

DEFENDING WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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Donald Trump's July 6 Warsaw speech defending Western Civilization excited predictable accolades and condemnations. Critics claimed he was extolling a tribal blood and soil defense of the West. Fans acclaimed his mostly conventional affirmation of Western principles. Admirably, he declared that "above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. That is who we are. Those are the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." He commended a "democratic Europe," although he unfortunately did not otherwise mention democracy specifically.

Defending Western Civilization, once commonly called Christian Civilization, is not a theme common to religious discourse on any part of the political spectrum. For the Religious Left, the presumed existence of such a civilization is morally absurd. They would largely agree with Mahatma Gandhi, who when supposedly asked his thoughts about Western Civilization, responded, "It would be a good idea," implying the existing West did not live up to its ideals. Ironically, the British-educated and South-African-raised Gandhi was himself a product of it, and his nationalist liberation movement grafted Western concepts onto a mostly Hindu culture.

Gandhi also said, "Western civilization is material, frankly material. It measures progress by the progress of matter—railways, conquest of disease, conquest of the air. These are the triumphs of civilization according to Western measure." This critique portrays the West as secular, anti-spiritual, unconcerned with the affairs of the soul and transcendence. He proposed that Eastern Civilization, supposedly less concerned with material progress, better harmonizes the material world with the life of the soul. There are many Western Christians who have accepted that critique.

Trump's speech mentioned Poland's traditional deep faith in God and that faith's central role in overcoming communism. This brief mention is more than what is present in most other contemporary references to Western Civilization, which is widely perceived to be secular or post-Christian. Secular elites throughout the West often act clueless as to the West's religious, largely Christian origins. And Christians too quickly accept the premises of Western Christianity's supposed sunset.

In fact, a civilization once shaped and transformed by the Gospel does not easily revert, absent violent revolution or external invasion, no matter the low rates of church participation or popular faith in theological particulars. Christian

concepts about human life and human equality have prevailed throughout the West to such an extent that prosperity, comfort, and human dignity are now presumed to be not just goals but rights guaranteed by society and specifically the state.

Yet Christian elites are curiously detached from the project of Western Civilization. The Religious Left in America unctuously demands social justice based on ultimately Christian premises, imposed by judicial or legislative fiat, in ways that could be sarcastically labeled as theocratic. The Religious Right is commonly accused of theocratic aspirations because of its resistance





President Donald J. Trump and President of Poland Andrzej Duda in the Royal Castle in Warsaw on July 6, 2017, the same day Trump delivered his speech about Western values. They stand in front of Rejtan, or The Fall of Poland, by Jan Matejko, 1866. The painting portrays Tadeusz Rejtan—a deputy of Poland's Sejm, or Parliament—as he protests against the First Partition of Poland, which Russia, Prussia, and Austria imposed on Poland in 1773. Many members of the Sejm had been bribed or forced to accept the Partition, so Rejtan blocked the doorway to stall them from accepting the demands. Official White House Photo, by Shealah Craighead.

to sexual egalitarianism, but its exertions are primarily defensive. Although the Religious Left is the more outspoken critic of Western Civilization as oppressive and genocidal, it still unconsciously demands that America conforms to a Christian-originated political theology.

American religious conservatives, in contrast, now typically see themselves in exile and under virtual house arrest within a hostile culture. At most they hope for legal defenses against judicial and regulatory assaults

on the autonomy of religious institutions. Claiming a vested interest in perpetuating, much less aspiring to lead, Western Civilization is rare. They have too quickly accepted the premise that that West, including America, is post-Christian and likely spiraling into ever-greater rebellion against the created order. The Benedict Option, conceived by Rod Dreher and inspired by Alistair McIntyre, proposes that Christians should focus on rebuilding the church and its accompanying spiritual institutions as the West enters into greater spiritual darkness.

Forty years ago Francis Schaeffer, from his L'Abri Alpine headquarters in Switzerland, inspired the creation of modern conservative Christian political activism in America by extolling the West's Christian origins and urging a return to those guiding principles. Political defeats on social issues have persuaded leading conservative Christian voices that this project to reclaim Western Civilization is over, now replaced by self-preservation.

Christian leaders in America's past, although living in more

troubled times, were once much more confident in Western Civilization, which they recognized was embedded within the church's own providential story. As they imagined it, the West was the earthly political projection of the church, and the civilization provided a protective umbrella under which the world would be evangelized and Christianized, spiritually and politically. They were not entirely wrong. One third of the planet is now affiliated with Christianity, including well over 2.5 billion people, thanks to Western missions and, it must be admitted, Western colonialism of the past. Today, Global South Christians outnumber Western Christians, a ratio that will continue to increase. Politically, Christian-nurtured Western economic and political concepts have been universalized, however haphazardly. The Western notion of material progress that Gandhi erroneously disparaged as soulless and secular is now the guiding force of global culture, including in his own India, plus China and other ancient civilizations where Christian communities remain relatively small if growing.

Amid this mostly unanticipated global success, Western Christian leaders are sanguine and mostly unappreciative of their own civilization. They barely speak anymore of Western Civilization, much less Christian Civilization. The project of civilization as a spiritual endeavor that should engage the church is largely denied or at least ignored. Similar indifference to civilization-building through the Gospel's power, with counsel and leadership from the church, is not common amongst the leaders of exponentially growing Global South churches. Christians in sub-Saharan Africa especially

take quite seriously the church's role in renewing and leading society, reshaping it to align with Gospel aspirations. It's not uncommon, if arguably unwise, for African nations with their burgeoning Christian majorities to legislatively inscribe Christianity by name into their constitutions and jurisprudence. They believe that societies must at their core be centered around a spiritual message. Western Christians have since lost that faith.

America's Religious Left heralds multiculturalism and diversity as civilizational markers. America's Religious Right largely cedes this point and speaks of Christian Civilization only in the past tense, and sometimes not even positively. Some conservative Christians, and many on the Left and in the middle, murmur against the Constantinianism that birthed the West by supposedly corrupting and exploiting the church for the imperial project. For them, spiritual recovery means rejecting and escaping the vestiges of Constantine's dark bargain.

Indifference and willful misunderstandings about Western Civilization by Western Christians are self-defeating and unfaithful to the church's social vocation. The church, by birthing and sustaining the West, has created a providential gift for social justice, prosperity, human dignity, and equality. The West's many failures to conform consistently to its own highest ideals do not negate those ideals.

The fruit of Christian civilization-building and its ideals are underappreciated. Christians in the West, particularly in America, need to regain their gratitude, their hope, and their confidence as builders and

leaders of civilization. The West of course is no longer confined to Europe and the Americas. Its principles to various degrees surge around the world. Even the worst autocrats and kleptocrats, even as they sometimes persecute the church, still conform unconsciously in countless ways to Christian Civilization's influence. They eat the fruit even as they deny the tree.

The West was never and will never be thoroughly Christian. Led and populated by sinners, it has always been corrupt and unfaithful. The church even at the apogee of Christendom was never wholly virtuous or wholly wicked, never had complete societal control, and never at its best harmonized the Gospel with every aspect of human society. Yet the West, as byproduct and partner with Christendom, is a real and living organism that was and is providential in purpose, and whose destiny should still be a source of inspiration and delight.

Trump's Warsaw celebration of Western Civilization may or may not reignite conscious Christian interest in the West as an ongoing project for the church. But even if Christians will not acknowledge the West as their own, the West is inextricably woven into the church's eternal story, with glorious chapters yet unwritten. Christian leaders, ecclesial and intellectual, should step forward into their responsibility for leadership and stewardship of the West. Contrary to despairing conventional wisdom, it's not too late. P

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