

Reason, Repentance and the Individual: Recovering the Judeo-Christian Roots of Western Civilisation

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I am grateful to the Mannkal Economic Foundation, and, of course, to Ron Manners, himself, for this kind invitation to participate in the second *Sun Rises in the West* conference. It's good to be back in Perth.

Introduction: On drifting from the moorings

And our meeting is timely, coming as it does after the results of the same-sex marriage survey, and as the Turnbull government tries to hammer out some appropriate legislation to change the law relating to marriage.

This is because many who are strong supporters of same-sex marriage are also concerned that the rapid secularisation of Australian society, and the marginalisation of Judeo-Christian principles, is pushing religion out to the margins where it can be ignored and even ridiculed.

This helps to explain recent polling that indicates equally strong support for enacting clear protections for religious freedom — and suggests a readiness to accept social change as long as it does not sever links to faith or infringe religious freedoms.

As parliament debates a law to reform marriage, however, there are unhappy signs that the Green-Left and some Liberal moderates regard protecting religious freedom as little more than the enshrining of discrimination and prejudice.

Quick to invoke Australia's duties under international treaties when angry at government policy on, say, refugees, this alliance denounces efforts to incorporate obligations assumed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights when it comes to protecting religious freedom.

Fear that we are in danger of drifting far from the cultural and intellectual moorings of our secular society is one factor accounting for the growing interest in reconnecting with the roots of Western civilisation whether at the baker's shop, in the classroom, on campus, or in the art gallery.

Widely seen by many on the left as inherently racist, imperialist, and misogynistic, Western civilisation is condemned with increasing frequency by its critics as a principal explanation for what they regard as being wrong, at heart, with our society.

Their answer is to recast our history, downgrade our literature and art, and banish religion — especially Christianity — from the public square. And campaigns to accomplish all these things have long been waged in the name of 'progress'.

On defining the West: reconnecting the sacred and the secular

The West" is an elusive concept, however, and one that has fallen from favour in recent decades. Yet it is one which we are able to grasp almost intuitively, familiar as we are with the freedoms, rights, and protections we enjoy in a secular liberal democracy.

Indeed, for thinkers such as Roger Scruton, Western civilization comprises, precisely, "communities held together by a political process, and by the rights and duties of the citizen as defined by that process."¹

Thus, an essential part of our civic identity is a reasoned commitment to key freedoms of speech, conscience, and religion — a commitment that, in turn, informs the secular character of our society.

¹ R. Scruton, *The West and The Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (London: Continuum, 2002), 16.

A secular society, such as ours, affords to all individuals a private realm, set apart from the public sphere, wherein they may freely exercise moral choice and assume moral obligation.

Liberal secularism protects this private sphere by constitutional arrangements that disperse and limit the power the state can exercise over the individual. But secularism did not spring fully formed from nowhere. It derives its character from the Judeo-Christian roots of the West.

Familiarity with what Christianity teaches — and the extent to which that teaching, in turn, draws upon its Jewish heritage — has almost certainly reached a low point in these early years of the 21st century.

This, combined with a growing hostility to organised religion, means fewer seem prepared to grasp the fact that Christianity has given shape to our conception of the good life, and the good life of the soul. But of course, this does not mean Australia is in danger of becoming a theocracy.

Western civilization is not enslaved to the Bible or the pronouncements of bishops. Far from being constrained by religious ‘certainty’, the West has grown to be characterised by open discussion, trial and error, and the willingness to entertain doubt.

Yet the religious heritage of the secular West is an essential component of its identity. And if we become indifferent to that heritage, we will soon discover that this identity will be weakened and, with it, the protections that secularism affords the individual.

It is important to recall and reinstate three of the principal ideas — or roots — that anchor secular, Western society to its religious foundation. The first of these roots is reason and the essential connection it has with faith.

The First Root: Reason

Reason is often equated with ‘science’ and is said to depend on verifiable evidence, or ‘proof’. But this not only reduces the concept of reason to that which is empirically falsifiable; it also shunts religion to the realm of the non-rational beyond the scope of reasonable discourse.

In his 2006 Regensburg Lecture, Pope Benedict XIV argued that we must reconsider the scope of reason so that enquiry about the nature and purposes of God is once more brought within its fold. For it is by the exercise of reason that we can cultivate wise moral and social habits.

The lecture created a storm of protest because Benedict referred to a 14th century dialogue, about Christianity and Islam, between a Byzantine emperor, Manuel II, and a Muslim intellectual about Christianity and Islam.

During the dialogue, the emperor made some observations about the relationship between religion and violence. He drew a comparison between the two religions and is quoted as remarking that spreading faith through violence is something unreasonable.

In his lecture, Benedict summarised the dialogue: “The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature.”² And that was the crux of Benedict’s argument: to act against reason is to act against the nature of God.

To confine religion to the realm of the non-rational ignores an essential insight. This is that it was Christianity’s appropriation and synthesis of the Hellenistic philosophical tradition that gave rise to that modern conception of reason from which Western intellectuals have attempted to divorce faith.

Pope Benedict’s intention was to recover and restate the relationship between faith and reason. For if religion belongs to the realm of the non-rational, the discovery of truth can never be part of reasonable discourse and can be nothing more than a series of subjective assumptions. The danger of such a sundering of faith and reason, Benedict argued, is that it results in a grievously attenuated form of Christianity leading to “the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness.”³

Pope Benedict argued at Regensburg that we must reconsider the scope of reason so that enquiry about the nature and purposes of God is once more brought within its fold.

After all, Christian theology entails a formal reasoning about God, and this system of reasoned enquiry into the search for truth became foundational in what we refer to as “the West”.

It is by means of the application of reason that human beings, created in the image of God, have exercised the capacity both to comprehend and to shape their social reality, to exercise moral judgment, and to facilitate wise intellectual and social habits.

By the exercise of reason, then, we may use our God-given free will to make reasonable choices, and thereby to grow as reasonable people. And it is in virtue of being reasonable people that we can build human communities which defend human dignity from the indignity of violent assault, the arbitrary exercise of force, and the subversion of courage and character.

Inherent in this is the notion of human progress and the recognition of error, and this leads me to the second root of the Christian foundation of the West that I want to consider, which is *repentance*.

The Second Root: Repentance

At first, repentance may seem an odd concept to identify as foundational for Western civilization, but I hope to show that it flows very naturally from our consideration of reason. Founded on the exercise of reason, repentance presupposes remorse, contrition, and a changing of one’s ways. Repentance involves the whole human person.

This capacity to reflect on the past and make amendment of life helps orientate the individual towards the future. Repentance, the seed of human hope and accountability, is considered by Sir Roger Scruton to be a quintessential part of the progressive development of the Western soul.

Scruton associates repentance – along with its concomitant components of confession and forgiveness - with the notion of sacrifice. For Scruton, sacrifice is one of the indispensable habits

² Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections”, (12 September 2006) accessed at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080117_la-sapienza.html

³ Benedict XVI, as above.

in Christian culture because it enables individuals to hold one another to account in those matters where our conduct can harm others:

Those who confess, sacrifice their pride, while those who forgive, sacrifice their resentment, renouncing thereby something that had been dear to their hearts. Confession and forgiveness are the habits that made our civilization possible.⁴

Although Scruton is talking principally about Christian conceptions of repentance, he is right to acknowledge, in addition, the themes of repentance and amendment of life that occur in Judaism, and he cites the rituals and liturgy of Yom Kippur as a notable example.

Indeed, these rituals are grounded ultimately in the Decalogue, the immutable, rational, and consistent moral code that remains one of the most significant components of the Judaic legacy undergirding the West and its life.

Repentance, as the liturgical expression of our accountability to God and to one another, is a principal element of Judaeo-Christian culture. In addition, it is a principal tenet of Christian theology that sin is a personal matter.

In other words, that sin inheres in the human heart of the individual rather than in the collective identity of the group. “Christianity,” says Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, “was founded on the doctrine that humans have been given the capacity and, hence, the responsibility to determine their own actions.”⁵

One consequence of this is that it has led to the much wider acceptance of accountability as a feature of public, social, and political life – something that Scruton notes is completely absent from totalitarian regimes.

In fact, a belief in the capacity of the individual to do better, to change and improve over time, is a mark of the impact of Christianity on Western Civilization.

Progress, and an orientation to the future, have their roots in the exercise of human reason, and are two of the key contributions that Christianity made to the foundation of the West.

Even while conceding that, at times in its history, the Christian church has been extremely intolerant of new ideas, the moral and intellectual architecture of Christianity, as a *system of belief*, fostered human progress.

For all that critics may argue against this point about the church’s legacy, it remains the case that the European environment was conducive to intellectual flourishing in the early modern period. It was an environment that allowed innovation and enquiry to take place and to shape the social and economic life of western societies.

As such, it is, surely, quite justifiable to argue that it was Christianity – as opposed specifically to the conduct of the churches – with its directional conception of both social and human progress, which shaped significantly the environment that enabled all this to occur.

The Third Root: The Individual

⁴ R. Scruton, *How to be a Conservative*, (Bloomsbury: London, 2014), 16.

⁵ R. Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*, (Random House; New York, 2005), 24.

At the heart of this progress lies the third principal root of the West: the individual. The Christian conception of the individual is crucial because it underlies all propositions about rights, responsibilities, and liberties that inform Western conceptions of civil society.

Whereas the ancient world assumed natural inequality between humans, Christianity spun a golden thread that came to link key Western liberal ideas of truth, faith, and freedom. That thread was the principle of individual moral agency and the assumption of the inherent equality of all human beings.

The reason the Christian conception of the individual is so important is that it underlies all the propositions about rights, responsibilities, and liberties that inform Western conceptions of civil society.

Whereas the ancient, pre-Christian world had at its heart the assumption of natural inequality, Christianity spun a golden thread that came to link key Western liberal ideas of truth, faith, and freedom – that thread being the principle of individual moral agency and the assumption of the inherent *equality* of all human beings.

The genius of Christianity is that by investing every individual with the God-given capacity for exercising individual moral agency, human beings are no longer defined by social status.

During the Middle Ages, canon lawyers and philosophers began to work out the elements of rights which needed to protect the notions of individual identity and agency. A moral claim about the individual was converted into a social status concerning individual identity.

As this occurred, so, too, an understanding of rights evolved to protect the free exercise of that identity. This conversion was made possible by the development of the notion of equality of souls from which this commitment to individual liberty sprang.

As Larry Siedentop remarks, “[Christianity] rests on the firm belief that to be human means being a rational and moral agent, a free chooser with responsibility for one’s actions. It joins rights with duties to others.”⁶

The commitment of liberal secularism to individual liberty is widely taken for granted these days by many in our society who are, nonetheless, opposed to any form of religion – and especially Christianity. Recall the response to the findings of the 2016 Census that were released a few months ago.

The rise of those describing themselves as having ‘no religion’ rose to just over 30 per cent, leading to calls for the final push to displace religion from any involvement in Australian public life.

Of course, those making the demand conveniently overlooked the fact that nearly two thirds of Australians clearly maintain a religious affiliation of one kind or another, and that Christianity remains the majority affiliate religion.

The aggressive and somewhat hostile, anti-religious secularism of our own age, however, has scrambled the proper relationship between liberty and faith, and, in doing so, has also distorted what should be a healthy relationship between secularism and religion.

⁶L. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, (Penguin: London, 2014), 361.

Indeed, the radical secularists go further: they pursue a civilization that is not simply indifferent to religion, but strictly neutral as to any conceptions of the Good Life that make demands upon us.

Far from being an irreconcilable opponent of religion, secularism ought, by contrast, to be understood as describing the societal environment both in which religious belief can freely flourish – and in which different religious believers can continue to contend freely for followers.⁷

Conclusion: Living in Covenant

And so to some concluding remarks.

The three elements I have considered this morning – reason, repentance, and the individual – are, I argue, three of the principal roots of Western civilization. They are, moreover, roots that are set firmly in the rich soil of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

But the danger is that as our commitment to that heritage weakens, so, too, does our capacity to defend the roots of the West that sustain our society, our democracy, and, indeed, our civilization.

Indifference to those roots might well pose a significant threat to the fabric of Australian society. And in Australia, the problem appears to be more than one of mere indifference.

According to recent polling conducted by the Ipsos Global @dvisor survey which canvassed the views of more than 17,000 people across 23 countries, 63 per cent of Australians think religion does more harm than good.

The average from respondents in other countries was around 49 per cent.⁸ Whereas 62 per cent of Indians and 45 per cent of Americans thought that religious people make “better citizens”, only 25 per cent of Australians thought so.

There can be little doubt that the social and cultural context in which religion is practised in Australia has changed, and continues to do so.

We know full well that the public square in Australia has become very fractious in recent times as opposing voices are pitched against one another with what appears to be an ever-diminishing scope for nuanced, respectful engagement.

So, what does the Judeo-Christian tradition bring to the public square? Jonathan Sacks has expressed this idea of religion in the public square very eloquently. By “religion in the public square”, Sacks says he means:

Simply religion as a consecration of the bonds that connect us, religion as the redemption of our solitude, religion as loyalty and love, religion as altruism and compassion, religion as covenant and commitment, religion that sustains community and helps reweave the torn fabric of society.⁹

⁷ L. Siedentop, as above, 360.

⁸ M. Wade, “Ipsos global poll: Two in three Australians think religion does more harm than good in the world”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (12 October 2017) <http://www.smh.com.au/national/ipsos-global-poll-two-in-three-australians-think-religion-does-more-harm-than-good-in-the-world-20171011-gyz7ii.html>

⁹ J. Sacks, “Cultural Climate Change”, *Standpoint* (September 2017), 51.

It is, therefore, of considerable importance that we recover an understanding of the important part that reason, repentance, and the individual have each played – and continue to play – in forging the social bonds that are characteristic of Western civilization.

Once grounded, as we need to be, in the roots of reason, repentance, and the individual – the Judeo-Christian roots of the West - we can draw upon a renewed understanding of the importance of covenant as a way of expressing how we bear a responsibility towards one another.

“Never was the need for fidelity and firmness more urgent than now,” said Winston Churchill addressing the House of Commons in 1939. Firmness and fidelity are needed now, more than ever if the West is to recover from its present weakened state.

Reason, repentance, and the individual are, then, three principal roots of Western civilisation. They are set firmly in the rich soil of our Judeo-Christian heritage. But if our commitment to that heritage weakens, so, too, will our ability to defend the foundation of our society.

The religious context of Australia has changed. As we embark on sought-after changes to marriage, we must also strengthen the civilization that has given us individual liberty and autonomy, and the rule of law. Attending to the health of our Judeo-Christian roots is a fine place to start.