

Avondale College

ResearchOnline@Avondale

Theology Book Chapters

School of Theology

2015

The Decline of the West: Myth, or Reason for Hope?

Bryan W. Ball

Avondale College of Higher Education, bryanball1000@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.avondale.edu.au/theo_chapters



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ball, B. W. (2015). The decline of the west: Myth, or reason for hope?. In B. Ball, & R. Mclver (Eds.), *Grounds for assurance and hope: Selected biblical and historical writings of Bryan W. Ball* (pp. 272-291). Cooranbong, Australia: Avondale Academic Press.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology at ResearchOnline@Avondale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@Avondale. For more information, please contact alicia.starr@avondale.edu.au.

Chapter 16: The Decline of the West: Myth, or Reason for Hope?

Bryan W. Ball

The conviction that Western civilisation is in irreversible decline surfaced with Oswald Spengler's much-read book *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918 and available in English since 1926. It has been called "one of the most widely read and most talked about books of our time".¹ Spengler compared the life of a civilisation to the seasons of the year, stating that already by the early twentieth century Western civilisation had come to its winter, its spring and summer, the seasons of birth and growth, now past. He also spoke metaphorically of the "twilight" of the West, that short period of gathering darkness between day and night, a gradual process rather than the sudden descent of night. Spengler's word for "the West", which appeared in the title of his book, was *Abenlund*, literally "evening land". Spengler said "the future of the West is not a limitless tending upwards and onwards for all time", but "a single phenomenon of history, strictly limited", and covering only "a few centuries" in duration.² In his day, he believed, the limit had almost been reached. Spengler's view was widely criticised in his time and for the next 50 years or so as being too pessimistic and too narrow in its Teutonic view of the world.

The passing of time, however, seems to have vindicated him. In 1959 Helmut Werner, who edited an abridged edition of *The Decline*, wrote "everywhere an irresistible conviction has been making itself felt that Spengler 'might have been right after all'".³ Since then a steady stream of similar works has continued to appear, the titles of which tell their own story, among them: *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (1996), *The Wreck of Western Culture* (2004), *Architects of the Culture of Death* (2006), *The Death of Christian Culture* (2008) and, to bring into focus the real issue before us, *How the West Really Lost God* (2013) - all

1 The *San Francisco Chronicle*, cited on back cover of the OUP 1991 abridged edition of Spengler's work.

2 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (abridged edition, H. S. Hughes, ed., Oxford University Press, OUP, 1991), 30.

3 *Ibid.*, xxxv.

written by articulate scholars, each delivering Spengler's message in their own words and from their own standpoint. The West is on its way out. The greatest civilisation known to man is dying and cannot be revived. Can this really be true? Can the civilisation which split the atom, conquered gravity, put men on the moon and brought them back, invented the micro-chip, decoded the gene, and produced Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Beethoven, Bach, Shakespeare, Newton, Milton, and Einstein *et al* have come to its end? It sounds preposterous, bizarre, impossible, the meanderings of unbalanced minds.

So what is the evidence? What do these writers and others like them have to say? What are their reasons for insisting that the West is in irretrievable decline? Could they be wrong, monumentally mistaken, perhaps? And what, if they are correct, does it mean for us, for our children and grandchildren? Is there anything beyond the dark midnight? Even a glimmer of hope? Or is life in our time, as many have said, absurd, pointless, and not worth living? The questions are many and momentous, and will not go away. And there is one more: Do the biblical and prophetic perspectives in which this great dilemma of our time can be contextualised offer any hope?

The West

For there to be any meaningful consideration of the West's decline it is first necessary to understand how the West came into being and what makes Western civilisation what it is or, if the prophets are correct, what it was. Perhaps the most obvious truth about the West is that, strictly speaking, it is no longer the West. What began in Western Europe and quickly spread to North America, before it had even fully developed in Europe, has grown to include significant segments of the East, most of the North and much of the South. The Western world-view and way of life, with national and regional adaptations, has increasingly dominated the world for the past four hundred years or so, achieving an influence its predecessors would not have dreamed possible. It is all the more imperative, therefore, to know precisely what we mean by the 'West' and if the assertion that the West is in decline is in fact sustainable.

The consensus of historical thought is that the roots of Western civilisation are derived from the Graeco-Roman era. In his acclaimed *History of the World* J. M. Roberts states that the achievements of ancient Greece, particularly those of the mind, "made Greece the teacher of Europe, and through it, of the world".⁴ There was democracy, clearly significant, but the emphasis on rational thought, the necessity of reason and the challenge "to irrational-

4 J. M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of the World* (6th edn., ed., O. A. Westad, London: Penguin, 2014), 189.

ity in social and intellectual activity”, Roberts says, was “the greatest single Greek achievement”.⁵ It can be summarised in one word, *nous*. Rome’s contribution to the West was law, *lex*, bringing order, a natural consequence it might seem of rational thought applied to the development of social cohesion. The legendary *Pax Romana*, based on just laws strictly applied, held the far-flung Roman Empire together for several centuries, giving to those who lived within its borders a stability and peace that had never before been seen across so wide an area, a social order which is still one of the hallmarks of civilisation. Athens and Rome, *nous* and *lex*, are appropriate symbols of the Graeco-Roman roots of the West.

A somewhat broader view was more recently suggested by George Weigel, who reminds us that the West “did not just happen”. Athens still symbolises “Greek rationality, which taught the West that there are truths embedded in the world and in ourselves” which can be accessed by reason. Rome stands for “Roman jurisprudence, which taught the West the superiority of the rule of law over the rule of brute force and sheer coercion”.⁶ But Jerusalem, in addition to Athens and Rome, is also a necessary symbol in understanding what ultimately contributed to the rise of the West. Jerusalem represents “biblical religion [i.e., Judaeo-Christian faith], from which the West learned the idea of history as a purposeful journey into the future”.⁷ Weigel holds that it was “the fruitful interaction of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome” which provided the soil “for the taproots of our civilisation”.⁸ In the final analysis, however, it might prove to be Jerusalem which provided continuity in the West for so long. Hope for the future is crucial to continuity.

All this, however, relates only to the foundations of the West, its roots, not to the completed, majestic building or the mature tree. It takes no account of the Dark Ages in mediaeval European history, traditionally an epoch of approximately a thousand years following the collapse of the Roman Empire and the disappearance of Graeco-Roman culture, when knowledge disappeared and the collective memory of the glories of Greece and Rome were forgotten. Modern historical thinking is that the mediaeval period was not as ‘dark’ as once thought, and that glimpses of light were seen at various times and places. Even if correct, they do not much alter the overall picture. No amount of historical revisionism can hide the fact that for much of this long period the vast majority of Europe’s people were illiterate, unable to read or write, economically disadvantaged and subject to poor health, dis-

5 *Ibid.*

6 George Weigel, ‘The Handwriting on the Wall’, *National Affairs*, No. 11 (2012), cited in Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templar, 2013), 219

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

ease and early death. If that is not dark, it is difficult to envisage what is. John Senior called that age the “Dark Night of Christendom”.⁹ The Graeco-Roman foundations of the West, hidden for centuries, had to be uncovered before the building could be erected.

If a date or an event is required for the beginning of the West as traditionally perceived, it would not be inappropriate to suggest the invention of movable-type printing in Germany in 1439. It was a measurably defining moment in human history. Within a few years printing presses were springing up all over Europe, signifying a new era and the availability of knowledge on a hitherto unprecedented scale, knowledge that would never again be lost and that would revolutionise human existence. The development of printing gave rise to two of the most significant movements in European and Western history, the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Renaissance, literally rebirth, specifically the re-birth of knowledge and learning, was a time of intense intellectual activity and cultural advancement resulting, among other things, in the rediscovery of the history of classical Greece and Rome and with it the roots of Western civilisation. Without the Renaissance, it is doubtful if the West would have existed, so we need to exercise care in claiming too much for the Graeco-Roman contribution *per se* to the West. It is doubtful that we would have known much about it but for the Renaissance.

Nor must we lose sight of another notable fact arising from the printing revolution. The first book to be printed was the Bible, the justly famous Gutenberg Bible, a work of high quality and relatively low cost. Soon Bibles were available in all the languages of Europe. They were immediately best-sellers. No other book has so influenced the world as the Bible, a fact that cannot for one moment be doubted but that is often too easily forgotten or merely conveniently ignored. The printed words of the Bible consistently bore witness to the “Word of God”, a phrase used repeatedly in both Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament it is presented as *logos*, the “word”, a seminal word and concept in the Christian declaration, and thus *logos tou theou*, “the Word of God”. The open *logos* led to *charis, pistis, agape, zoe, elpis* and *photos* - grace, faith, love, life, hope and light – the core of Christian belief and Christian life for two thousand years, and the substance of civilised life in the West until very recently.

Logos is a word with profoundly rich significance. It is translated in the New Testament with more than twenty different meanings in addition to “word”.¹⁰ It inherently contains meanings of reason, purpose and revelation. In all these usages it is a common noun. But in John 1:1-3 it becomes

⁹ John Senior, *The Death of Christian Culture* (Norfolk, VA: IHS, 2008), 170

¹⁰ See, for example, Young’s *Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible* under ‘Logos’.

a proper noun, a name, the original “Word”, the *Logos* who had been with God in the beginning, who *was* God, who had been made flesh (John 1:1-3, 14), who “dwelt among us” (v.14) and who was seen and heard by untold thousands in the early decades of the first century AD. His existence was confirmed by Greek and Latin sources outside the Bible and his coming had been repeatedly foretold in the Old Testament, his life and teachings recorded in the New Testament. John thus affirms the pre-existence and divine nature of this eternal *Logos*, the divine-human redeemer. He is “the One who gives and is this Word, not only in His addresses, but in His whole earthly manifestation . . . He is the Word . . . the eternal Word”.¹¹ Here is the very essence, the core of Christian truth from its beginning and through all subsequent ages - God made flesh to redeem fallen humanity. It was this belief, with its collective and personal consequences, which undergirded the post-Renaissance West as it eagerly fed on the opened Bible, growing rapidly to become the dominant world outlook for more than four centuries.

But there is in the New Testament another profound truth concerning this incarnate Word. In Philippians 2 Paul offers practical counsel to the young Christians at Philippi concerning attitudes and relationships. In this context Paul also speaks specifically of the incarnate redeemer. This divine, pre-existent Christ did not consider divinity, his status as God, as something to be “held on to”, something to be “grasped”. Rather, he “made himself nothing” (Phil 2:7, NIV), “of no reputation” (NKJV), “he humbled himself”, coming “in human likeness” and “appearance” (Phil. 2:1-5). This entire passage is often thought of as a Christological statement, referring principally to the nature of Christ. Yet the essential truth here is not that of pre-existence or incarnation, but of humility, condescension, self-abasement, self-sacrifice, even to the point of painful and humiliating public death. This, too, is of the essence of authentic Christianity, always hard to understand, but never more so than by twenty-first century men and women addicted to materialism and dedicated to the seemingly unlimited gratification of self.

All this and everything that pertains to it as recorded in the Bible is the essence of Christianity and the substance of Western civilisation as it developed in Europe following the sixteenth-century Reformation with its emphasis on the Bible as the source of truth. The twentieth-century historian, Arnold Toynbee, wrote much in his 12-volume world history of the nexus between Christianity and Western civilisation. He regarded Christianity as being at the heart of Western civilisation, attributing the “problems of Western civilisation to its breaking away from Christianity and embracing false idols”.¹² As we shall shortly observe, many other informed thinkers in more

11 G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (trans. G. W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), IV, 129.

12 Marvin Perry, *Western Civilisation: Ideas, Politics and Society* (10th edn.,

recent times have taken a similar view. To the rediscovered *nous* and *lex* of ancient Greece and Rome and the teleological understanding of history, *teleios*, which emanated from Jerusalem, was added the *logos* of the New Testament and all that *logos* stood for and became. We can only truly understand the decline of the West as we grasp what the West really was and how it came to be.

The Decline

Toynbee (1889-1975), was one of the most distinguished and influential men of his era, the first half of the twentieth century. His own history is a pertinent illustration of the decline of the West. A graduate of Balliol College, Oxford, he was appointed tutor and fellow there in 1912, later becoming Professor of International Studies at the London School of Economics in 1925, a position he held until his retirement in 1956. He was also director of studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at the Foreign Office, serving as advisor to the British Government, notably during the later years of World War II and immediately thereafter. The author of many books and hundreds of articles, he was best known for the 12-volume *Study of History* in which he examined in great depth the rise and fall of the 23 civilisations known in human history. He appeared on the front cover of *Time* magazine in 1947, was a regular commentator on the BBC on history and foreign affairs, and lectured frequently at home and overseas, often to large audiences. As the dominant intellectual figure in the first half of the twentieth century, his influence was immense, “the world’s most read, translated and discussed living scholar”.¹³

Today Toynbee’s work is seldom read or quoted, his ideas since the early 1960s regarded as *passé* in academic circles and the media and hence in the popular mind, his name largely unknown to anyone under the age of fifty. It was a remarkably rapid loss of prestige for such a respected writer who in his day had appealed widely to both academia and the general public, and it raises a fundamental question. Why? Why Toynbee and not Spengler? The reason is now broadly agreed on and it illustrates the parallel between Toynbee and the decline of the West – his views on the relationship of Western civilisation and Christianity, the underlying thesis of much of his work, particularly the *Study of History*. Marvin Perry assessed it well:

Toynbee attributed the problems of Western civilisation to its breaking away from Christianity and embracing false idols The secular values of the Enlightenment, divorced from Christianity, cannot restrain human nature’s basest impulses. For the West to save itself, said Toyn-

2012), 789.

13 Michael Lang, ‘Globalisation and Global History in Toynbee’, *Journal of World History*, 22/4 (2011), 747.

bee, it must abide by the spiritual values of its religious prophets.¹⁴

It is likely that Toynbee would have seen in his own demise confirmation of his rejected world view.

If a time or an event is required for the last fading of the light in the West, it would almost certainly be the Sixties, the decade of “revolution in social norms”, and any one of the following: My Lai, Woodstock, the rise of the drug culture, campus revolution and riots, civil disobedience, availability of the Pill, radical feminism, blatant pornography, escalating violence and brutality, demonstrations for gay and lesbian rights, vocal minorities claiming to speak for the majority. Together they were, in the words of a later analyst, “harbingers of a new culture that would shortly burst upon us and sweep us into a different country”.¹⁵ Toynbee, like the civilisation he represented and sought to explain, was caught up in this tsunami-like sea change that swept across the West, tossed up like detritus from the ancient past and left to expire on the shores of this strange and irrational new world. Of course, the ground had been prepared and the seed sown in earlier decades, to change the analogy, for the upheaval of the Sixties and the denouement of the West. Naziism, World War II, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Nietzsche’s nihilistic ‘God is dead’ philosophy had all played their part. Twilight finally and inevitably yielded to darkness and by the end of the decade, *Abenlund*, “evening land”, had virtually become the land of the sunless midnight.

It is significant that this is precisely how several others have seen it. Robert Bork, former US Solicitor General and Court of Appeals Judge, in his masterly analysis of the West at the end of the twentieth century, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, asserted that belief in the God of Christianity “is probably essential to a civilised future”.¹⁶ Paul Johnson had written in his *History of Christianity* (1976), “with public Christianity in headlong retreat, we have caught our first distant view of a de-Christianised world, and it is not encouraging”.¹⁷ Bork agreed. Twenty years later he had seen it more closely and concluded, “Large chunks of the moral life of the United States, major features of its culture, have disappeared altogether, and more are in the process of extinction”.¹⁸ One assessment claims that as early as 1948 England was “a pagan country in any ordinary sense of that term”.¹⁹

14 Perry, *Western Civilisation*, 790.

15 Robert Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (New York: Regan/Harper Collins, 1996), 1.

16 *Ibid.*, 295.

17 Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 517.

18 Bork, *Towards Gomorrah*, 12.

19 Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism* (London: IVP,

In North America there were similar fears that the old order was disintegrating. Carl Henry, soon to be the first editor of *Christianity Today*, was in the 1940s Professor of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary where he felt that Fuller's mission should to challenge "the humanist presuppositions that underlay Western civilization".²⁰

A more recent interpretation of Western decline appeared in 2004 with John Carroll's brilliantly written *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited*, "in essence, the spiritual history of the modern West",²¹ to quote the author himself. Carroll was professor of sociology at La Trobe University in Melbourne at the time of writing. We shall return to Carroll shortly, but here we note comments in the Prologue to his book referring to "The weakening of Christian faith" and the determined attempt "to find a credible alternative to Christ crucified".²² The book is essentially an evaluation of the Enlightenment when "at last the ties to Christianity – Catholic or Protestant – were cut . . . denouncing it as superstition, a barbarian shackle on the triumph of rational humanity".²³ The "main shackle to be cast off was religion", in the process of which "the eighteenth-century men of reason turned with venom against Christianity", undermining "traditional Christian orientation" and the biblical revelation in particular. The consequence was predictable and inevitable. "The authority of the Bible began to diminish",²⁴ and both the undermining and the diminishment have continued unabated until the present time. Nietzsche, one of the last Enlightenment spokesmen, became with time "more and more contemptuous of the darkness of faith, and more caustically anti-Christian", declaring that Protestantism "must be killed off completely".²⁵ He must be credited at least with a Herculean attempt to do just that, even if he went mad in the process.

Lesslie Newbigin had already assessed the consequences of Enlightenment thinking and the nature of the new West that had appeared in the second half of the twentieth century. The goal of a secular society, free from the "shackles" of the religious past had more than been achieved. "The result is not, as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity" and far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism that Christianity had conquered

2013), 12.

20 *Ibid.*, 32.

21 John Carroll, *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2004), 8.

22 *Ibid.*, 6.

23 *Ibid.*, 135.

24 *Ibid.*, 139.

25 *Ibid.*, 194, 191.

in the early centuries.²⁶ Even Bultmann's attempt to connect with this new West, in which the thinking of the majority was now shaped by a different plausibility structure, by demythologising the Bible, had failed. "In the end, the reductionist program takes the modern world-view as ultimate and must eventually jettison even those parts of the Christian tradition Bultmann was seeking to safeguard".²⁷ Little now remains of the West as traditionally understood. "One does not need Jesus in order to embrace the existentialist view of life".

In 2009 Melanie Phillips wrote from London in *The World Turned Upside Down*, another well-researched and well-written examination of Western civilisation, of the "unravelling of British culture", stating that Britain had become "an increasingly post-Christian society", due in large measure to "the erosion of the building blocks of Western civilisation"- Christianity and the Hebrew Bible.²⁸ Like many of the writers cited, Phillips laid much of the blame for Britain's religious decline on the prevailing educational system:

The teaching of Christianity gave way not just to other religions but to pagan cults, which were given equal status. In 2009, the government announced that pupils would learn about the rituals and teachings of the Druids, Moonies and Rastafarians for a new 'religious studies' 16-plus exam [taken at age 16], along with atheism and humanism. A draft outline of the new exam also included rap music, Stonehenge, human rights, gender equality, GM crops, multiculturalism in Britain, cloning and the effect of the internet on religion.²⁹

The truth of the old adage "as the twig is bent, so grows the tree", attributed to Alexander Pope, appears to have been confirmed. The kind of irrational revisionism evident above has been seen elsewhere in the Western world of late, where extreme left-wing idealists have manipulated educational curricula to reflect their own political agendas.

An even more recent evaluation of Western decline came from the pen of Mary Eberstadt, senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Centre in Washington. In 2013 she published a well-researched account of the collapse of Christian faith in the West, unambiguously entitled *How the West Really Lost God*, at many points confirming much that Carroll had written from the other side of the world. With reference to "The dramatic decay of Christian belief and practice" and the arrival of the "post-Christian" era in some parts of the world, Eberstadt writes:

In addition to being "post"-Christian, some parts of this landscape are

26 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 20.

27 *Ibid.*, 12.

28 Melanie Phillips, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York and London: Encounter, 2010), 339, 343-44, 356-59.

29 *Ibid.*, 346

also notably *anti-Christian* - as a lengthening list of public events disfigured by aggressive atheist or secular protests goes to show. Some observers have even used the term “Christophobic” to capture the vehemence with which some Europeans, including high-ranking public figures, have come to renounce the influence of Christianity on the Western present and past.

For Western Europeans, the waning of religious belief has transformed practically every aspect of life from birth to death: politics, laws, marriages (or lack thereof), arts, education, music, popular culture, and other activities . . . A growing number of Western individuals greet the milestones of life with no religious framework at all. They are born without being baptised; they have children without being married; they contract civil marriages instead of religious ones . . . and upon dying their bodies are incinerated and scattered to the winds, rather than prayed over whole in the ground as Christian ritual and dogma had hitherto commanded.³⁰

It seems difficult, if not impossible, to deny the reality of Western decline, or that this decline can be traced to the loss of its Christian roots.

Callum Brown, Professor of Modern European History at the University of Glasgow, says “It is in my lifetime that people have forsaken formal Christian religion, and the churches have entered seemingly terminal decline”, adding “It matters that we understand why”.³¹ John Senior, formerly professor of Classics at the University of Kansas argued that Christianity had lost its identity in the modern world, saying without qualification towards the end of his book, *The Death of Christian Culture*, that “the declining West is ruined Christendom”.³² Perhaps the most chilling comment of all comes from Michael Craven, who provides another critique of Toynbee’s *Study of History*. Arguing again that the present-day troubles of the West began with the Enlightenment, Craven cites Toynbee as saying that the Enlightenment produced a tolerance “based not on the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity but on the Mephistophelian [devilish, Satanic] maladies of disillusionment, apprehension and cynicism”.³³ It would be entirely in keeping with the biblical revelation itself to think that a Satanic influence was at work in the destruction of Christianity and the demolition of the West but that, of course, would be completely unacceptable and naive to the modern mind.

We have surveyed, albeit briefly, the views of several highly-qualified men and women, writing over the last thirty years from three continents and

30 Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God*, 7.

31 Cited in Eberstadt, v.

32 Senior, *Death of Christian Culture*, 164.

33 Michael Craven, “Theology and the Church”, June, 2011, www.battlefor-truth.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=434

differing backgrounds – Christian, Jewish and secular, Catholic and Protestant, each addressing the most momentous issue of our time, the declining state of our civilisation. They do so from various perspectives – historical, theological, sociological and biblical – and they all reach essentially the same conclusion. We now live in the fading twilight of Western civilisation. The decline is evident and irreversible. The West has become “the culture of death”. Surely, it is inconceivable that these scholars, having carefully weighed the evidence, could all be wrong, seriously and culpably mistaken. So how did the West lose its original identity and the nature that made it what it was for at least five centuries, now racing “lemming-like toward inevitable destruction”?³⁴ One of the writers previously cited remarked, “It is important that we know”, and that is not difficult to determine.

The Ascent of Humanism

It was not so much a false idol that the West had embraced, but a new religion, a new philosophy. Born, or re-born perhaps, in the Renaissance, coming of age in the Enlightenment, and reaching its maturity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the new religion is Humanism. The first Humanist Manifesto of 1933 specifically called it a religion, a replacement for the old, outdated and irrelevant Christianity which had shaped the past.³⁵ The second Humanist Manifesto of 1973 claimed “no deity will save us; we must save ourselves”. Commenting on this Manifesto a noted humanist, John Dunphy, wrote:

I am convinced that the battle for humankind’s future must be waged and fought in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as proselytizers of a new faith . . . The classroom must and will become an arena of conflict between the old and the new – the rotting corpse of Christianity, together with all its adjacent evils and misery, and the new faith of humanism.³⁶

It is evident that humanism has been driven by these convictions ever since.

Two writers in particular deserve our attention if we are to understand this new religion, its god, its beliefs and its consequences. John Carroll we have already mentioned. His *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited* was first published in 1993 with the title reversed: *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture*. The original title seems preferable since it puts the horse before the cart, cause before effect, as Carroll clearly demonstrates. A decade before Carroll’s perceptive study, Francis Schaeffer’s collected works had been published in five volumes, the last of which bore the title *A*

34 Senior, *Death of Christian Culture*, 11.

35 Humanist Manifesto I, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanist_Manifesto

36 Humanist Manifesto II, www.em.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanist_Manifesto

Christian View of the West. Both Carroll and Schaeffer are essential reading for all who would know the truth about humanism and its far-reaching and demoralising impact on Western civilisation. Carroll describes humanism as a myth, “a myth that failed”.³⁷ Schaeffer says that already in the eighteenth century it began to dawn on some humanists that their philosophy had failed. Its stance had “changed from optimism to pessimism”.³⁸ But it was already too late to change course, too late to re-lay the shaken foundations of the civilisation they had sought to destroy.

What exactly are we to understand by the term ‘humanism’? It is a substantial and sometimes inadequately understood concept which, like a giant octopus, has spread its tentacles in many directions. We may reduce various definitions to two – secular humanism and Christian humanism, so called, the latter largely an unsuccessful attempt to combine secular thought with Christianity, an enterprise by no means yet abandoned. It is secular humanism, however, that has by and large prevailed, affecting contemporary society and which, although now in its old age and expiring with the culture it has created, is still evident across the landscape of the entire Western world.

Carroll begins his book with a bold assertion, “We live amidst the ruins of the great five-hundred-year epoch of humanism. Around us is that colossal wreck”.³⁹ We can agree with Carroll’s time-frame if we recognise that humanism established itself during the Renaissance but did not attain its majority until the Enlightenment and only reached its zenith in the two centuries following. Carroll says that now, living at the end of that epoch, “Our culture is like a dying god, its altar unattended . . . its rage turned to indifference”.⁴⁰ Schaeffer is more specific. The humanistic elements which had risen during the Renaissance came “to floodtide in the Enlightenment”,⁴¹ and it is this matured humanism, the calculated alternative to Christianity, that concerns Schaeffer through most of the five hundred pages of his analysis of the West in the years following.

Schaeffer makes a perceptive observation on Renaissance humanism, often thought to be primarily concerned with the rediscovery of classical learning and its relevance to the new society emerging from the Dark Ages. Most specialists agree that Michelangelo was probably the most significant exponent of Renaissance ideals through art. Referring to Michelangelo’s magnificent statue of David, carved in 1504 and universally acknowledged as one of the greatest achievements of Renaissance art, Schaeffer points out that *David* “was not the Jewish David of the Bible” but merely a title for the

37 Carroll, *Wreck of Western Culture*, 2.

38 Francis Schaeffer, ‘A Christian View of the West’, *Works* (1985), 5, 172.

39 Carroll, *Wreck of Western Culture*, 1.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Schaeffer, *Works*, 5, 148.

sculpture. Furthermore, and to the point, Schaeffer observes “Michelangelo knew his Judaism, and in the statue the figure is not circumcised”.⁴² Most who have seen this amazing piece of Renaissance sculpture will not have noticed this detail. Schaeffer has, and he comments, “We are not to think of this as the biblical David but as the humanistic ideal. Man is great”.⁴³ Michelangelo’s *David* was oversized, with disproportionate hands and exaggerated muscles, bigger and better than the original David, a hero of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Schaeffer again, “The *David* was the statement of what humanistic man saw himself as being tomorrow . . . man waiting with confidence in his own strength for the future”.⁴⁴

We are now ready to define humanism more precisely, to understand just what Renaissance humanism was and what it bequeathed to the Enlightenment humanism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Schaeffer puts it well, “The humanistic cry was, ‘I can do what I will; just give me until tomorrow’”.⁴⁵ Carroll is more descriptive, defining humanism as the attempt to “turn the treasure-laden galleon of Western culture around”, to put that ship off course, to divorce it from Christianity and thus change its very nature. Carroll explains, “It attempted to replace God by man, put humans at the centre of the universe – to deify them . . . to found an order on earth . . . without any transcendental or supernatural supports – an entirely human order”.⁴⁶ Further, in the humanist view,

Humans are all-powerful if their will is strong enough. They can create themselves. They can choose to be courageous, honourable, just, charitable, rich, influential, or not. They are creator and creature in one. Out of their own individual wills they can move the earth. The great individual stands alone. . . .⁴⁷

In short, humanism is the belief “that man is his own measure, autonomous, totally independent”,⁴⁸ as even a cursory reading of the Humanist Manifestos makes abundantly clear. The humanist god is man himself.

Carroll and Schaeffer are not the only voices raised against the baleful and pervasive consequences of Enlightenment humanism. In his illuminating study of twentieth-century art as a reflection of the culture of its time, H. A. Rookmaker, Professor of the History of Art at the Free University of Amsterdam, argued in *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970) that as humanism had grown in influence since the Enlightenment, so Christianity

42 *Ibid.*, 114.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, 116.

46 Carroll, *Wreck of Western Culture*, 2.

47 *Ibid.*, 3

48 Schaeffer, *Works*, 5, 109.

had grown weaker:

The Enlightenment was to change the world. It is a period in which we today are still living, though at its end. Its aims have been fulfilled. The world is different. What started in the philosopher's study is now in the hearts and minds of the whole western world.⁴⁹

Rookmaker had not seen the evidence which the final decades of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century would provide, but his conclusions were, nonetheless, essentially accurate, as later writers would demonstrate.

It would be impossible to cite all that those already quoted have written about the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment humanistic culture in the West. One final foray into the massive amount of material available will suffice. Schaeffer claims with Robert Bork that moral degeneracy is one of the most evident consequences of humanism's attempt to re-shape the West after its own image. The change can be seen in literature, art, music, the media, and in society as a whole. It can be seen on the streets of all the major cities of the West, in London, New York, Sydney, Paris and as Schaeffer points out, in Amsterdam and Copenhagen too. Those who have been there know exactly what he means. "Pompeii has returned. The marks of ancient Rome scar us: degeneracy, decadence, depravity, a love of violence for violence's sake. The situation is plain. If we look, we see it".⁵⁰ Bork wrote at the beginning of his book, "A nation's moral life is the foundation of its culture", and at the end, after several chapters of evidence, "We must take seriously the possibility that perhaps nothing will be done to reverse the direction of our culture, that the degeneracy we see about us will only become worse".⁵¹ That was in 1997. Those who have lived through the last twenty years and are willing to look objectively at the evidence must surely agree. It is, indeed, "the colossal wreck" of humanism's new West that surrounds us, the old West dead or in its final death throes.

It remains to bring to bear on this assessment of humanism and its role in Western decline, two relevant passages from the book that humanism so emphatically rejects. The first is from the account of human origins in Genesis, chapter 3. The key text is verse 5 where the serpent says to Eve that as soon as she eats the forbidden fruit "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God". In whatever way this encounter is interpreted, metaphorically or literally, the fundamental issue remains the same. The first temptation to assail humans was not to eat a forbidden fruit, but to "be like God". It was a dazzling idea, an irresistible temptation, but also a false promise, a lie,

49 H..R. Rookmaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: IVP, 1970), 41.

50 Schaeffer, *Works*, 5, 226.

51 Bork, *Gomorrah*, 12, 332.

wonderful to contemplate. To be God, even to be like God, is the ultimate temptation and, as we have observed, it lies at the very heart of the humanist vision. As long as human beings believe that they can be like God, whatever it takes, they will never forget the promise. To be like God eliminates the need for God. The West is in its present state of decay because humanism has offered the old lie over and over again and because humanity has willingly believed it.

The second passage comes from the New Testament, from Paul's description of the "perilous times" that will come in "the last days" (II Tim. 3:1-5). Paul lists nineteen symptoms that will mark the last age and they are all human characteristics. There is nothing here about wars, earthquakes, pestilence, famine, or preaching the gospel throughout the world. This list is entirely a description of the human character and human behaviour in the end time. The list includes brutality or violence, materialism or love of money, youngsters out of control - "disobedience", a preference for evil over good, arrogance, and the ceaseless search for pleasure, frequently without self-control. It all sounds like last night's news bulletin. Carroll, Schaeffer, Eberstadt, Bork and Senior, *inter alia*, have written many chapters describing the scenario, often in great detail. Merely to read much of it leaves one feeling contaminated. The characteristics Paul lists describe what happens every day on the streets, in the offices, in the homes and in the schools of virtually every country in the Western world.

Yet none of this is the real issue. The key text is verse 2, where Paul declares at the outset, "Men will be lovers of themselves". This is the first of the nineteen characteristics, and it is the spring from which all the others flow. The NIV and other translations are more gender inclusive, "People will be lovers of themselves". The real issue here is narcissism. In our time Narcissus has reappeared and come of age. Today's 'selfie' is Narcissus dressed up in modern garb, obsessed with his or her appearance, expectations and compulsion to be noticed. Narcissism, self-love, precedes love of money in Paul's list. Scott Peck argues that "malignant narcissism" is "at the very root of evil".⁵² The love of money is in reality a manifestation of the narcissism from which it springs, as is the case with all other indications of self-absorption and self-gratification. Bork argues that narcissism leads to nihilism. It is a connection that deserves consideration. "The one who is absorbed in himself and his sensations, believing in few or no moral or religious principles, in nothing transcendental, is a nihilist. A culture that preaches narcissistic nihilism is asking for trouble".⁵³ Bork's case is that this is exactly what has happened over the last thirty years or so and that it is happening on an ever-increasing scale today. Little wonder that trouble of all kinds surrounds us

52 M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (London: Arrow, 1990), 89.

53 Bork, *Gomorra*, 125-26.

everywhere. We have asked for it.

The point in all this is that this defining mark of our culture, narcissism, is the very antithesis of the incarnate *Logos* whose existence in human form lay at the heart of Western civilisation as traditionally understood. The Jesus who must be abolished to make way for humanism's new god, emptied himself, made himself of no reputation, thought that being God was nothing to be grasped, clung to, cherished. So he renounced it, to enter the arena of human existence. That is so alien to contemporary thought as to be incomprehensible. At the heart of his teachings, which in turn lie at the heart of the Christian West, were the twin principles of self-denial and the welfare of others. The contrast between the old, Christian West and the new, humanist West could not be greater. The options are self-abnegation or self-glorification, self-sacrifice or self-gratification, humility or hubris, the culture of life or the culture of death, God in Christ or Narcissus by himself. If we have correctly understood the prophetic voices of our time and comprehended the meaning of the evidence that surrounds us, we know that Western civilisation is in decline, and we know why.

A Prophetic Perspective

We now return to Jerusalem and the teleological, forward-moving understanding of history which re-appeared in the Reformation as a significant factor in the Protestant world-view. It is most clearly enunciated in two outlines of successive world empires set out by the prophet Daniel and referred to by one early English expositor as "the A.B.C. of prophecy",⁵⁴ i.e., the starting-point for understanding all subsequent biblical prophecies. They are Daniel's first two symbolic visions, the great metal image in chapter 2 and the four beasts in chapter 7, widely held to be complementary outlines of world history from Daniel's time to the final establishment of God's kingdom on earth. This linear understanding of history affirmed by these chapters was not, however, the sole prerogative of Reformation and post-Reformation biblical scholars. It came to be the standard Protestant interpretation for several centuries, still valid today and finding its way, complete with diagram and dates, into the *NIV Study Bible* published by Zondervan in 1985.⁵⁵ This long-established view of prophecy and history provides a final prism through which it is possible to understand in context the decline of the West and to grasp its full significance.

Limitations of space require that we focus on the prophetic outline in Daniel 2:28-45, assuming that readers will be familiar at least to some extent with the text and Daniel's interpretation. As previously noted, this prophecy

54 *Supra*, ch. 10, 'Early English Apocalyptic Interpretation', 13-15.

55 *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1311.

covers in outline the entire course of Western history from Daniel's time to the establishment on earth of the kingdom of God. The sequence of events is symbolised by a great image composed of four different metals – gold, silver, bronze and iron – depicting the four empires that would successively rule the Western world from the end of the 6th century B.C. onwards: Babylon (626-539 BC), Medo-Persia (539-331 BC), Greece (331-168 BC) and Rome (168 BC-AD 476). The fourth empire, Rome, would be divided, first into two parts, East and West, Rome and Constantinople, symbolised by the legs of the image, and ultimately into ten kingdoms, symbolised by the toes of the image and also by the ten horns of the fourth beast of Daniel's second prophecy in chapter 7. Many commentators agree that it is not necessary to understand this as a literal number, even though it is possible to identify ten such nations.

Some of the nations into which the Roman Empire was divided were strong and some were weak, as indicated by the feet and toes of the image which were made of iron mixed with clay (vs.33, 42). These divided nations would last until the kingdom of God was established, bringing to an end all earthly kingdoms as predicted in the vision by a great stone or rock of supernatural origin. This rock would strike the image upon its feet, i.e., in the time symbolised by the feet and toes, becoming “a great mountain” and “filling the whole earth” (v.35), or in the words of the interpretation, “in the days of these kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed” (v.44). Thus would human history and earthly time yield to eternity.

Beyond the identity of the four empires there are at least three further facts that emerge from the text and its fulfilment in the course of history. In specifying them it is recognised that we are attempting the impossible in seeking to condense several centuries of rich history into just a few paragraphs. That aside, it is clear firstly that the main focus of this prophecy is on the time represented by the feet and toes of the image. In the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel gives one verse, sometimes only part of a verse, to each of the four empires, while four verses are given to the events to take place in the time of the feet and toes. Even the mighty Roman Empire which had lasted for six centuries is passed over in a single verse. It is as though the text must reach its apogee as quickly as possible. The kingdom of the stone is, of course, the ultimate climax of the prophecy, but in terms of what transpires on earth and leads ultimately to the kingdom of God, it is undoubtedly what happens on earth in the period designated by the feet and toes of the image that is of greatest significance.

The identity of the nations into which the Western Roman Empire was divided is obviously also of crucial importance. Roberts describes what

happened: “The last western emperor was deposed by a Germanic warlord, Odoacer, in 476, and formal sovereignty passed to the eastern emperor”⁵⁶ [in Constantinople]. Odoacer was leader of the Ostrogoths, one of many tribes which descended on Rome from the north during the 4th and early 5th centuries, eventually settling in what had been the Western Roman Empire. Often thought of as barbarian, many of these tribes, the Ostrogoths included, were in fact Arian Christians. Roberts again, specifically of the origins of Western Europe, says:

People, customs and concepts that had been developed on the Central Eurasian steppe were part of the foundation for the new kingdoms that emerged, either through peoples such as the Goths, Alans and Huns, or through the influence they had on the Germanic tribes who had encountered them. It was a new world for those who lived on the continent.⁵⁷

Another account reflects the turmoil of the age, “The period was one of great upheaval, confusion, and change, during which a large number of states secured their independence”.⁵⁸ Three of the tribes which invaded Rome, the Heruli, Vandals and Ostrogoths, had themselves been destroyed by 538, those remaining from the conquest of Rome settling down across the lands of the old Empire and eventually giving rise to the nations which now comprise Western Europe. The crucial fact emerging from this all too brief account of what was a long and often confusing sequence of events over many centuries is that the feet and toes of Daniel’s image represented the nations of Western Europe as they emerged after the fall of the Roman Empire.

The final point of note is that all four empires represented in the prophecy, beginning with golden Babylon, made a significant impact on the world of their day. The details are not mentioned in the text, but can easily be ascertained from any reliable history. Rome is a prime example. A vast and well-ordered empire, Rome dominated the world of its time for several centuries bequeathing to posterity an understanding of law and order as the basis for peace and prosperity. We are thus led to a final and critical question. What contribution did the nations represented by the feet and toes make to the world of their day? What impact did Europe, Western Europe in particular, have on the course of history? Roberts suggests the answer in a chapter entitled, ‘Christianity and the Western Transition’. Noting that Christianity came of age in the old Roman Empire, Roberts recognises Christianity’s significance to the developing European mind and ethos and to Europe’s subsequent character:

Often disguised or muted, its influence runs deep in the countries that

⁵⁶ Roberts, *History*, 279.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1955), 4, 826.

were shaped by it; almost incidentally, it defined Europe. That continent and others are what they are today because a handful of Jews saw their teacher and leader crucified and believed he rose again from the dead.⁵⁹

The influence of Christianity on European history and therefore on the West is incalculable and widely recognised. As Europe developed so did Western civilisation, built initially and firmly on Christian principles and values. That the United States has also played a significant role in the making of the West is undeniable, but so is the fact that early America was settled by immigrants from many European countries, not least among them the founding Pilgrim Fathers from England, taking with them their Christian beliefs and deeply held convictions of the Bible as the basis for a coherent and ordered society. Europe initially gave the world what we now know as Western civilisation and until recent times Europe has been a staunch defender and promulgator of Christianity. Christianity, ‘the essence of western civilisation’, came to maturity in Western Europe with the latter-day descendants of the feet and toes of Daniel’s vision of world history.

We can be even more precise concerning recent events. Melanie Phillips, reminding us once again of the most significant battle of our time, ‘The Attack on Western Civilisation’, writes, “Christianity is under direct and unremitting cultural assault from those who want to destroy the bedrock values of Western civilisation”.⁶⁰ Specifically, “Christianity and the Hebrew Bible have come under explicit attack”.⁶¹ Toynbee was right in asserting that the survival of the West was directly related to “the spiritual values of its prophets”. We now live in a different world, however. Humanism and secularism have for most people destroyed belief in the prophets whose values undergirded the original West. As Newbiggin explains, “The real world is not the world of the Bible”, but a world “that can be explained without reference to the hypothesis of God”.⁶² The old prophets have gone, their voices muted and disregarded, the culture they shaped changed for ever. So Phillips can conclude, “The attack on Western civilisation at its most profound level is an attack on the creed that lies at the very foundation of that civilisation”.⁶³ And it has all come about at the very end of Daniel’s depiction of world history, in the final stages of the times represented by the feet and toes of the image.

Carroll argues that in order to succeed humanism had to “create out of nothing something as strong as the faith of the New Testament that could

59 Roberts, *History*, 246.

60 Phillips, *World Turned Upside Down*, 312.

61 *Ibid.*, 98.

62 Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 67.

63 Phillips, *World Turned Upside Down*, 316.

move mountains”.⁶⁴ But humanism failed. The results of that failure lie all around us, “the wreck of Western culture”, in the end-time of human history as foretold by Daniel. Yet that is not the end, if we take seriously the final assertion of the prophet, which reason tells us we must do in view of the fulfilment of all that has preceded it over the course of many centuries. “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (v. 44).

On this positive note we must conclude what has been for the most part a sombre and sobering analysis of our time and our culture. While we feel compelled by the evidence to agree with those who have said there is no going back to the past, no way to reverse the changes that can be seen all around us, there is a way forward – the kingdom of the stone, the kingdom of God, the kingdom which the incarnate *Logos* himself proclaimed and to which the biblical prophets consistently bear witness. We are told that the “kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus”, a kingdom “both present and future”.⁶⁵ It was manifest in the incarnate *Logos* himself, the one who was and is, in his very being, in his life and teachings, but it is not completely fulfilled until the end of the age. If this is true, then all that the *Logos* is and all that he says demands a future, the final fulfilment of the prophetic vision that has been unfolding for two and a half millennia.

In this context it is possible to look forward with assurance to that final fulfilment - the arrival of the kingdom signified by the stone, the kingdom of God. Here is anticipation in place of despair, light to dispel the gloom, the brightness of a new day to follow the twilight and darkness that has descended on a confused and culpably misled and misinformed world. The irreversible decline of the West, in reality no myth, is in fact a welcome harbinger of hope.

64 Carroll, *Wreck of Western Culture*, 3.

65 G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1975), 57, 59.