time, Christians appeared to be propagating "hatred of the human race." Had these two charges been verified in subsequent experience, Christianity would never have replaced the pagan gods or won the allegiance of ordinary people. That it did both must lead us to think why.

The most ambitious sociological attempt to explain this development is Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> Stark is not a philosopher and his argument proceeds along everyday lines that reveal how the religious principles that came out of the Bible found social expression and success in a very different cultural milieu. Take a very simple idea like the notion that we should love our neighbor. To us this seems self-evident and, no doubt, a certain amount of natural sympathy always exists in every age and nation, whenever we see fellow human beings trapped in suffering. But we first have to see them, and then we often need to go out of our way or sacrifice our own tranquillity or welfare to help others. And certain forms of belief and behavior make the suffering around us all but invisible or encourage us to believe others' plight is not our business.

Early Christianity challenged that problem in the Roman Empire in several ways. First, it cared for widows, orphans, the sick, the dying, and buried the dead—both Christian and non—as no form of classical religion or politics had ever done. Indeed, by the fourth century, the Emperor Julian, the so-called "Apostate" since he had once been a Christian, said of his former faith: "The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us." He continued: "It is generosity toward non-members, care for the graves of the dead, and pretended holiness of life [Julian thought the

motives cynical] that have specially fostered the growth of atheism" [i.e., non-pagan, Christian religion]. As an Emperor dedicated to bringing back the pagan pantheon, he encouraged his people to match the Christian benevolence. But he found that it is not easy to inspire such behavior for merely abstract purposes; charity towards others in the religious sense, which is to say effective love and compassion, only became possible because of a prior belief that God and the good demanded such things from us.

This scenario was the result of long preparation. By roughly Julian's time, the bishops of Rome were virtually the only recourse the poor had. St. Gregory the Great, for example, took his responsibility towards Rome's poor so seriously that "when a single poor man was found dead of hunger in Rome, he abstained from saying Mass as though he were guilty of his death."<sup>2</sup> Though not every bishop before or since was so saintly, Gregory's attitude expressed something that would not otherwise have existed in the rather harsh social conditions of the empire. We know of the brutality of the Coliseum and the elite scorn for the mobs; but we rarely see that this has been the natural condition of most societies in most times untouched by certain religious beliefs.

Such behavior had tangible benefits in Church growth. Of course, people who had admired Christian virtues such as love of neighbor, humility, and virtue were attracted to the early Church. Concrete example of a different sort of life than was common under the pagan dispensation made people readier to listen to the theological teaching. (We had ascetics, wise men, and philosophers in ancient Greco-Roman culture, but no figure comparable to, say, John Wesley or Mother Teresa). But compassionate behavior also had a more fleshly influence. We forget that ancient societies were regularly raked by epidemics that killed large numbers. Often, it only took enough care to keep people hydrated while their natural powers of resistance overcame the infection. Christians undertook that and other perilous tasks out of the demands of charity, while also preserving their own people in higher percentages than pagans and also creating a group of people thereafter immune to further outbreaks who could care for yet others. It had a snowball effect on Christian demographics, which helps, in part, to account for the relatively rapid growth of the new religion.

Another social factor in this early history was Christianity's appeal to women. In pagan circles, women often died from abortions and infant girls, less valued by pagan fathers who had life and death powers, were often exposed. Christianity from the outset ruled out both abortion and infanticide, giving females within the Christian orbit greater longevity and higher percentages among the population than their pagan counterparts. We see here how theological and sociological factors overlap. The relatively greater emphasis on equality between the sexes in early Christianity not only offered women greater social prominence, first inside then outside the Church. It gave them life.

This may seem a distant point to us, but it has no little current relevance. We see in all the developed countries today a demographic implosion in part fueled by contraception and abortion. Where abortion for sex-selection occurs, even in distant countries such as China, the male-female ratios is inevitably skewed in the direction of males (who are often regarded as more valuable in the various world cultures) with large social repercussions. Many people have characterized the move away from the older religious ethic as a liberation for women. Perhaps this is true for certain outmoded social roles. But I think this remains to be seen in the long view, both on the grounds just mentioned as well as the consequences for women and children of the breakdown of the old taboos against divorce and male irresponsibility towards families.

But what did Biblical religion do for the development of the West besides spread social solidarity, a more compassionate public ethos, and greater equality between the sexes? We see this most clearly in the

transition from the classical to the medieval world. For instance, Genesis tells us that God made the world and saw it was good. From that starting point, much flows that we take for granted. Once that view became common, Western people could not take the dualistic views of Gnostics or follow the strictly ascetic path of a religion like Buddhism, which regards the world as an illusion (Non-Western Buddhists sometimes argue against this interpretation, but it is difficult for a Westerner to see these teachings as anything other than neglectful of the Creation). In the Jewish scriptures, the world and all the things in it have real, if limited, value by the fact that God made them.

This principle, when combined with another, had large effects in the West. Genesis also tells us that God made man in his own image and gave him dominion over the Creation. Contrary to what most people think and a lot of what we hear from the environmental movement, almost every developed culture has a similar hierarchical view that places man over other creatures. But the truly revolutionary idea is that we with our weak intellect and will are in some dim way an image of the divine (Christianity's God-Man kicked this idea up yet another notch). The slow working out of this idea is the taproot of notions such as human liberty and human equality that so clearly distinguish our tradition from others and have gained a prominence in the West as nowhere else.

Genesis, like recent cosmology, also speaks of a beginning to the world and the linear direction of time towards an end. Most archaic cultures are more inclined to cyclical or sacred time. The West still observes the seasons and most Western faiths have a regular liturgical calendar. But I believe this notion of Creation's direction also had a profound effect on our minds. More than any other world culture, the West has a notion of history as meaningful in itself, in much the same way that sacred history presents key turning points in the history of Israel and the Christian churches. In the nineteenth century, this turned into a very naive view of human progress that was a distant offshoot of the Biblical vision. But I would like to argue against a certain type of conservative as well as the liberal disillusioned by the failure of the old liberal optimism, that there is still indeed progress made in certain realms—we need only think about civil rights in this country or medicine and agriculture around the world. Taken together with man as image and steward of Creation, that dynamic sense of time inevitably added to the West's restless creativity.

Some people, particularly under the impulse of what I think are false notions of nature's equilibrium, have looked upon this as exactly what is wrong with Western man. We do not accept an assigned place in Creation, these critics argue, and from that flow our environmental problems, our greedy consumption of natural resources, and our exploitation of other cultures beginning with the great Western voyages of exploitation. There may certainly be down sides to Western concepts of creativity, progress, and dynamism, but these need to be weighed against the often debilitating submission to fate, kismet, or so-called natural necessity.

Many of these features of Western dynamism were already evident in Saint Augustine's work. But so was something else characteristic of the West: the importance of the individual and his conscience. Now Augustine does not conceive of personal individuality in quite the same way as we might today. Nor does he exaggerate the importance of mere accidental diversity, as we tend to do. But he does already have a notion of the drama of the individual soul when confronted by the world and God, which it would be difficult to find before him. That drama too would later blossom into various forms in the Renaissance, Lutheranism, existentialism, and so forth. Even if we now tend to overdo it in the modern West, we have rightly discovered personality and individuality as no other culture.

One last note on this medieval period that may surprise you: it was during the Middle Ages that first appeared the idea of rights as inhering in human persons. It used to be thought that even the high Middle Ages were covered in the darkness and barbarism characteristic of the Dark Ages in Europe. In scholarly terms, that has somewhat gone by the board. We can now see that representative institutions, separation of church and state, and limited powers all had their roots in the medieval period, as did growth of the Augustinian notion of personality. Perhaps that is why the notion of personal rights also emerged around the same period. Significantly, the first uses of the idea of rights are in church or canon law, not secular law. The medieval canonists specifically use the notion to argue, for the first time in history, that the poor have a right to be fed.<sup>3</sup>

So by the time we arrive at Machiavelli, Locke, Hobbes, and the other great modern thinkers, we already have a great deal built into the Western heritage by the ancient Hebrew, Christian, and medieval religious traditions that distinguish our civilization from others. The science and technology so identified with the West, too, had their start before the great advances of the seventeenth century. You can glimpse a bit of this in the claim by modern environmentalists about the "Medieval Roots of Our Environmental Crisis."<sup>4</sup> Curiously, we have been told two contradictory things about our religious tradition. On the one hand, we've been told that it impeded scientific investigation out of superstition. But we've also been told that by privileging the human race and its powers over the natural world it has led precisely to the exploitation of nature. The truth is that the Biblical view of the Creation as emanating from a good God led to confidence that His Creation was orderly and intelligible. Whatever excesses stewardship might later bring, in the Middle Ages it led to enormous improvements in agriculture, basic manufacturing, and transportation. Significantly, it was the Franciscans—the followers of Saint Francis of Assisi, who rejoiced in the creation as perhaps no one in the two millennia of Christian history—who were most prominent in the scientific developments, perhaps because they were inclined to pay more attention to the created world than any other group.

All of this, I believe, should lead us to be more comprehensive in our understanding of the West. The political and economic freedoms that have emerged in the past three centuries and the marvelous medical and technological advances we have seen are in many ways an advance over the past—but not entirely. As the environmental problems have reminded us, there is a limit and respect due to what we can do with the creation that was eclipsed in the heyday of progress. In a similar way, economic and political freedom have become divorced from their roots in what the American Founders formulated as "men have been endowed by their Creator. . ." with the result that almost anything anyone claims to desire he can claim as a right.

All of these problems, it seems to me, should lead us to reflect more carefully on the Old West's relationship to the New West. To begin with, we would be well advised to reproduce the activity of the earliest Christians and seek to deal with welfare issues outside of governmental action again, so far as modern conditions allow. I am quite aware of the obstacles to doing so in modern conditions, but if we do not make that effort we will continue to see the kind of inhuman government relief of the past century in which the givers—the taxpayers—have no human connection to the receivers—welfare recipients—who neither feel empowered or grateful for what is after all only a modest subsidy. If we want our social welfare efforts to be more human, we have to return them to the human circle of trust and direct help and responsibility again. Free societies generate tremendous wealth, but it is not merely wealth that the poor need from us, as the early Roman example showed.

But some people argue about the larger, long-term connection of the New West to the Old West, well, that was all fine in the past. But now that we've discovered things like economic and political liberty and human rights, we don't need the religious baggage any longer, which proved a problem. True enough. People fought wars for religion; and minority faiths, such as Judaism, suffered in the old Christendom. But I would put it the other way around. Since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, religion as such has not been a legitimate reason to go to war. Yet has the pragmatic, allegedly rational public realm done better? The French Revolution tried to set up the worship of the Goddess Reason; many innocent people were sacrificed to that goddess. Marxism claimed to be the most scientifically rational way of organizing society: 100 million dead. If organized religion produced conflict, organized irreligion has produced much worse. People outside the West see a virtual suicidal tendency among nations that seemed cultivated and advanced in the twentieth century, but destroyed each other in two world wars.

And what of the United States? Are we an exception to this rule? It depends. I would argue that, to begin with, we are still poised between a religious and secular view of ourselves. Take the controversy over the principal who, in the wake of September 11, put up a sign in front of the Breen School in California saying, "God Bless America." Not neutral between religion and irreligion as our courts would have us be. But suppose someone had put up a purely secular sign, "Courage America, Onward to Victory!" It might have generated no controversy, but is it neutral towards religion and non-religion? Perhaps if we put up both together, kids and their parents could choose to endorse one or the other or both and we can escape the contradiction.

But more is at stake in these matters, however, than appears in these slightly comic conflicts. The American Founders were not neutral between religion and irreligion. Washington put it quite forcefully in his Farewell Address:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?"

Even Jefferson, often thought of as the most radical of the Founders, who famously formulated the "wall of separation" in a letter to the Danbury Baptists, says in his *Notes on Virginia*: "And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God?" For Jefferson almost all Americans at that period, reason itself agreed with revelation on that point.

The Founders' principles offers a trenchant challenge to our contemporary views. They are so little

understood that they seem to us to offend against another basic modern principle: the separation of church and state. But the mere fact that the same people who saw the foundations of our liberties in God also believed in the separation of church and state invites us to deeper reflection. Of course, the Founders introduced many subtleties into this understanding and made sure that the new country had checks and balances and other institutional structures that would inhibit tyranny of any kind. But their views offer a potent challenge to our current confusions that needs to be seriously examined in higher studies. That is rarely the case. More typically, they are regarded as ideas of "a world that is dead and gone" in a famous formulation by Justice William Brennan.

Yet the American experiment has shown itself to be one of the most durable and just forms of government in human history. Its Founders were prudent men who understood both abstract theory and historical example. All of us now sense that something unreal has crept into our national life. It is one of the reasons that Americans prior to September 11 were basically satisfied with our politics and economics, but feared the moral drift of the nation. Since September 11, we are all much more highly aware that virtues we once thought quaint holdovers from earlier ages may determine whether we survive and flourish, or we retreat and decline. Wartime situations, because of the necessities they impose, can call forth great virtues. But the kinds of virtues that Washington, and Jefferson, and many wise people have seen as necessary to freedom cannot only spring from fear and challenge. They must rest on a firmer basis.

The democracies, for all their current cultural decay and uncertainty of purpose, are necessarily doomed to perish. But the problems that they show all around the world should lead us to rethink the anthropology that undergirds democratic regimes. The older view of man, the anthropology of the democratic citizen, entailed seeing him as created in God's image. From that flowed his rights and dignity. Questions of establishment and discrimination, of course, need to be considered carefully, but so does the possibility that democracy absent some spiritual vision is incoherent. In that perspective, let me close with a remark by Václav Havel, the astute Czech writer and dissident who became president of the Czech Republic after the fall of Communism. Havel has noted that not only America, but all the democracies are suffering from a malaise. And the solution he proposes goes to the heart of the argument about the Old West's importance to the New West that I have been making here: "Wherein lies that forgotten dimension of democracy that could give it universal resonance? I am deeply convinced that it lies. . . in that spiritual dimension that connects all cultures and in fact all humanity. If democracy is not only to survive but to expand successfully and resolve those conflicts of cultures, then, in my opinion, it must rediscover and renew its own transcendental origins."

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### Footnotes:

1 Stark's subtitle emphasizes the often overlooked social dimension in this rapid growth, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

2 Cf. Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, (New York: Meridian Books, 1952), 50 [originally published in 1932].

3 On this point, see Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150-1625*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

4 This is the title of Lynne White's highly influential article, which first appeared in *Science*, March 10, 1967, and has been reprinted many times since.