

America's Christian Heritage

by Harold O.J. Brown



The phrase “America’s Christian Heritage” might irritate any hearers who do not want to be classed as members of the tribe that first received its name in Antioch (Acts 11:26). But wait: we recognize that one does not have to be a member of the family to be remembered in a will, nor be of the same name, or even of the same race, as one’s predecessors in order to receive an inheritance from them.

One need not be a professing Christian, or even merely a generic or nominal Christian, to have received and benefited from what we call America’s Christian heritage. Of course, I should be less than candid if I did not say to each of you, as Paul did to Agrippa, when that King told him, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian,” “I would to God that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds” (Acts 26:29). At the time, Agrippa would have had to convert and declare himself a Christian in order to enjoy the benefits that Paul promised believers: there was no Christian heritage. Today the situation is different. Our largely Christian predecessors in this country have left us quite a heritage, one that we need not be Christian to enjoy, provided we do not as biblical Esau did and disdain our birthright for a mess of politically correct secular pottage. To dispense with allegory and speak directly, let me say that the Christianity of the past, whatever its failings, has left for us in late second-millennium America a valuable heritage, which we would be very unwise to squander.

In the United States at the present time, we are experiencing a kind of war of attrition against the Christian inheritance. There is a rather direct war being waged against certain Christian bodies and institutions, specifically those belonging or accused of belonging to the religious right. This war will be dam-

aging to the United States, but the damage will be suffered primarily by those bodies and institutions directly attacked. The war of attrition, which is wearing down the social structures and institutions that derive, more or less directly, from Christianity without themselves being “church,” will ultimately damage everyone—except those who prefer the guidance of tyranny to the responsibilities of freedom.

Attacks on the Christian heritage may be made in temperate language and come from well-respected quarters, such as the *New York Times*. For less temperate attacks, one does not have to look or listen far, no farther than one’s radio, where the proliferating talk show hosts seem also to intensify their hostility and vituperation day by day. In Chicago, one of the least temperate is a certain Jay Marvin. In one recent program, he aggressively responded to a hearer who mumbled something about the importance of preserving Christian values. “Why do you think the first settlers came to America?” Mr. Marvin demanded. “Why? Why? To escape religious persecution, that’s why.” By implication—not such a subtle implication—Marvin accused anyone speaking out in favor of the Christian tradition or Christian values of an inclination to religious persecution. Indeed, implicit in the argument is a silent equation, religion equals religious persecution. Proclaiming himself Jewish, Mr. Marvin evidently wanted to wrap himself in the mantle of a persecuted minority. This tactic is effective (and safe), however, only when the minority really is not all that persecuted. It is natural enough for Jews to be displeased with evangelism or proselytization that attempts to persuade them to accept Jesus, the Christians’ Messiah, as their own. However, when this sensitivity to anything resembling persecution goes too far, in other words, so far that it would deny to all of society anything and everything that bears a Christian tinge, it begins to eat away at the ground on which the objector himself stands, for the freedom and liberty he enjoys is partly based on the biblical understandings that have become part of our national ethos through

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the Christians who brought them to these shores.

As a Jew, Marvin has inherited from his Jewish predecessors a tradition of values and morals that differs hardly at all from the Christian values against which he spoke. Therefore the question arises: Is the objection to the label "Christian," or to the values themselves? It may be that the encounter with Christianity has been so unpleasant for some people and for some groups that merely to affix the label "Christian" on an idea or a principle is enough to cause it to be rejected. This is especially unfortunate when the idea is something that is very useful or even necessary for the health of society and has been brought to these shores primarily by representatives of European, and therefore Christian, civilization. The suspicion is strong, verging on certainty, that this particular talk show host, like many others in our society, really rejects the values themselves and only makes use of the label to attack them.

How has it become possible in America to attack certain basic values, values that most human societies throughout history have considered vital? It has become possible because Christians and Christianity have rendered themselves so odious, at least in the sight of some, or have been declared so odious that anything they touch is regarded with distaste, as fit to be suppressed or discarded. The word "Christian" has become a bad word in politically correct America. If a thing—or a person—can effectively be labeled "Christian," he or it has been rendered unclean, and can be banished from the community without further explanation.

Consider the implications: "Christian" has become a bad word in a society that is still at least in some sense about 70 percent Christian. What are the implications when two-thirds to three-quarters of the people of a nation are led to think that they have no good excuse for existing, or at least no excuse for being what they are? There is a parallel in that "white" is a bad word in a society that is about 70 percent white (not the same 70 percent, of course). Incidentally, "male" is a bad word in a society that is, from the nature of things, about half male. Does any sports team ever win victories by constantly telling its members that they are cowardly, unsportsmanlike, weak, and lazy? If 70 percent of a particular society are constantly told—and tell themselves, ultimately coming to take it for granted—that they owe their existence and their prosperity to crimes and malfeasance of various kinds, will they not inevitably come to think of themselves as criminals and malefactors? And will this not sap their ability to aspire to virtue and to accomplish virtuous deeds? We are rascals and wretches, and no good can come of us. Curiously, one of the features of this rascal-and-wretch doctrine is that we are taught to apply it selectively to ourselves and to exempt others.

Of course Christianity, too, has a low view of man as he is. It has often been attacked for its doctrine of original sin, which asserts that humanity chose rebellion against God in the infancy of the race and continues to perpetuate it year by year, making us all "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). This might appear to be a very pessimistic view, and indeed it is, if it is combined with a materialistic worldview. We notice, however, that it is not selective, but applies to all humans, to generic man—men, women, and children. No race dare single itself out as racially special, but no race need regard itself as racially lost. Christianity, properly understood (as it frequently has *not* been in nominally Christian nations), will prevent a race or a nation from exalting itself above others, but it will also warn it against debasing itself beneath them. In addition, and very im-

portantly, Christianity, with all that it says about the reality of human sin and corruption, does not leave us there. Instead, it goes on to tell its adherents, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Christianity is far from unfamiliar with human frailty and human sinfulness—in fact, it is often accused of exaggerating them, but it is also full of hope. What is said in the Epistle to the Hebrews of the people of the church is also true in a very significant way of the people who came to these shores: they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:13-16).

The confidence that they could find and build a better country here on earth was in large measure a consequence of the fact that they had before them the vision of the ultimate city, "a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). It is no accident that as much of America, and foremost many of our intellectual and political leaders and opinion-makers, lose the vision of that City, and seek to make the perfect city themselves, we come to disparage more and more man and his works that we have done. This is what the late Dutch Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd called "the twilight of Western thought," based on "pretended autonomy." Thinking, or pretending, that we can do perfectly well without divine guidance, we gradually come to the conclusion that we have done perfectly badly up until now, and that no good thing can be expected of us.

A society that loses its *élan vital*, its enthusiasm for life, or perhaps not merely its active will, but even its passive willingness to live, is hardly likely to survive. The threat to the survival of a largely Christian people such as ours does not lie with the animus of the small number of secularists and militant anti-Christians, but with the gullibility and lack of self-respect of the 70 percent or so of us who in some way bear the name of Christian, and who seem more and more inclined to apologize for the fact that we exist, and even to promise to stop existing as soon as we comfortably can. By so apologizing, those of us who are Christians not merely discard the heritage with all that it can do for us, but also render it inaccessible to the others who, without being Christian in name or in conviction, might otherwise have profited from it. If the Christian heritage in America is lost, it will not be because there is a small if substantial minority of non-Christians who wish that it did not exist (we must not overlook the fact that many non-Christians do not object to the heritage), but because there are so many Christians who have become first ashamed and then ignorant of it.

The survival of a healthy society is important for all Americans. For this reason, it is important that no one and no group—whether they be militant secularists, victims of Christian prejudice and maltreatment, or pusillanimous Christians, be allowed to squander or spoil the inheritance.

Are we or were we in the United States ever in any sense a "Christian nation"? Actually, to ask it in this way is to ask incorrectly, for the expression "the United States" originally designated not a nation but a confederation of states, originally sovereign, and remaining sovereign for several decades, at least in theory, if not in practice. The answer is this: the United States, or America if you prefer, have never been *prescriptively*

Christian, at least not since the Constitution, but they were and to a large extent still are *descriptively* Christian. Christianity in the large sense—not Christian doctrine as such, but the civilization that has grown up in the context of Christian teaching and Christian life—is so interwoven into the whole social and indeed human fabric of the United States that it cannot be cut out, and certainly not ripped out, without destroying the entire fabric. Jesus said, citing the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures if you prefer, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39, citing Leviticus 19:18). When we refuse to listen to him saying that, because his words are transmitted to us by Christians, and we separate Church from State, we also forget the antecedent commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:12), also taught us by Christians (and by many others). Now we have ten- and eleven-year-old children dropping a five-year-old from a 14th-floor window to his death on the pavement below. Let it not be said that Eric Morse was dropped because the Supreme Court, some years ago, ruled that the Ten Commandments may not be posted on school walls, and, earlier this year, that they may not even appear in courtrooms. But let it be said that a society that will not listen to anything that Christians have transmitted because it is “religious” will not long be immune to the consequences.

The 13 original colonies that began a seven-year war for independence in 1776 were all by nature and history Christian. The varieties of Christianity differed from one region to another, but each of them was at least as Christian as, indeed more so than, the European mother country or countries from which their people came. To say, as so many do, that the colonists came here to escape religious persecution is to obscure the issue: it seems almost to imply that religious authorities in the “mother country,” primarily England, were persecuting free-thinkers, secularists, agnostics, and atheists and that they all fled to America. (It is not too plausible to suggest that England was persecuting Jews or Muslims, for those groups would have been readily identifiable, and there were very few of them in the 13 colonies.) To a considerable extent, the colonists came because they wanted to exercise their religion not merely freely but vigorously, but had not been able to do so in the country or countries from which they came. As Oscar Handlin points out in his signal work *The Uprooted*, religion was a very vital and active force in every immigrant wave from the 17th century until the middle of the 20th. People may not have come specifically in order to practice their religion, but one of the very first things that the colonists and later immigrants did was to establish churches and schools to train clergy. Harvard College was established only 16 years into the history of New England in order to train the next generation of Puritan ministers. The influx of east Asian immigrants that followed the changes in immigration law in 1965 has also brought the establishment of Asian Christian churches, and there are now over 2,000 Korean Christian congregations in the United States. The idea that people came to get away from religion is absurd. The idea of a secular state was virtually nonexistent in 1787, the year that the Constitution was adopted, as it had been in 1776. “To read the Constitution as the charter for a secular state is to misread history, and to misread it radically. The Constitution was designed to *perpetuate* a Christian order.” From the earliest colonial days to the present, immigrants brought their churches with them. In several of the colonies, as well as in the United States after independence, the immigrants definitely came in the hope of finding freedom to express their religious convictions

and to live in accordance with the dictates of their faith.

As each of us knows, the United States Constitution, as interpreted and perverted by a succession of Supreme Courts, has been the means for secularizing America, and for driving religion in general, and Christianity in particular, to the fringes of society. A document that was once thought to protect a heritage is now, in the hands of judges and justices patterned on the judge of Luke 18:2, who “neither feared God nor regarded man,” the means of destroying it. Time is running out, indeed, virtually has run out, and so I would like to end not by describing but—in true evangelical fashion—by sharing with you an important element of our Christian heritage, the three-point sermon. A proper preacher, not to say professor of theology, would develop each of these points painstakingly, perhaps painfully, but I shall confine myself to stating the three points that I think constitute a vital part of our Christian heritage: perspective, proportion, and priority.

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Perspective. Did Jesus not recount the story of the rich fool, who boasted of all that he had laid up in his barns, that God said to him, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose shall these things be, which thou hast provided? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20-21). Communism taught that men and women must suffer today for the Man of the future, but that Man, even if he were to come—and he has postponed his visit indefinitely—cannot repay them. The loss of the eternal perspective seems to tell us, for the moment, “Eat, Drink, and be Merry,” but how does the saying end? “For tomorrow we die.” The more we lose the awareness of the fact that death is not the end, the more death becomes the goal. An individual, a family, a nation where the eternal perspective is forgotten will ultimately have no higher goals than selfish desire, and no more heroic deeds than abortion and euthanasia.

Proportion. Jesus asked a rhetorical question, “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

(Matthew 16:26). Forty-odd years ago, when I was in high school, we were told that an article of America's faith was the infinite value of every human life. That was unbelievable; it was totally out of proportion. Only God is infinite. Today it has been inverted into its opposite, or even worse: not merely the zero value, but the negative value of every human life. Man—men and women—who lose sight of God may for a while think that their place is with divinity, but all too soon they come to find themselves among the demons. In 1962, when the Supreme Court was preparing to ban the reading of the Bible from public schools, the occult was widely held to be a foolish superstition. In 1994, a generation later, we see—on the verge of Halloween—that the occult is becoming an article of belief. O.J. Simpson, accused of a double murder, has become a folk hero, and both he and his alleged victims provide the material for Halloween celebrations in the schools, where no one dare mention a Commandment or sing a Christmas carol. The Psalmist said it well: "The wicked strut about on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men" (12:8). We forget that, and disregard the Book from which it comes, at our peril. We are being told to forget it, at least to forget it officially, and we are in peril, not least from our officials.

Priority. We should certainly look at things from the right perspective, and keep them in proportion, but there must be something that is seen to come first. Perhaps it was not necessary to place "In God we trust" on our coinage and, under President Eisenhower, to add it to our banknotes. Perhaps it was not necessary to post the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls, to have Nativity scenes in public places, to sing carols in schools, or even to say "Merry Christmas." These are not the Christian heritage: they are only fragmentary by-products. They are not necessarily unattractive or useless by-products, but little can be gained by fighting for them, or recovering them. Being fallible human beings, limited in knowledge, in strength, and in the ability to will what is good, we cannot build the City of God on earth. Being human, we need many things—food, drink, raiment, shelter—but the way to have what we need of them is not to put them first. Instead, heed these words, the last part of the heritage that I can mention today: the priority. "Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of these things [food, drink, raiment]. Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).



After

by Rudolph Schirmer

Will we be whistling to each other then,
Croaking through the treetops, saying,
Yonder lies the forest freehold,
And beyond it, fields afloat?

Will the wind no longer whip us
Now that night has come for good,
Nor the frost unduly nip us
More than strictures ever could?

Will the nightingale surprise us
As the lark so often did,
And purling serenades apprise us
Of a charmed Valladolid?

Or will the rasping note prevail
Until our ears acclaim discord
And we go down beneath a hail
Of atonalities abhorred?

Will our trained spirits fall to musing
On the vacant and the dead,
Or by more energetic choosing
Breed vitality instead?

Shall we go whispering to sleep
With no intention of reprise,

As if God had no word to keep,
No creed to bring us to our knees?

Will the strains our hearts were torn by
Echo through a sullen void
And the banners we had sworn by
Flutter loosely, undeployed?

Will our arrows, limply whizzing
Through the penetrable air,
Fall to earth in gentle shower,
With no power to impair?

Or will old weapons, newly wielded,
Still avail to daunt the foe,
And all our seignories be shielded
As when first we drew the bow?

Let us hope—for hope is cure—
That we retain the faculty
To nurse a vision clear and pure
Of all that we aspire to be.

Let us dream—for dreams avail—
That we concur, as children do,
In one transcendent fairy tale
Where all advertisement comes true.