

Recovering and Sustaining Cultural Memory

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Are we Rome? That is, is the West – by which I mean the nations that used to be called Christendom – on the verge of civilizational collapse, as the Western Roman Empire did in the fifth century?

This is a question of immense relevance today. Last year's most important political book in the United States was "Why Liberalism Failed," by the Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen. In it, Deneen argues that liberalism – the political and economic settlement under which we have been living more or less since the 19th century – is destroying itself. It is doing so not because it has failed to achieve its ultimate goal, but paradoxically because it has done very well at it.

In Deneen's telling, a basic purpose of liberalism is to liberate the individual from all unchosen obligations. Its ultimate goal is to secure for the choosing individual the right to self-definition and autonomy. The anthropology of liberalism assumes no teleology. In the classical view, liberty is the freedom to live virtuously. In the modern, liberal view, liberty is the right to define yourself as you choose, without reference to any outside tradition or authority. As the US Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy infamously put it in 1992, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."

Liberalism has worked fairly well for us over the past two centuries. So why is liberalism in a mortal crisis now? Because liberalism depends on a cultural consensus that it cannot create. Justice Kennedy's remark – delivered in a majority Supreme Court opinion reaffirming the constitutional right to abortion – reveals the core instability at the heart of liberalism. What do you do when there is no longer a binding consensus of right and wrong, or even what it means to be human?

Liberalism in all its forms – political, social, and economic – atomizes society. In Deneen's account, the liberal state presents itself as a neutral arbiter of competing claims. But without a widely shared, pre-political sense of how those claims might be judged, the state has no choice but to enforce its own view as normative. And it turns out that the normative view is that held by the power elites in the liberal state.

What happens when the elites become detached from the masses? More crucially, what happens when ordinary politics becomes next to impossible because the masses do not share a cultural basis within which they can settle disputes? That's what we are living through today.

The contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre said that we in the West were no longer living on a coherent tradition, but on incoherent fragments of tradition. We cannot settle political disputes, but only yell at each other, because reasoning depends on a shared epistemological framework. For the West, this was Christianity, and since the Enlightenment, a secularized version of Christianity. Now that consensus has broken down. We are left only to yell at each other.

In his 1982 book “After Virtue,” MacIntyre famously compared our civilization to late Rome’s. He said that a crucial turning point in Rome’s decline and fall came when a significant minority of people stopped believing that their job was to shore up the Empire, but rather set about creating small, local communities within which the life of virtue could survive the Dark Ages ahead. MacIntyre said that today, we await “a new – and doubtless very different – St. Benedict.”

This is where, for me, the idea of the Benedict Option was born.

The choice – that is to say, the OPTION – facing serious Christians today is whether or not the decline of the West has reached that turning point. Do we continue working to shore up the current political, economic, and civilizational order? Or do we instead focus more on building up alternative forms of Christian community within which the faith can be preserved through the present and coming darkness?

I believe that serious Christians have no real alternative but to choose the latter. That does NOT mean that Christians should run to the hills or hive off from the world like separatists. That is not feasible. It doesn’t even mean that Christians should leave politics. What it means is that Christians must make their first priority the shoring up of their faith. As Robert Louis Wilken, a leading American Catholic historian of the early church, puts it:

Nothing is more needful today than the survival of Christian culture, because in recent generations this culture has become dangerously thin. At this moment in the Church’s history in this country (and in the West more generally) it is less urgent to convince the alternative culture in which we live of the truth of Christ than it is for the Church to tell itself its own story and to nurture its own life, the culture of the city of God, the Christian republic. This is not going to happen without a rebirth of moral and spiritual discipline and a resolute effort on the part of Christians to comprehend and to defend the remnants of Christian culture.

This is why I wrote *The Benedict Option*. It is a book written as a prophetic warning to Christians in the West: that if we don’t act now, and act boldly, to strengthen ourselves in the traditional Christian faith, that faith will disappear. The handwriting is on the wall.

Now, I wrote the book as a traditional, conservative Christian for traditional, conservative Christians, but my message is not strictly religious. I am deeply concerned about the decline not only of the Churches, but of Western civilization more generally. Though I am a believer, and though I am confident that only a genuine religious revival can reinvigorate and restore the West today, I nevertheless stand strongly with non-believers who cherish the civilizational history of the West. Indeed, most of my fellow Christians fail to understand the meaning and the priceless value of the patrimony that has come down to us from Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. The Christian faith is a universal creed, to be sure, but for us, it has been articulated through *particular* peoples and *particular* times.

Tradition is not the same thing as traditionalism, which the late historian Jaroslav Pelikan described as “the dead faith of the living.” We must not try to restore any sort of Golden Age – this is not possible – but rather we must continue a living relationship, a conversation, with our ancestors. Their stories are our stories too. Our life together is writing a new chapter in the long narrative of Western civilization. It is a chapter that

includes non-Western peoples. On Saturday in Sydney, I met an immigrant from China, a Christian convert who told me how much he has come to love the sense of justice and mercy, and respect for the individual, that he has discovered in the West. The ideals of Western civilization came to us through peoples of the Mediterranean and northern Europe, but anyone who affirms these truths and values is a friend of the West, whatever their ethnic background. It's important to recognize that, and state it clearly.

One reason why even many – even most – Christians are unaware we are living through the religious and cultural equivalent of the Great Flood of the Bible. It is a time of catastrophe, yes, but a particular kind of catastrophe: one that is obliterating the old order, including Christianity.

The floodwaters are *liquid modernity*. This is a phrase coined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to describe the quality of constant change characteristic of our time. For Bauman, modernity was “solid,” in the sense that a definite and radical change had been set in motion but change happened at a rate that was absorbable. That is, people could get used to the changes, such that life itself felt solid.

At some point in the 20th century, the rate of change sped up so fast that modernity became liquid. That is, before this or that change took solid form, things changed again. To live in liquid modernity is to experience life as having no fixed landmarks or pathways. You can go wherever your desires take you.

Liquid modernity has caused the loss of traditions, religious and otherwise. It has fomented the dissolution of bonds among people, a loss of shared authority, as well as a sense of connection to the past and to the future. And it has terribly compromised the ability of people to reason together, and therefore to live together. People have come to see truth as whatever *feels* true for them. This is what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “emotivism.” You cannot argue with someone’s feelings. And if you can’t argue with someone’s feelings, then how can you settle disputes? You can’t, except through the raw exercise of power.

There are two pseudo-religions in liquid modernity that take the place of Christianity. One is an ersatz Christianity called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” by the sociologist who is the leading expert on it. Though it uses the language and institutions of Christianity, MTD is nothing more than the assertion that God wants us to be happy and nice. This is the de facto religion of most young Americans, whatever their professed creed.

The other religion is far more militant and hard-edged. This is the religion of Social Justice, and it has taken over academic institutions in our society, as well as much of media and elite corporations, as thoroughly as Calvinism conquered Geneva in the Reformation.

What is the religion of Social Justice? Well, I’m cheating a bit. The academics James Lindsay and Mike Nayna, in a 2018 essay in *Areo*, says that the “Social Justice” phenomenon is LIKE a religion. Lindsay and Nayna define the Social Justice phenomenon like this:



One, it references a manner of approaching social justice-relevant topics through a rather inflexible moral ideology that is most readily identifiable with identity politics and political correctness (along with the more recent buzz worded concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Specifically, this is a social philosophy profoundly concerned with effecting liberation from oppression, with “oppression” defined by what is known as postmodern critical theory. Two, it represents the loose coalitions of people who subscribe to this ostensibly “progressive” view of identity and society. These people have been variously called “regressive leftists,” “identitarians,” and, more pejoratively, “Social Justice Warriors (SJWs)” in common parlance over the last half decade.

The authors go on to say:

Social Justice exhibits many religion-like qualities, perhaps enough to earn it that designation.

Social Justice is like a religion because it provides an explanation for why the world has gone wrong, a vivid and forceful prescription for how to make it right, and a strong sense of purpose and community among the elect. Unlike Christianity, the religion of Social Justice is not burdened with a sense of human frailty. Nobody is more convinced of his own righteousness than a Social Justice Warrior.

If you have had to deal with the Social Justice Warriors, you know all too well how hysterical and self-righteous they are. The difference between Social Justice Warriors and terrorists is that you can usually negotiate with a terrorist. SJWs – who, again, hold the high ground in the leading institutions of Western culture today – are driven by the same monomania that recurs in truly revolutionary movements, from Jacobins to Bolsheviks to Maoists. As Sir Roger Scruton puts it:

EVERYTHING THAT DOES NOT CONFORM TO THE EGALITARIAN GOAL IS TO BE PULLED DOWN AND DESTROYED. IN THIS WAY, ‘SOCIAL JUSTICE’ BECOMES A BARELY CONCEALED DEMAND FOR THE CLEAN SWEEP OF HISTORY THAT REVOLUTIONARIES HAVE ALWAYS ATTEMPTED.”

One way of understanding barbarism is as a condition in which cultural memory has been obliterated. In this sense, modernity itself is a way of thinking and being that induces barbarism. This is because a core purpose of modernity is to liberate the desiring individual from any unchosen obligations to a history, a people, a religion, or a way of life. In advanced modernity, everybody is, in theory, a lump of clay that molds himself.

The Cambridge University social anthropologist Paul Connerton has written profoundly about the modern condition, and the loss of cultural memory. He writes that “our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past,” and that “participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory.”

When a new regime or revolutionary social order takes over, says Connerton, the first thing it does is to find ways to sever society’s connection to its past. ISIS has been doing that in the areas it controls, by erasing any physical embodiment of the memory of those areas’ pre-Islamic past. Says Connerton: “The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting.”

ISIS is an extreme example, but this happens in all societies that are undergoing revolutionary change. The communist regimes of Russia and Eastern Europe tried this too. Speaking of those societies, Connerton writes that “there were people there who realized that the struggle of citizens against state power is the struggle of their memory against forced forgetting.”

A people that has been forced to forget its culture is a people who are easier to control. This is one of the fundamental lessons of totalitarianism. In communist societies, as in revolutionary France, the masses had their cultural memories persecuted, denied, and to a great extent washed from their brains. In our society, the chief agents attempting to accomplish this barbarization are the Social Justice Warriors within universities, media, corporate diversity offices, law, and other institutions.

These are the new barbarians among us. We rarely recognize how radical they are – and that is part of why they are so effective. We have not mounted a meaningful defence. I’ve been following the struggle the Ramsay Centre has had with the SJWs running universities here. I will give the SJWs credit: they are nothing if not committed to their revolutionary creed. They don’t think that we who cherish Western civilization are merely wrong; they think we are evil. And you do not compromise with evil. This is a sacred belief for them, not one to be questioned.

Social Justice Warriors have captured some of the churches. When I was at Harvard recently, I observed that nearly all of the churches near campus fly the rainbow flag, and have Black Lives Matter signs featured prominently out front. Whatever you might say about either of those causes, the fact that liberal Protestant churches now identify themselves *primarily* through SJW causes is significant. On the other hand, liberal Protestant churches are only marginally influential in society, and declining rapidly.

SJWs have captured many, perhaps most, corporations. In the name of “inclusivity” and “diversity,” they are directing hiring and firing practices, and policing discourse and behaviour in the workplace to an unprecedented degree. This is significant, because SJWs have the power to make or break careers for ideological reasons, and because major corporations are no longer reticent about exercising their power to affect social justice legislation. American social conservatives met our Waterloo in April 2015, when big business involved itself for the first time in the culture war by threatening to punish the state of Indiana over a religious liberty law that progressives called anti-LGBT. The state backed down.

As important as the SJW capture of corporations is, it’s not the worst thing. That these radicals have control of Western universities, however, is a calamity whose seriousness can scarcely be overstated. Universities are the chief institutions through which knowledge is preserved, generated, and disseminated. James Lindsay and Mike Nayna point out that the capture of universities in our secular society is especially worrying for a reason that might have escaped many of us. They write:

“Religions in secular sociopolitical environments are forced to treat their beliefs as beliefs. Social Justice has arranged things such that it can treat its beliefs as knowledge.”

As we have seen, Social Justice is like a religion in that many of its claims are non-falsifiable. Universities under Social Justice control – or at least university faculties –

operate like cathedrals and seminaries of an alternative religion. That they operate under the pretence that they represent objective knowledge is a clear threat to the future of Western civilization. As Lindsay and Nayna write:

“By seeking to conquer educational institutions first, Social Justice has effected a social and cultural coup that religious hardliners have only been able to dream about for most of the past century.”

Regarding Social Justice as an alternative religion, and universities as cathedrals and seminaries of this alternative religion, compels those who are passionately committed to preserving and advocating for the Western tradition to think and to strategize in radically different ways. Many of us have thought that the fight was a matter of persuasive reason. But reason doesn't matter to the Social Justice Warriors. Reason is only a tool through which the oppressor justifies and advances his oppression. To use the colloquial expression, when we try to reason with these people, we are bringing a knife to a gun fight.

If this battle for the institutions is unwinnable, at least for the foreseeable future, what should we do? It is here that the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, and the example of the early Benedictine monks, have something to teach us.

In his influential 1981 book of moral philosophy, “After Virtue,” MacIntyre surveyed the bleak postmodern landscape of moral discourse and likened our current period to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, and the entrance of the West into the so-called Dark Ages. MacIntyre concludes:

A crucial turning point in that earlier history [the fall of Rome, he means] occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.

MacIntyre is talking here about the early Benedictine monasteries. St. Benedict, who was born four years after the last Western emperor was deposed, founded his monasteries in the early 6th century. In his Rule, Benedict calls these monasteries “schools for the Lord's service.” He regarded them as communities of formation and discipleship.

Those monasteries were not simply places of prayer and worship, though that certainly was at the heart of what they did. They were also places where practical knowledge that had been lost to civilization when Rome fell was preserved, and passed on to the peoples living in areas where monks planted monasteries. It is incredible to imagine that people forgot how to garden, how to build things, and how to make ordinary things when civilization fell, but the archaeological record is clear on this. The early Benedictines not only seeded barbarian-ruled Western Europe with faith, but also with lost knowledge.

And, crucially for our purposes tonight, the Benedictines preserved within their monastery libraries books that carried within their pages the cultural memory of Greco-

Roman civilization. They copied, and recopied, both sacred and profane works. Over time, the monks founded the first schools in medieval Europe, and began educating leaders for the emerging civilizational order. The knowledge that the monks preserved in their living communities became the basis for the refounding of Western civilization. This is why some scholars regard the Rule of St. Benedict as second only to the Bible as the most influential book in Western history.

The early Benedictine monasteries were preservers of cultural memory, because in the worst times, they kept the tradition alive within their monastery walls, and later, when the barbaric tide began to recede, because they spread that preserved knowledge to their students working and living in the world.

Now, Alasdair MacIntyre says that the world today awaits a new, and doubtless very different, St. Benedict. Let us ask ourselves: what would a St. Benedict of the 21st century do to preserve the Western civilizational tradition amid this current barbarism? Where are the 21st century equivalent of the Dark Age monasteries?

I propose to you that they are, and must be, colleges and schools that fully embrace and celebrate the Western humanist tradition – from the Greeks and the Romans, through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation, and on through the Age of Science and Enlightenment. There are a few of these colleges and schools now – Campion College here in Australia is one, and we have a few in the US. And, in America the burgeoning classical Christian schooling movement is resurrecting the study of the classics, and the Great Books of the Western tradition, for students in elementary school and high school.

Men and women of good will who love the Western tradition, and who feel a deep responsibility to preserve cultural memory and pass on our cultural patrimony, should think very hard about the value of trying to shore up the imperium. That is, we should consider whether or not the continuation of the moral, intellectual, and artistic life of Western civilization is consonant with engaging these institutions. Instead, we should give very serious thought to constructing new forms of community within which the intellectual and cultural life and legacy of the West can be sustained through this present and coming age of barbarism and darkness.

I'll put it to you bluntly. If most of today's universities, overrun by Social Justice Warriors, are determined to be the mortal enemies of Western thought and civilization, then we have no choice but to shake the dust off our feet, and to strengthen those few who stand, and construct new ones.

When St. Benedict died in the year 547, he left only a handful of monasteries in the vicinity of Rome. But over the next three and four centuries, the monastic movement took off across Western Europe. They were an army of stars thrown into the sky of Dark Ages Europe – and they saved civilization.

Note well: St. Benedict did not set out to save Western civilization, or to Make Rome Great Again. All he wanted to do was to figure out a way to live in faithful Christian community in a time of great chaos and trial. Everything he accomplished followed from his determination to search for God in an ordered way.



For us, if Western civilization is to be saved, it will be saved in large part because men and women who love the tradition do anything they can to save it – even establishing countercultural, radical institutions to preserve and pass on that cultural memory. This is the challenge of our time.

This is not only the challenge of our time, it is also a great adventure. I'll end with this 1980s-era passage from the late American Catholic novelist Walker Percy, from his book "Lost In The Cosmos." This, I believe, characterizes what we defenders of the West are facing today. Percy writes:

"Imagine you are a member of a tour visiting Greece. The group goes to the Parthenon. It is a bore. Few people even bother to look — it looked better in the brochure. So people take half a look, mostly take pictures, remark on serious erosion by acid rain. You are puzzled. Why should one of the glories and fonts of Western civilization, viewed under pleasant conditions — good weather, good hotel room, good food, good guide be a bore?"

Now imagine under what set of circumstances a viewing of the Parthenon would not be a bore. For example, you are a NATO colonel defending Greece against a Soviet assault. You are in a bunker in downtown Athens, binoculars propped up on sandbags. It is dawn. A medium-range missile attack is under way. Half a million Greeks are dead. Two missiles bracket the Parthenon. The next will surely be a hit. Between columns of smoke, a ray of golden light catches the portico.

Are you bored? Can you see the Parthenon?

Explain."

Yes, I'm afraid that we are Rome. The Dark Ages are upon us again. This fight that the Ramsay Centre is engaged is many things, but boring is not one of them. Fight on – but fight with strategic intelligence. You may be losing the straightforward culture war, because the enemies of the West have all the firepower and occupy the high ground. But do not despair! Now is the time to prepare the institutions of Resistance.