

FIRST THINGS

Against Christian Civilization

[Paul Kingsnorth](#) December 12, 2024



The last time I was in America, which was last autumn, I visited the battlefield at Little Bighorn. It was a beautiful snowy day. The landscape was vast and white and still. When we pulled into the battlefield site, hardly anyone was there. A couple of park rangers, a few other visitors. It made the place feel even more eerie than it probably would at any other time.

Standing in the snow, looking up the ridge at the monuments and the graves, I tried to imagine the psychic reality of living through the end of your culture. I tried to imagine being an Indian who faced not only the trauma of land theft and a future of being forced onto reservations, but also the harder-to-bear psychic wound of losing your entire metaphysics. Of seeing everything you thought you knew about the world, about your people, about your land, about the shape of the universe, its gods and spirits, disintegrating beneath you. I realized as I stood there that America did not just take the Indians' land—it took their entire world, outer and inner.

Of course, America is hardly the first or only society to have done something like this. A grand sweep of human history seems to demonstrate that this is how humans operate basically all the time. They expand, they seek new lands, and if they find people already on them, conflict ensues. A technologically advanced society will inevitably displace and possibly destroy a less advanced culture. Technological advancement, of course, does not imply spiritual or cultural advancement, however common it is to hear these things elided. But it's hard to find a country that doesn't have at least one example of a people whose world was wiped out by newcomers. My own country, Britain, has several. My first novel was a three-hundred-page exploration of the psyche of an Anglo-Saxon pagan losing his world to Norman and Christian conquest.

But the fact that the pattern is common does not make it any less traumatic for those who lose everything. What are they to do? Fight back and hope to win? Fight back knowing they will lose, but go down with their world? Become part of the new culture and turn their back on the old? Or become part of the new world and seek to retain what can be retained? Maybe the answer depends on personality, and on circumstance.

Native culture in America offers plenty of examples of all these responses. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse are globally famous now as men who refused to surrender their worlds. Less famous is Charles Alexander Eastman—or, to use the name he was given by his people, the Santee Dakota, Ohiyesa. Ohiyesa was just eighteen at the time of Custer's Last Stand, but his life was in some ways an illustration of the conflicting forces of the time.

A Native American whose white grandfather was a former U.S. soldier, he grew up learning the traditional ways of the Dakota Sioux. When he was a teenager, however, his father, who had been sent to an internment camp for his part in an uprising against the whites, returned wearing a suit and tie and professing a new faith. His father instructed Ohiyesa to Europeanize in order to succeed in the new world that was rising around them. The Indian's job now, Ohiyesa's father said, was not to submit to reservation life, but to succeed on his own terms in white society. Sending his son off to an American school, he told him, "It is the same as if I sent you on your first warpath. I shall expect you to conquer."

And Ohiyesa did. Changing his name to Charles Alexander Eastman, he became a writer and speaker on Indian life and culture, one of the first Indians to qualify as a doctor, a historian of his people, and a vigorous campaigner for Indian rights. His life's work was to build bridges between the new white culture and the culture of his declining people. He believed that the new America needed an indigenous soul, and that his people could help provide it. Perhaps this is why he is not as famous as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. His path was not one of brave but doomed military resistance. It was messier and harder to pin down.

Ohiyesa also became a Christian. In his autobiography, [*The Soul of an Indian*](#), he writes movingly of the horrors that so many so-called Christians imposed on his people, and of how, nonetheless, the path and teachings of Jesus spoke to him as true. In his autobiography, he tells of how he traveled around to meet many of his own people as a Christian missionary, telling the stories of Jesus and explaining the values of the faith. At one such meeting, an old man, after a long silence, stood up and replied to him. "I have come to the conclusion," said the old man, "that this Jesus was an Indian. He was opposed to material acquisition and to great possessions. He was inclined to peace. He was as unpractical as any Indian and set no price on his labor of love. These are not the principles upon which the white man has founded his civilization."

Ohiyesa sympathized. "I confess," he wrote in his memoir,

I have wondered much that Christianity is not practiced by the very people who vouch for that wonderful conception of exemplary living. It appears that they are anxious to pass on their religion to all other races, but keep little of it for themselves. I have not yet seen the meek inherit the earth, or the peacemakers receive high honor.

Observations like this led Ohiyesa, toward the end of his life, to a radical conclusion. He did not reject Christianity or Christ. Neither did he cease to think of himself as an American. But he came to see something about his faith that perhaps only someone of his background could have seen. At the end of his life's story, he tells us what it is:

It is my personal belief, after thirty-five years experience of it, that there is no such thing as "Christian civilization." I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same.

Today, it is the Europeans and the Americans who are experiencing cultural and metaphysical collapse. The West is undergoing its own loss of a sense of self and culture, of history and stability. After centuries of global hegemony, it is our turn to experience the fear of such a loss, the fear of decline and fragmentation.

Around the time Ohiyesa was doing his work, the German historian Oswald Spengler was writing his gloomy masterpiece [*The Decline of the West*](#). Spengler had developed a theory about the rise and fall of human civilizations, all of which, he said, could be fitted into his pattern. He declared that Western culture—"Faustian culture," as he called it, defined as it was by its outward-looking, conquering, materialist ethos—had already

begun to ossify at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that it was rotting from within even as it dominated the world. The early twenty-first century, Spengler predicted, would see the beginning of its collapse and its “return to formlessness.”

A few decades later, the British historian Arnold Toynbee echoed Spengler’s prediction in his own painstakingly developed cyclical model of the rise and fall of cultures. His vast multi-volume work, *A Study of History*, examined twenty-one civilizations across the span of human time, seeking common reasons for their rise and fall. Nineteen of those twenty-one civilizations, he concluded, “collapsed when they reached the moral state the United States is in now.” Note that his “now” was quite some time ago: Toynbee died in 1975.

I have taken to calling the strange, dissolving, increasingly nihilistic moment we are living through a “culture of inversion.” We can best understand the process, I think, by simply observing that our elites today are focused overwhelmingly on inverting the culture that we took for granted when I was growing up. The inversion takes many forms and can be found in almost every crevice of society now, from the curriculum in schools to the output of the Disney corporation. Turning everything on its head is the work of the West today.

But what is this “West”? Well, it depends whom you ask. A liberal, a conservative, a reactionary, and a Marxist might give very different answers. But let us, instead, ask a historian. In his book [*Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*](#), written shortly after the Second World War, the medievalist Christopher Dawson offered his definition:

There has never been any unitary organisation of Western culture apart from that of the Christian Church, which provided an effective principle of social unity. . . . Behind the ever-changing pattern of Western culture there was a living faith which gave Europe a certain sense of spiritual community, in spite of all the conflicts and divisions and social schisms that marked its history.

The West, said Dawson, was a religious construction. Specifically, it was a creation of the Roman Catholic Church. This is the only reason we talk about a “West” at all. But this claim immediately raises a question. If the Christian faith *is* the basis of Western culture, what happens when that faith retreats—or is rejected? We know the answer, because that rejection, or retreat—what the poet Matthew Arnold called the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the “sea of the faith”—has been going on perhaps since the Renaissance. As we survey the twenty-first-century landscape, at least in Western Europe, we can see that our founding religion is now defunct as a guiding force and a cultural glue.

A question logically arises from that observation: Is the decline of Christianity responsible for our current malaise? Is our lack of faith at the root of our loss of confidence and the ensuing inversion of our old values? The answer to this, in one sense, is obviously yes. As another historian, Tom Holland, demonstrated in his book [*Dominion*](#), it was Christianity that formed the Western mind. When such a sacred order dies, there will be upheaval at every level of society, from politics right down to the level of the soul.

This, I think, is where we are. And I am hardly the only one to have noticed. In fact, almost everyone who is paying attention has by now noticed. Some of those people, in response, have come to a conclusion: Since Christianity was the basis of this “Western” culture of ours, and since this culture is now sick or even dying, the way to revive it must be to revive Christianity—not so much as a religion, but rather as a social glue, or even as a weapon. What we need, we increasingly hear from many different quarters, is a return to something called “Christian civilization”—regardless of whether the Christian faith is, in fact, true.

At a certain level, this might appear to be an attractive narrative. But I believe it is a deadly mistake.

Some time ago, a question came to me as I read through the Bible: What if God agrees with Ohiyesa?

At the very beginning of the very first book of the Bible we find a claim about what a human is created to be. God scoops up soil from the ground, breathes into it—and humans appear. We are raised from the ground, naked, and placed in a garden, to “tend and keep it” in communion with all that lives, in conversation with all

the birds and animals. Humans, it turns out, were created as vegetarian gardeners. We were created to be so close to God that we could see him “walking in the garden in the cool of the evening.” One day, it is implied, we might become spiritually mature enough to eat of the fruit of the forbidden trees and to share in the knowledge and wisdom of God himself.

Well, that’s not how things turned out. And when we disobeyed, what happened? Farming happened. Work happened. Hunting happened. Metalwork happened. Murder happened. Cities happened. Civilization happened. It was all a deadly result of our Fall. Ever since we were expelled from this garden, it seems, we have been building great towers to the sky, trying, if subconsciously, to return to our true home. But always our towers are brought down, and our tribes are scattered.

In the First Book of Samuel, the people of Israel tell their judge, Samuel, that they want a king to rule over them. The judges were religious leaders, supposedly ruling on God’s behalf, but the people of Israel had had enough of this theocracy. “We want a king to be over us,” they say. “Then we will be like all the other nations, and our king will judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” Samuel warns them that their king will do other things, too: He will conscript their sons into war and take their daughters to be his perfumers and bakers. He will take the best crops from their fields and vineyards. He will tax them a tenth of their grain, their animals, and their servants. And if the people cry out, in the end, against this tyranny, “the Lord will not hear you in those days, because you chose a king for yourselves.”

The people choose one anyway, and the rest of the history of Israel plays out. Again and again, the people pursue earthly power and turn away from God. Often they confuse the two. Eventually, God stages an intervention, appearing himself in human form, to turn things around. But he does not appear in the form of a king or a judge or a procurator or a wealthy aristocrat. He appears as a barefoot carpenter in a backwoods province of the Roman Empire, he spends his time with the weak and the despised, wandering in the desert and the countryside, through small towns and villages. When he finally goes to the city, to the civilized center, it tortures and kills him.

At the very least, I think we can say that this God of ours has an ambivalent relationship to humanity’s earthly power structures. At no point does he enthusiastically embrace them. Often he rejects them, and sometimes he destroys them. The reason is always the same: They take humanity’s gaze away from him and redirect it towards themselves. People forget, again and again, that in Christopher Lasch’s words, “God, not culture, is the only appropriate object of unconditional reverence and wonder.”

What we call “religion” is perhaps best described as the collection of tools and mechanisms that we use here on earth to direct that “reverence and wonder” towards its proper end: God, not culture. I have thought for many years about what this “religion” thing is and how it should relate to my life. I have watched and read many other people who are thinking about it, too. As a result, I think I can identify five common attitudes that are commonly adopted toward religion in the world today.

The first attitude we may call *scientific atheism*. This is the faith of Arthur C. Clarke and the New Atheists. Religion, in this telling, is primitive nonsense based on falsehood, which will inevitably be replaced by science and reason.

Second, we have *liberal relativism*. This tells us that all religions are fine if kept in their place. Maybe all religions are the same. There are many paths up the mountain, after all. But even if it’s all nonsense, people should be free to practice their faith, and we shouldn’t discriminate. There should be a secular public sphere with “freedom of worship.”

Third, we have *serious religion*. My way is the truth, thinks the believer, and I must follow it before all else, wherever it leads.

Then we have what we may call *cultural religion*. I attend church only at Christmas and Easter, and I do my hair nicely beneath my headscarf. Cultural religionists see their faith as primarily an expression of their culture.

Finally, we have the subject of this lecture: *civilizational religion*. This phenomenon comes to the fore in times of upheaval or crisis. Seeing that the culture is in trouble, and understanding that a particular religion was at its heart, the civilizational religionist seeks to use religion to rebuild culture, *regardless of its truth*.

A good recent example of this tendency was given in an essay written last year by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, titled “Why I am now a Christian.” Ali’s escape from the fundamentalist Islam of her Somali upbringing initially led her, quite understandably, into a prominent public role as a New Atheist. Recently, though, Ali announced that she had become a Christian.

The reason for her conversion was what made her essay on the subject so significant. Though, as she says, she “ultimately found life without any spiritual solace unendurable,” the main thrust of her essay made a very different argument. Her new faith, she argued, was adopted as a bulwark—or, perhaps, a weapon. In her words:

Western civilisation is under threat from three different but related forces: the resurgence of great-power authoritarianism and expansionism in the forms of the Chinese Communist Party and Vladimir Putin’s Russia; the rise of global Islamism, which threatens to mobilize a vast population against the West; and the viral spread of woke ideology, which is eating into the moral fibre of the next generation.

“Modern, secular tools,” wrote Ali, have not been enough to fend off these threats. We need, she suggests, something deeper. We need to understand that we live in what she calls a “civilisation built on the Judeo-Christian tradition.” “The lesson I learned from my years with the Muslim Brotherhood,” she wrote, “was the power of a unifying story.” The West should now learn the same lesson. Its unifying story is that same “Judeo-Christian tradition,” and it should now be deployed to fight what Ali calls the coming “civilisational war.”

This is civilizational Christianity in action, and we are going to see a lot more of it in the coming years, as our culture continues to fragment, at least partly due to the factors Ali identifies. When I hear Steve Bannon talking about “Christian nationalism” as the spearpoint of his holy war against the globalists, I hear a faint echo of what is coming. Civilizational Christianity puts civilization first and Christianity second. Its proponents are less interested in whether the faith is actually true or transformative than in what use it can be to them in their ongoing culture war.

The best-known current proponent of civilizational Christianity is the psychologist and pundit Jordan Peterson. For Peterson, Christianity is a Joseph Campbell-style hero’s journey, one specially designed for young men. In his short film “Message to the Christian Churches,” Peterson lays out his civilizational program and challenges the faith to keep up. Christianity, he tells us, in an echo of Ali’s argument, offers “a psychological approach to our ancient stories” that can help us oppose what he calls “an extremely damaging ideology.”

This ideology, predictably referred to elsewhere as “cultural Marxism,” tells us that Western culture is an “oppressive patriarchy,” that “human activity is fundamentally a planet-destroying exercise,” and that “damnable male ambition” is the root of the problem. Some of these fanatics, he tells us, believe that there should be “extreme limits on our wants, even on our needs.”

Extreme limits on our wants! Whatever would the Desert Fathers say?

Peterson goes on to lay out his case for the defense of civilization, which he defines as “a society centered on the encouraging, adventurous, masculine spirit.” The Christian Church, it turns out, exists to encourage this spirit. It is, he states,

there to remind people, young men included, and perhaps even first and foremost, that they have a woman to find, a garden to walk in, a family to nurture, an ark to build, a land to conquer, a ladder to heaven to

build, and the utter, terrible catastrophe of life to face stalwartly in truth, devoted to love, and without fear.

Do you see anything missing in this list of what the Church ought to be doing? That's right. It is Christ. It is Jesus. He gets not one mention. Not in the entire video. Neither does God the Father. Neither does the Holy Spirit. Instead, Peterson's civilizational Church is to be a self-help club for young men. It is to be a cultural institution, fighting back against the woke and the "bloody Gaia worshippers" and the feminists and the life-sapping cultural Marxists. It sees life as a catastrophe, and the correct response to that catastrophe as masculine conquest. What Jordan Peterson wants, in other words, is a church that looks like Jordan Peterson. "You're churches, for God's sake!" he exclaims at one point, in the only mention of God in the entire film. "Quit fighting for social justice! Quit saving the bloody planet! Attend to some souls! That's what you're supposed to do!"

Now, I was confused when I heard this, because dimly, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was sure I could remember a few scattered references to "social justice" in the Bible. So I went to check. The first page I opened contained this passage, from the Book of James:

Come now, you who are rich, weep, howling out at the miseries that are coming for you: your riches have spoiled and your garments have become moth-eaten; your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will serve as testimony against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have kept treasure in the last days. Look: the wages of the workers who have reaped your lands, which have been unfairly held back by you, clamour aloud, and the outcries of those who have reaped have entered the ears of the Lord Sabaoth. You lived on the earth in dainty luxury and self-indulgence. You have gorged your hearts on a day of slaughter. You have condemned—have murdered—the upright man.

This is an entirely typical passage; there are dozens like it throughout the New Testament, and indeed the Old, many of them from the mouth of Christ himself. *This* is Christianity. And as Ohiyesa knew, but Jordan Peterson apparently does not, it is founded upon a set of values inimical to those of our modern, expansionist, acquisitive, growth-obsessed, and apparently "masculine" civilization.

It might at this point be worth asking what a "civilization" actually is. It is generally defined as a way of living based around the *civitas*—the city. Like most people at most times, we probably assume that our way of life is normative and will persist. But it is worth noting that for 99 percent of human history, we have not been "civilized" at all. For most of that time, we were closer in our lifestyles to the picture painted of the Garden of Eden. Only in the last ten thousand years, in selected regions of the planet, has an urban way of living, constructed around settled agriculture, cities, states, and economies of accumulation and surplus, arisen. Only in the last hundred years has this model gone global. Given the record of past civilizations, there is no guarantee that this model will continue into the future.

When we look at the results of this development, we would have to say that the verdict was mixed. In the red column, we can see that the spread of human civilization has ravaged God's creation in an unprecedented fashion, just as it has created vast inequalities of wealth and warfare on a previously unimaginable scale. In the black column, we can see that civilization has created vast wealth and allowed us to visit the moon and extend our lifespans—although, according to anthropologists, only to the length that pre-civilized hunter-gatherers were enjoying anyway.

But what does any of this have to do with the Christian Way? With a God who made us to inhabit a garden, in communion with all life? A God who walked among us as a poor man preaching renunciation and love? What, actually, is spiritually beneficial about this "Western civilization"—or any civilization? After all, Babylon and Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, were as civilized as the ancient world got.

To find out, we might hold up the stated values of our civilization against the famous list of seven deadly sins. The list was compiled in the sixth century by Pope Gregory I. He based it on an earlier list of eight passions,

compiled by the fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus, which is still current in the Eastern Church. How is Western civilization doing today at fending off these sins?

Pride is celebrated everywhere—pride in nation, status, wealth, ethnic group, identity, religion. We have a month-long festival named for it. Greed is the basis of our economy. Along with envy, it is the cornerstone of the idol of our time, the universally worshiped god known as “economic growth.” If we were neither greedy nor envious, the economy would collapse in five minutes. Wrath is the fuel beneath the culture wars and all of our political factions. As for lust—find me a billboard or a film or a song or a brand of shoes that doesn’t piggyback on this most primal human passion. It is perhaps behind only gluttony in its ubiquity. Even sloth has been monetized. How else could something as oxymoronic as a “leisure industry” even exist?

Our entire civilization, then, not only fails to resist these deadly sins, but actively encourages them. They are the very basis of its existence. This, surely, is what Ohiyesa, and many other critics like him, many of them Christian, have been able to see. Are “Christianity and modern civilisation opposed and irreconcilable”? On this basis, I think we can say, unequivocally: Yes.

We could go further. It is not just “modern civilization,” as Ohiyesa wrote, or indeed Western civilization, that seems opposed to the Christian Way. It is *all* civilization. After all, the very foundation of an urban society based around agriculture, with wealth and power concentrated in kings and armies, is what Christ called “heaping your wealth into barns.” And we know what he thought of that.

When we read the life of Jesus of Nazareth, in fact, it is impossible not to see a man who was, in some fundamental sense, *uncivilized*. He did not tell us to get good jobs and save prudently. He told us to have no thought for the morrow. He did not tell us to generate wealth, so that economic growth could bring about global development. He told us to give everything away. The rich, he said repeatedly, could never attain the Kingdom of Heaven. He did not tell us to defend our frontiers, or to expand them. He told us never to resist evil. He did not tell us to be responsible citizens. He told us to leave our dead fathers unburied and follow him instead. He told us to hate our own parents and to love those who hated us. Every single one of these teachings, were we to follow them, would make the building of a civilization impossible.

What we are really hearing about, then, when we hear of defending or rebuilding “Christian civilization,” is not Christianity and its teachings at all, but modernity and its endgame. It is the idol of material progress—the progress that has shredded both culture and nature—which is causing such grief everywhere. “Christian civilization” is not a solution to this; it is part of the problem. And when actual Christianity is proposed instead, the response is so often the same: *Oh yes, that’s all very well, you fundamentalist—but what practical use is it?*

The answer is: None. Christianity is *impractical*. Impractical, intolerable, and awful, in the original sense of that word. It is terrifying, and it is designed to kill you. This is because the values of God and the world are inimical, as we are told repeatedly by Christ and all the saints. This, surely, is the beautiful mystery at the heart of this thing. God is not mocked. His wisdom is foolishness to the world, and vice versa. What this means to us is that our “civilizational war” in the name of Christ will fail, because Christ does not fight wars other than those that go on in the heart.

The essence of civilizational Christianity is the reshaping of this radically unworldly faith for very worldly ends: the defense of a certain kind of culture. The gospels become a weapon with which to fight a culture war in a collapsing civilization. But confusing the Christian way with the way of that civilization is a fatal error.

Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love God. Do not resist evil. Lay down your life for your friends. Rule by serving. Give away your wealth. Let the dead bury the dead. We have our orders. And how we hate them. How I hate them. Sometimes I can’t look at them, or at myself in their shadow. And so we twist them. We—all of us—use them to justify war and resistance and politics and wealth and power and all the human things that these orders instruct us to walk away from. *Oh, yes, I know he said that, we tell ourselves, but he really meant this.*

But what if he meant what he said, and we don't like it? As the Western collapse progresses, we all face a question: Will we follow our orders? Or will we twist them, again, to justify our role in a coming war?

When the tempter appears to Jesus in the desert before his ministry begins, he offers him control over all the kingdoms of the world, if only he will worship him, rather than God. Jesus, of course, rejects the deal.

In worldly terms, though, the devil's argument is quite rational. *Why not use your power for good?* he seems to be asking. Why not govern these kingdoms as an earthly ruler, wisely and justly, instead of wandering around in the sticks preaching to exiles and nobodies? Wouldn't you be better off engaging in politics for the greater good? You could build a Christian civilization.

The devil is, of course, wrong. But why? The answer seems to be that these are not the terms on which God operates. Jesus's work in the world is something very different, and what it shows is that God loves the meek, not the haughty; the humble, not the proud; the poor, not the rich. St. Paisios of Mount Athos, who died thirty years ago, was a radio operator during the Greek Civil War. "If you want to tune in to God so He listens to you when you pray," he once said, "turn the knob to humility, for on this frequency God always operates."

The Book of Kings seems to tell us the same thing. We may not find God where we expect to find him:

A great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

Did God intervene on earth just to give us another identity to fight over? Or to build us a civilization or an empire with a cross painted on it? Or did he tell us to live differently? To see differently. Literally, to *repent*, which in the original Greek *metanoia* does not mean "Say you're sorry," as I always used to believe, but rather: *Transform yourself*. Turn around, change your mind, change your heart, change your way of seeing. And through *that*: Change the world.

How can we know, how can we hope to know, what God wants from our time? When the prophet Habakkuk laments to God that his people are suffering injustice at the hands of foreign enemies, God replies to him directly. "Behold, you scoffers," he commands, "take notice; look and be amazed and be gone, for I am working a work in your days which you would not believe even if someone told it to you."

God goes on to explain to Habakkuk that he is "raising up against you" a "bitter and hasty nation," the Chaldeans, who will act as his instrument in correcting an Israel that has, yet again, strayed from his path. Speaking as a man whose country once ran the world's biggest empire, I sit up and think when God declares to Habakkuk: "Because you have plundered many nations, all the people who remain shall plunder you, because of the men's blood and the sins of the land, and of the city and all who dwell in it." It is a hard thing to hear, perhaps, but Ohiyesa would have had no problem understanding it.

I think now that we will recover a culture worth having only if we tune our radio dials to humility, as persons and as peoples. Our work is not to "defend the West." That's idol worship. Our work is *repentance*, which means *transformation*. We have to be prepared to die—and thus reborn. I am speaking as someone who is, most of the time, afraid even to contemplate what this might demand of me.

But I believe there is wisdom to be found for us, in this disintegrating age, not in crusading knights or Christian nationalists, not in emperors or soldiers, but in the mystics, the ascetics, the hermits of the caves, and the wild saints of the forest and the desert. These were the people who built a real Christian culture. So did the simple, everyday lovers of God in the world, who tended to the poor and the sick for no reward. As the gates of Rome were breached by Goths, as Ireland and England were invaded by Vikings, as the Ottomans overcame Constantinople, as the communists dynamited cathedrals and crucified monks, they kept on. They did their

work. They did not fight for civilization; they fought for Christ. And they fought not with swords, but with prayer and with active love for their neighbors and enemies. Without that love, the devil wins.

We are, I am sure now, living through the end of something. We are in what the Sufi philosopher René Guénon called “the darkness between worlds.” We should accept it; even, if we have the strength, embrace it. We should use it as an opportunity to sharpen the blade of our souls on the stone of the world. Christians, of all people, should know the drill by now. We cannot see where this is leading, but any suffering that is undergone as this world falls down around us may lead us on to better things. Who, after all, would have predicted in 1980 the resurgence of the Russian Church? For that matter, which of Christ’s followers would have predicted in a.d. 33, sitting at the foot of the cross and watching their teacher die in agony, the incomprehensible global force that his agony would spark?

Cultures, I sometimes think, are built by accident. If at the heart of all cultures is a sacred jewel—a revealed truth—if all cultures have a spiritual essence, well, then it comes from spiritual work. The monks built the West, just as surely as the soldiers did, and they built the more enduring part. “Christian civilisation,” wrote the liturgical artist Hilary White recently, “is the secondary fruit of Christian mysticism.” This is the essential point. Prayer is the heart of the matter. Christ is the heart of the matter. Without the heart, there is no body. Trying to work backward—to build a body, as it were, with no heart—is an impossibility. The notion of pretending to believe in Christianity because you approve of its fruits and want, somehow, to see them return, is a dead end and a dead duck. C. S. Lewis spotted the trap:

Religions devised for a social purpose, like Roman emperor-worship or modern attempts to “sell” Christianity as a means of “saving civilisation,” do not come to much. The little knots of Friends who turn their backs on the “World” are those who really transform it.

And does that not sound like a classic Christian paradox? If you want to save your life, you must lose it. If you want to transform the world, you must turn your back on it.

What do we want, we who live in this time of decline and confusion? Do we want a restoration—or a transformation? Do we want war—or repentance? Do we want civilization—or do we want Christ? What if we can have only the one or the other?

It would be easy to “fight for the West” using anger and bitterness as our fuel. Plenty are doing it. Plenty more will join them. It’s easy to identify the enemy. Easy to forget we are supposed to love him. None of that is good enough. None of that is Christian. I am saying all this to remind myself, as much as anyone else, where the true path lies. It isn’t in “Christian civilization.” It is in something much harder: Christian love.

Perhaps we should leave the last word to Ohiyesa, a man who saw the dismemberment of his world but somehow never lost faith. It was his worldview, forged through that suffering and struggle, that allowed him to see his way:

We know that all religious aspiration, all sincere worship, can have but one source and goal. We know that the God of the educated and the God of the child, the God of the civilized and the God of the primitive is after all the same God; and that this God does not measure our differences, but embraces all who live rightly and humbly on the earth.

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Source: <https://firstthings.com/against-christian-civilization/>