

PRAISE FOR *THE GATHERING STORM*

“At the heart of Al Mohler’s powerful new book is a fundamental truth: for all of us, what we believe profoundly influences the way we live. Most people of faith understand that argument, even while we try to ignore or dismiss the rise of militant, uncompromising secularism in every corner of our culture. Dr. Mohler shows the way that the undermining of religious values contributes to a host of acute national problems, from the beginning of life through its very end. *The Gathering Storm* offers a timely warning that can help Christians and their allies understand and overcome some of the menacing forces increasingly surrounding us.”

—MICHAEL MEDVED, RADIO TALK SHOW HOST,
AUTHOR OF *GOD’S HAND ON AMERICA*

“In the midst of our cultural and moral decay, Albert Mohler stands as one of this generation’s most incisive thinkers and articulate communicators. These gifts and more are on full display in *The Gathering Storm*. In this book Mohler triages the myriad challenges before contemporary Christians, and skillfully prescribes the most biblically faithful way forward. According to Mohler, these are not times for despair, but sober mindedness, conviction, and courage. I pray this book is widely read, and this message is well heeded.”

—JASON K. ALLEN, PRESIDENT OF MIDWESTERN BAPTIST
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AND SPURGEON COLLEGE

“We who now live in the late modern age witness a great falling apart, a center that may not hold,” warns Dr. Albert Mohler in his new book *The Gathering Storm*. Dr. Mohler is not an alarmist. So I say to you: If Al Mohler is worried, you should be worried. Very worried. This book is not a call to arms so much as a *cri de cœur* aimed at everyone who is not yet cut off from hearing an argument from the other side on anything. Mohler has surveyed the field of difficult issues and barely can find a hopeful sign. Again: Be worried. Be very worried. But don’t be paralyzed. Read. Think. Pray. Start with this book and with everything Al Mohler has to say.”

—HUGH HEWITT

“Speaking moral and spiritual truth to political, economic, and cultural power is never easy. At different times and in different places, however, it is more difficult or less. Today it is very difficult indeed—which explains why so few Christians or others are willing to do it. Many preachers, teachers, and ordinary folks go silent. Some even yield to ideologies that are antithetical to the moral teachings of Christianity and often the world’s other major religious traditions and to the principles of natural law and natural rights that have shaped the best in our own cultural history, including the founding of the United States as a nation ‘conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.’ Albert Mohler, however, refuses to be bullied into acquiescence or silence. His is a prophetic and unapologetic Christian voice speaking truth to power. In every corner of the Christian community his words should be heard and heeded.”

—ROBERT P. GEORGE, MCCORMICK PROFESSOR OF
JURISPRUDENCE, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

“In *The Gathering Storm*, Albert Mohler brilliantly addresses the primary worldview, cultural, and moral challenges of our day, showing us why these issues are so critical for us to comprehend. Recognizing that all too often Christians have struggled to grasp the far-reaching implications of these matters, this timely and theologically informed volume enables us to see with greater clarity the advances of secularization in all spheres of life. Moreover, Mohler, one of the twenty-first century’s most incisive Christian thinkers, offers wise and insightful cultural commentary connected with an urgent warning about what is really at stake for individuals, families, churches, and the culture at-large. This excellent book should be essential reading for pastors, Christian educators, and laypersons across the land. Highly recommended!”

—DAVID S. DOCKERY, PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE
FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION; AND DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF
THEOLOGY, SOUTHWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

“Al Mohler’s new book is for all people concerned about Western secularism’s swelling tide, especially as it affects the church. His chapter on the church cites my own United Methodist denomination’s civil war over marriage and sexuality, which should warn all Christians about compromising historic Christian ethical teaching. Heterodox theology and ethics are no longer just threats in liberal mainline denominations. They now swirl within evangelical churches. Mohler reminds us that these tides may swirl but they will not overwhelm the Rock.”

—MARK TOOLEY, PRESIDENT OF THE INSTITUTE
ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

THE GATHERING STORM

SECULARISM, CULTURE, AND THE CHURCH

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.



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BOOKS

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ISBN 978-1-4002-2023-6 (eBook)

ISBN 978-1-4002-2021-2 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4002-2025-0 (TP)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020933306

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Katie and Riley Barnes

*Just a few years ago it was my honor to
introduce to the happy congregation*

“Mr. and Mrs. Riley Barnes.”

*Our daughter and her husband united in marriage,
a new son a member of our family, faith, hope,
happiness, and love revealed again. Since then,
you have blessed us in countless ways, but Mary
and I count two gifts above all others.*

*Thank you for letting us share the unimaginable
joy of loving Benjamin and Henry as grandsons,
and for being such wonderful parents.*

*Your sweet home is filled with the love of
Christ and love for the church and constant
hospitality. Together, you are an oasis of joy.
We could not be more proud and thankful.*

Love always, Papa

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INTRODUCTION

The Storm Gathers

Since I was in the eighth grade, Winston Churchill has been a figure of fascination and inspiration. One of the great leaders of history, he was also one of the most interesting personalities of any era. He lived his life on the stage of history, and he believed himself to be playing an important role on that stage. Indeed, the survival of freedom in the modern age cannot be told without him.

One great question has always vexed me. How could Winston Churchill's prophetic warnings about the rise of the Nazi threat have been so right, and yet so ignored, for so long? That is one of the great perplexities of the twentieth century.

For most of the 1930s, Churchill was a political outcast in Britain. Those were his "wilderness years," when Churchill was warning of the rise of Nazi Germany and the political class in Britain (and most of Europe) was determined not to see what Churchill saw. The horrors of the First World War were still too recent and too overpowering.

But Churchill was right, and that is why he was brought back into the government the very day that Britain declared war on Germany and finally moved to stop the march of Nazi aggression. That is why, in 1940, King George VI summoned Churchill to Buckingham Palace and asked him to serve as prime minister. The rest is history.

In his massive six-volume history of the war, Churchill entitled

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the first volume “The Gathering Storm,” covering Europe’s long years of denial about the Nazi threat. The title captured my attention years ago. Churchill’s choice of words was perfect. He was documenting a storm that was gathering in public view for all to see—if they only *would* see. Summarizing his case, Churchill described the volume as the story of “how the English-speaking peoples through their unwisdom, carelessness, and good nature allowed the wicked to return.”¹ And, of course, to rearm.

I have borrowed Winston Churchill’s title, for I see a gathering storm that already presents itself as a tremendous challenge to the faithfulness of the Christian church. Actually, this storm has been on the horizon and working its way through history for over a century now, but in our own day with a dramatic strengthening and acceleration. This is the gathering storm of the secular age.

Historical analogies are always imperfect. The storm of the secular age is not so easily identified as the rise of the Nazi threat, nor is it focused on one movement, one leader, or even one readily summarized set of ideas. But, make no mistake, it is a storm.

My main point in borrowing Churchill’s title is to borrow his main argument as well—the first task of faithfulness lies in understanding reality. Understanding the storm and seeing it for what it is turns out to be a necessary first step.

The increasingly secular character of our age presents Christians with a new and daunting set of challenges. We have witnessed the displacement of Christianity within the culture of the nations throughout Western Europe and Canada, and now in the United States as well. In the US, we can easily point to robust church attendance in some sectors and the more general fact that a majority of Americans still claim, in some sense, a Christian identity, but those numbers are falling fast.

In October 2019, the Pew Research Center released a major new report, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” The research indicates that though 65 percent of Americans

identified as Christians when asked about their religion, that was actually a decrease of 12 percent in just ten years.² The math is easy to project into the future. The decline of Christian identity is particularly pronounced among younger Americans, and fully one-third of those age thirty-five and younger report no religious affiliation. Americans had long believed that we were an exceptional nation and that secularization was a European reality, not ours. We can afford that illusion no longer. America is on the same trajectory, just on a somewhat delayed timetable.

The most familiar word for the process we are witnessing is secularization. Scholars debate the term aggressively, but it points to a process that has been taking hold in modern societies since the dawn of the modern age. It does not mean that all people in these societies become truly secular, or irreligious, but it does mean that Christianity, which forged the moral and spiritual worldview of Western civilization, is being displaced. The society itself is progressively secularized.

The secular age is not inhabited by people who necessarily identify as secular. They may consider themselves “spiritual” and may even cite a religious affiliation as a matter of family identity. The key issue is that the society is distanced from Christian theism as the fundamental explanation of the world and as the moral structure of human society. Christian truth claims have lost all binding authority in the culture, and the loss of that binding authority is the most important fact. Most secular people claim no aggressively secular identity, but biblical Christianity no longer binds their consciences or grounds their fundamental values.

Oliver Roy, a prominent observer of secularization in the European context, correctly argues that the argument over secularization theory misses the essential point—that Western societies are being progressively “dechristianized.” Sadly, as he noted: “Dechristianization never takes a step backward.”³

Sometimes, the process is demanded by secularists, who see

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belief in God as a great obstacle to human progress. For the most part the real challenge is not secularism, but secularization—a process that happens in a society largely without argument or notice. The binding authority of Christian theism—the biblically grounded understanding of God and the world—just fades away, replaced with a new worldview.

In his recent book, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, historian Tom Holland argued that our civilization cannot be understood without the central role played by Christianity. He went on to argue that even our secular age cannot be understood apart from the historic framework of Christianity. He documented the rise of major moral and political movements of modern times and made the case that they are extensions of Christian moral impulses, even if their basic ideology is secular. In an amazing sentence, he wrote: “Christianity, it seemed, had no need of actual Christians for its assumptions still to flourish.”⁴

That sentence makes no sense to a believing Christian. It is simply untrue that Christian morality can exist for long without Christian belief. The residual influence of biblical Christianity in the larger culture existed for some time, but the pressures of the late modern age, and especially of the sexual revolution, are eroding and openly opposing even that residual influence.

Holland is right that our culture, even in its present secularizing form, cannot be explained without Christianity. But, by now, it is clear that those who are in the driver’s seat in our culture are doing their best to deny that history and to marginalize the Christian worldview in the dominant society.

The secular age writes checks it cannot cash. It claims to uphold human rights even as it undercuts any argument for human dignity and natural rights. It invents new rights (like same-sex marriage) at the expense of fundamental rights (such as religious liberty). It claims a high view of human dignity, but aborts millions of unborn human beings in the womb. The pattern goes on and on.

A half century ago, the German intellectual Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde presented what is now known as the “Böckenförde Dilemma”: “Does the free, secularized state exist on the basis of normative presuppositions that it itself cannot guarantee?”⁵ That is a central dilemma of our times. Severed from the Christian worldview that gave it birth, the modern Western worldview cannot account for human dignity, human rights, or any objective system of right and wrong. As Quaker theologian D. Elton Trueblood warned many years ago, America and its allies were fast becoming “cut-flower civilizations,” which, cut off from Christian roots, were destined to wither and die.⁶

There is now a robust debate among conservative theologians and political theorists over the question of the classical liberal tradition that became the framework for the concept of liberty that has been treasured by what Churchill called “the English-speaking world.” This tradition became the central argument for the ordered liberty and constitutional self-government of the British and American political traditions. But classical liberalism (which produced both the conservative and the liberal political arguments in the United States) is now breaking down.

A central fact of the storm now gathering strength is moral liberalism, which cannot be explained without the dechristianization of society. Moral liberalism has basically become the dominant moral commitment of the most influential sectors of American society, from the universities to the entertainment industry and the artistic centers and the mass media and the titans of Silicon Valley. Apparently, to be hyper-modern is also to be hyper-liberal in moral worldview.

Do Christians believe enough biblical truth to withstand the moral liberalism of the age? Cultural forms of Christianity have been largely dechristianized and tamed, and nominal Christianity is fast disappearing. There is no social capital to be gained by joining a congregation defined by biblical truth. To the contrary, such

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membership will now destroy social capital. Liberal Protestantism is the quintessence of cultural Christianity, and the culture prevailed over Christianity long ago. Are evangelicals and other conservative Christians in the United States prepared to be considered enemies of the regime?

Political scientist Patrick J. Deneen understands that political and moral liberalism now lacks even the self-awareness to recognize the abyss. In his words, “The breakdown of family, community, and religious norms and institutions, especially among those benefiting least from liberalism’s advance, has not led liberalism’s discontents to seek a restoration of those norms. That would take effort and sacrifice in a culture that now diminishes the value of both.”⁷

One of Winston Churchill’s great virtues was his ability to see the storm and then to summon the courage and conviction to go into the storm. That is the challenge faced by Christians in the United States today—to see the storm and to understand it, and then to demonstrate the courage to face the storm. We must see the storm and understand it, if we are to be faithful to Christ in this secular age.

As Churchill observed as he brought that first volume of his great history of World War II to a close: “Facts are better than dreams.”⁸

ONE

THE GATHERING STORM OVER WESTERN CIVILIZATION

It was as if Western civilization was burning, right before our eyes. The great cathedral known throughout the centuries as Notre-Dame de Paris burned through the April night, and the damage was catastrophic. The majestic cathedral that had symbolized Paris for more than nine hundred years was a smoldering ember.

Notre Dame's iconic image is more than a feat of architectural genius; the cathedral stood as an essential monolith of Western civilization, signifying the central role of Christianity in the development of European identity. Indeed, the very design of the structure itself marked the emergence of Gothic architecture—an architectural style intended above all else to communicate the transcendence and glory of God. Gothic architecture intends to make a person entering through its space feel small, almost *infinitesimal*. The seemingly endless perpendicular lines lead the eyes upward even as the magnitude of the space appears breathtaking. The message sent by the architecture of the cathedrals was clear—the cosmos is all about the glory of God.

The great cathedrals of Europe, and their successors elsewhere,

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were intended to make a huge statement of Christian identity for the entire society. For centuries, the landscape of Europe would be dominated by the cathedrals and their soaring towers and spires. The message would be clear.

The relevance of Notre Dame's fire to the crisis of Western civilization was there for all to see, but few seemed to see it. The story of Western civilization cannot be told without the cathedrals of Europe. The fact that cathedrals like Notre Dame would for centuries dominate the skyline of European cities points to the central role of Christianity in providing the worldview that made Western civilization possible. The basic tenets of Christian theology and ethics constructed the superstructure of European culture, providing its morality, basic truth claims, understanding of the cosmos, and language of meaning.

And all of that was burning, but the threat to the values of Western culture had already been burning for some time.

Notre Dame's history chronicles the erosion of Christianity's dominance over Western civilization. The gathering storm of secularism can be told through the narrative of arguably the most recognized cathedral in the world. More than mere bricks and mortar, Notre Dame's story captures the sorrow of secularism and its corrosive determination to exterminate the influence of the Christian worldview.

A Tale of the Times

When the French Revolution swept through the streets of Paris, the radical revolutionaries sought to eradicate the Christian heritage of France. On October 10, 1793, the revolutionaries marched into Notre Dame and replaced the statue of the Virgin Mary with a statue to the goddess of reason.

And so, a society framed, forged, and founded entirely upon the

Christian worldview tried to purge itself of all Christian vestiges. The French Revolution pursued a radical vision of a secular worldview governed not by religious belief, but by the Cult of Reason. But, predictably, the Cult of Reason failed—it could not maintain the revolutionary movement. When the French Revolution dethroned God, it plunged French society into “The Terror”—a mayhem of madness and murder. The revolution revealed secularism’s utter inadequacy to establish a civilization and order a society.

Thus, in 1794, what was called the Cult of the Supreme Being replaced the Cult of Reason. This in no way marked a return by the French to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—they did not return to the trinitarian God of the Bible. Instead, the French created a new god in their own image. They created a new cosmic deity they hoped would serve as a necessary check upon revolutionary passions.

Then, in 1801, Napoleon reestablished the Roman Catholic Church as the state religion in France, but he did so as a pointed maneuver. The church remained subservient to the autocratic and totalitarian regime of Napoleon Bonaparte as emperor. He did not grant the church autonomy in his empire; but he understood the church’s value as an institution of morality, which he saw as necessary for a well-ordered society. Napoleon viewed the Christian tradition pragmatically—a tool to maintain order rather than the foundation of a societal worldview. Indeed, by the early twentieth century, the French government even claimed ownership of the major church buildings in France, including Notre Dame.

It is the French state, therefore, which is to rebuild Notre Dame, not the Roman Catholic Church. Though the Catholic Church utilizes the cathedral for its religious purposes, it does not own the cathedral. Furthermore, the French are now engaged in a great debate over the future of the cathedral. Will it be returned to its formal grandeur, or will it now become a monument to post-modern confusion? More likely, it will be the latter.

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When the storm of secularism thunders on the horizon, it often seems unassuming, undaunting, a mere change in the weather. But secularism will seduce a civilization away from the very foundations that it stood upon for centuries. The tale of Notre Dame points to the endgame of secularism: what was once a testament to Christianity's centrality to the culture is now mostly a civic monument and symbol of French nationalism. Indeed, when the French president Emmanuel Macron issued his statement, he mourned the loss of a national treasure—a sentiment devoid of theological reflection or the significance of the cathedral within the nation's Christian heritage.

This is no longer a surprising response, and the pattern is hardly limited to France. Something fundamental has reshaped our entire culture. In Europe, the process is now very advanced, and the dechristianization of European societies is now largely true in Canada, where the society is in this respect far more like Europe than the United States, which is right across its border. In the US, we can see the same process now in play, and accelerating. Eventually, this process will reshape the entire culture. It is happening right now, right before our eyes.

The Secular Advance

The West's new cultural and moral environment did not emerge from a vacuum. Massive intellectual changes have shaped and reshaped Western culture since the dawn of the Enlightenment. At the heart of this great intellectual shift is a secular reframing of reality.

Secular, in terms of contemporary sociological and intellectual conversation, refers to the absence of any binding theistic authority or belief. It is both an ideology, which is known as *secularism*, and a consequence, which is known as *secularization*. The latter is not an ideology; it is a concept and a sociological process whereby

societies become less theistic, and in our context that means less Christian in general outlook. As societies move into conditions of deeper and more progressive modernity, they move out of a situation in which religious belief—and specifically, belief in the God of the Bible—provided the binding authority that held society together and provided a common morality, a common understanding of the world, and a common concept of what it meant to be human. Secularizing societies move into conditions in which there is less and less theistic belief and authority until there is hardly even a memory that such a binding authority had ever existed.

The secularization of Europe has happened over the course of more than two hundred years. What began as a parlor game of the philosophers has now become the ideological engine of society. In Europe, events like the French Revolution were accelerants, but so were two devastating world wars in the twentieth century. For many reasons, America did not track with Europe's secularization schedule. For at least a century, America resisted the secularization of Western society in ways that perplexed many in the intellectual class. In some Scandinavian countries, less than 2 percent of the people attend church regularly, whereas an estimated 40 percent of Americans at least claim to be regular church attendees. The vast majority of Americans at least say they believe in God. Those statistics have led many American Christians to believe that the majority of Americans share the same general beliefs about God, morality, and the meaning of the world.

Yet, there is one sector of American public life that has kept pace with Europe's secularization—American universities. If secularization is ultimately about the evaporation of religious belief and its binding authority, then this process has certainly prevailed in the American university culture. The closer one gets to most American colleges or universities, the closer one gets to a secular public space—an intellectually secular place. Moreover, the engines of the culture are the intellectual elites. And where are they gathered in

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the most concentrated form for optimal influence upon the young? On the college and university campus. The intellectual class and the academic elites, representing a far more radical vision of America than what most of America understood, saw where the future lives—in the youth.

The secularization that America has largely avoided in the past is alive in its institutions of higher learning and has finally been unleashed on the nation through many successive generations of students who have had their worldview shaped by the secular, intellectual elites. Thus, the intellectual conditions of America are quantitatively and qualitatively different from those that prevailed in the culture just twenty years ago. The storm of secular thought, which has inundated the nations of Europe, has now spread over the Atlantic. We can now see the effects on our society, with a revolution in morality, ethics, and total worldview on the horizon.

The American and European thinkers who first tried to understand what was happening thought of religion's decline—Christianity specifically—as a process that the modern age would unleash automatically. To be modern would be to abandon belief in God. The old Christian morality would melt away and a new secular morality, including a new sexual morality, would replace it.

But, as it happened, the hard atheism and agnosticism that marked the intellectual and political elites was not followed by the general population. Instead, what happened among the millennials was the advance of a great religious indifference. In the words of Stephen Carter, a law professor at Yale University, God became a hobby, with fewer and fewer serious hobbyists.¹

Peter Berger, one of the most insightful scholars of secularization, came to the conclusion that the United States was secularizing, but following a different pattern than was seen in Europe.² As Berger has explained, in twentieth-century America, Christianity and religion in general were transformed to something noncognitive and optional. Belief and doctrines became less important, and

often receded in meaning. As a result, the binding authority of the Christian moral tradition or of any religious tradition was lost. Consequently, many of our friends and neighbors continue to profess faith in God, but that profession is increasingly empty of any moral authority or serious intellectual content. From the outside looking in, America did not appear to be secularizing at the same rate as Europe. In reality, however, professions of faith in God had less and less real theological or spiritual substance. America is slipping into its own Notre Dame moment—and our own society is far more secular than most Americans understand. And now, the leading trends in the United States point toward a far more aggressive secularization in the future. America is beginning to look like Europe, and it appears to be catching up fast.

Berger predicted that the collapse of conscious religious commitments coupled with the breakdown of binding authority would lead to the fact that, in the face of cultural opposition, belief in God or religious principles would quickly capitulate to the secular agenda—which is exactly what is happening in the larger culture. Just ten years ago, most polls showed that a majority of Americans opposed same-sex marriage. Yet, in our day, a majority—that includes many of the very same people polled one decade ago—has rendered an opposite moral judgment on the same issue. Just as Berger explained, when the cultural tide turned against our society's empty religious commitments, people were happy to jettison their moral judgment on homosexuality in order to retain their social standing. They adjusted their religious beliefs and moral judgments in order to be “on the right side of history,” as the culture's progressives directed.

One of the clearer developments in the past two decades has been the inevitable collision between religious liberty—America's most cherished “first freedom”—and the newly invented sexual liberties. Most urgently, the collision was caused by the legalization of same-sex marriage by the Supreme Court in 2015. In recent years,

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it has become clear that the entire LGBTQ movement represents a clear challenge to anyone who would hold to the historic, biblical position on sexual morality and marriage.

Thus, the backdrop of the 2020 presidential election further reveals the pervasive secularism redefining the traditional foundations of Western civilization. The Democratic primary has especially highlighted the pace of secularism's demands. Many of the candidates ran as far to the left as possible, attempting to outdo one another in radical positions that would have been unthinkable in their party only four years ago. What political reality have we slipped in to where Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and a former contender for the Democratic presidential nomination argued for the abortion of unborn babies as *the Christian* thing to do?

Indeed, the candidacy of South Bend mayor Pete Buttigieg—who is homosexual and married to a man—serves as a prime example. Buttigieg identifies as a Christian and a member of the Episcopal church, and he calls for a resurgence of liberal Christianity. In his view, the eclipse of traditional Christian sexual morality is a liberation of human sexuality. In effect, he claims a Christian identity while excavating Christianity of its nonnegotiable teachings, including the very definition of marriage. But there is no true Christianity without this truth and doctrine. Buttigieg is symbolic of secularizing Christianity that does not embrace a hard form of secularism. Buttigieg's candidacy shows the radical shift in the understanding of Christianity in our culture and its attempt to depart from the explicit teachings of the Bible—a departure of Christianity from its historic and scriptural roots. Buttigieg, moreover, contended that his Christian faith led him to no other conclusion than a secular, progressive agenda, which supports unfettered access to abortion and every aspect of the sexual revolution. Buttigieg tried to make a *theological* argument for rejecting historic Christian teaching. He asserted a new secular orthodoxy as the only viable way to read the

Bible. He posited a place for religion in the public square, but only a religion in line with his secularized theology.

Buttigieg's candidacy, though important as a political development, is even more important as an indicator of the direction in which our culture is headed. Historic Christianity is now increasingly either rejected outright or relegated to having no significance in the culture. Or, as in the case of Buttigieg, Christianity is redefined to meet the new "arc" of progressive morality.

The Impossibility of Belief

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has carefully traced the influence and effects of secularization on the Western world. As he explained in his important book *A Secular Age*, the way people hold to theological convictions and religious principles in the modern era is fundamentally different from how people believed in the past.³ Modernity has made religious belief provisional, optional, and far less urgent than it was in the premodern world. As Taylor noted, on this side of modernity, when people believe, they make *a choice to believe* that previous generations did not make. For many people, belief is now nothing more than an exercise of personal autonomy.

Taylor also helpfully showed that Western history can be defined by three intellectual epochs: pre-Enlightenment impossibility of unbelief; post-Enlightenment possibility of unbelief; and late-modern impossibility of belief. In the pre-Enlightenment era, it was impossible not to believe. One simply could not explain the world without some appeal either to the Bible or to some other form of supernaturalism. No other worldviews were available to members of society other than supernatural worldviews, particularly the Christian worldview in the West. While society had its heretics, there were no real atheists among them. Everyone believed in some form of theism, even if it was confused.

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That all changed with the Enlightenment and the availability of alternative worldviews. These new alternative worldviews made it possible for members of society to reject the supernaturalism of Christianity or other theistic systems in exchange for a naturalistic worldview. At this point it became *possible not to believe*. Yet, even in this intellectual climate, it was still unlikely that the average educated person would reject the Christian worldview because the theistic explanations for life were simply more pervasive, binding, and persuasive than nontheistic worldviews.

But for many people in the present age, it is the third intellectual condition that prevails. In their mental and social world, it is *impossible to believe*. That means, especially in terms of the intellectual elites and the culture formative sectors of society, theism is not an available worldview. Many people in the most privileged sectors of our modern societies do not even *know* a believing Christian. They are no longer even haunted by the remains of a Christian frame of mind. They are truly secular.

Significantly, Taylor pinpoints this unbelief as a lack of conscious commitment to a self-existent, self-revealing God. Secularization is not about rejecting all religion. Taylor noted that people in the current hyper-secularized culture in America often consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. Secularization, according to Taylor, rejects belief in a personal God, one who holds and exerts authority. He described the secular age as deeply “cross-pressured” in its personal experience of some spirituality and rejection of the personal authority of God. The issue is binding authority.

In these cultural conditions, Christians are the new intellectual outlaws. Entering a discussion based on a theistic or theological claim is to break a cardinal rule of late modernity by moving from a proposition or question to an obligation; or moving from an “is” to an “ought.” Some “oughts” remain, of course, but the language of command and law and authority have been explicitly secularized and carefully reduced in scope. Secularization in America has

been attended by a moral revolution without precedent and without endgame. The cultural engines of progress driving toward personal autonomy and fulfillment will not stop until the human being is completely self-defining. This process requires the explicit rejection of Christian morality for the project of human liberation.

In 1983, theologian Carl F. H. Henry prophetically warned,

If modern culture is to escape the oblivion that has engulfed the earlier civilizations of man, the recovery of the will of the self-revealed God in the realm of justice and law is crucially imperative. Return to pagan misconceptions of divinized rulers, or a divinized cosmos, or a quasi-Christian conception of natural law or natural justice will bring inevitable disillusionment. Not all pleas for transcendent authority will truly serve God or man. By aggrandizing law and human rights and welfare to their sovereignty, all manner of earthly leaders eagerly preempt the role of the divine and obscure the living God of scriptural revelation. The alternatives are clear: we return to the God of the Bible or we perish in the pit of lawlessness.⁴

Writing even earlier, Henry had already identified the single greatest intellectual obstacle to a cultural return to the God of the Bible. Released in 1976, Henry's first volume of his six-volume magnum opus *God, Revelation, and Authority* began with this line: "No fact of contemporary Western life is more evident than the growing distrust of final truth and its implacable questioning of any sure word."⁵ This obstacle inhibiting the return to the authority of a Christian worldview is part of a vicious circle that begins with the departure from at least a cultural impression of God's revealed authority. Departing a Christian worldview leads to a distrust of final truth and a rejection of universal authority, which then hides the way back to the God of the Bible.

The story of the rise of secularism is a stunning intellectual and

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moral revolution. It defies exaggeration. We must recognize that it is far more pervasive than we might want to believe, for this intellectual revolution has changed the worldviews of even many of those who believe themselves to be opposed to it. If nothing else, many religious believers in modern societies now operate as theological and ideological consumers, constantly shopping for new intellectual clothing, even as they believe themselves to be traditional believers. They are the same old words, after all.

Christian ministers, theologians, and thinkers who stand on biblical authority break the rules by engaging the culture based on the self-revelation of a self-existent God with ultimate moral authority who has addressed his creatures with *oughts* and who does and will finally judge according to his laws and commands. This culture grows more and more resistant to a God—any god—who would speak to us with words such as “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” The fact that Christians enter every conversation as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who are bound by biblical revelation means they cannot begin without breaking the new rules. And we must remember those who break the rules are not welcome by those who *make* the rules.

We Must Protest

Christians reading this may respond in one of two ways. One, we can respond in utter despair, retreating together to the corners of coffee shops with a false sense of nostalgia that longs for the past—usually idealized. But, as biblical Christians, we are called to live in the present and prepare the next generation for the future.

The second response is equally erroneous. We might be tempted to look for rescue in political victory—believing that a retreat of secular thinking is only one election away. In other words, Christians might, and indeed have, attempt to rescue society through a social,

political movement. While we must never demean the importance of elections nor diminish the responsible stewardship Christians have with their vote, we also dare not believe political victory will secure ultimate and lasting peace. Rescue will not come by mere politics. We do not need a political movement. We need a theological protest.

True Christianity and true gospel preaching depend on a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture. That is why, since the time of the Enlightenment, the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture have been under constant attack. In the Enlightenment, modernist philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant confronted Western culture with a series of questions that ultimately transformed the notion of truth in the Western mind. The result was a totalitarian imposition of the critical model of rationality upon all truth, the claim that only scientific data can be objectively understood, objectively defined, and objectively defended. In other words, the modernist worldview does not allow for the concept of special revelation and openly attacked the possibility of supernatural intervention in world history. Modernity thus presented the church of the Lord Jesus Christ with a significant intellectual crisis.

In the United States, a quintessentially American philosophy known as pragmatism also challenged the ultimate authority and truthfulness of Scripture. Pragmatism was the idea that truth is a matter of social negotiation and that ideas are merely instrumental tools whose “truthfulness” will be determined by whether they meet the particular needs of the present time. In the eyes of the pragmatists, ideas are nothing but provisional response to actual challenges; and truth, by definition, is relative to the time, place, need, and person.

As most of us are aware, modernity has given way to post modernity, which is simply modernity in its latest guise—postmodernism is nothing more than the logical extension of modernism in a new mood. Claiming that all notions of truth are

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socially constructed, postmodernists are committed to total war on truth itself. This is the consequence of the secularization that has poisoned Western civilization. Secularization has birthed this postmodern moment, which has led to a deconstructionist project bent on the casting down of any religious or theological authority.

Christians must not retreat nor find our salvation in a false hope. We must, with every fiber of our God-given strength, with full dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit, with every ounce of conviction we can muster through prayer, with unwavering courage, *protest* this secular moment.

The only way to escape the rationalist claims of modernism or the hermeneutical nihilism of postmodernism is the doctrine of revelation—a return to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Christians must remember that in the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture bequeathed to us by the Reformers, we can have confidence in God's Word despite the philosophical and theological problems of the age. God has spoken to us in a reasonable way, in language we can understand, and has given us the gift of revelation, which is God's gracious disclosure of himself.

The gathering storm over Western civilization—the secularism that has wrought utter moral chaos in places like Europe—has blanketed the horizon in deep shadow and darkness. So many have celebrated this unforgiving storm. But Christians are in a unique predicament. We can confront the culture because we truly love our neighbor, and as such we work for the preservation of what is good and faithful—good laws that promote human dignity and uphold justice and righteousness. But, at the same time, we cannot attribute ultimate allegiance to any culture, but only to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's evangelicals, as the theological heirs of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many others, cannot capitulate to the demands for a revolution in Christian doctrine and morality. An affirmation of the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible has stood at the center of the evangelical faith since the sixteenth century—and as

the heirs of the Christian faith for more than two thousand years. We are those who confess, along with the faithful throughout the centuries, that *when Scripture speaks, God speaks*. Scripture alone is the ultimate authority for life and doctrine. In a sense, a Christian theology hangs on the accuracy of that singular proposition.

The Christian church cannot long survive without the church's explicit commitment to the authority of Scripture, and to the Lord Jesus Christ above all else. Without the authority of Scripture, our theological convictions will mirror the secularism of the larger society—we will merely espouse conjectures rather than finite and lasting convictions, and our preaching will dwindle to nothing more than a display of empty promises.

As Christians continue to face the stiff wind of opposition from the storm of the secular age, we must continue to be faithful. We must say and tell what we know to be true. We must protest every false gospel and every erroneous worldview that diminishes human flourishing. We must continue to hold fast to the core theological convictions of the Christian faith and to the primacy and authority of Scripture. We must not fail in seeing Scripture rightly proclaimed, the church built up, and the message of the gospel stretched to every corner of the earth.

All Authority

The secular age undermines the very conditions that make our civilization possible. The secular storm we face undercuts all notions of authority, placing on the throne the subjective self—a false notion of liberated humanity freed from the shackles of theism and the biblical worldview. The gathering storm we face threatens nothing less than a regime change—to inaugurate a new empire under the guise of human freedom and autonomy. Its consequences would be devastating. When society jettisons objective truth, it leaps down a rabbit hole even Alice