

THE STING OF THE WASP

THE NECESSITY OF A CHRISTIAN CULTURE IN A POST-PROTESTANT AMERICA

R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Faith, 2016.

When America (or the West more broadly) finally collapses, be it in ten or 10,000 years, researchers will not be lacking for source material explaining her downfall. The cottage industry producing reductionist theories about how “civilization started to fall when” has been at work since at least Nietzsche (or possibly Gibbon). They are the clickbait narratives for the self-indulgent. And, I must admit, they are fun to read. Yet, often the narratives succeed more in telling us about the author’s preoccupations than addressing our present cultural woes. Enter R. R. Reno’s recent publication, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*. Reno, the current editor of the popular magazine *First Things*, gives a different outlook on the state of our culture. Rather than diagnosing when society began its long decline and fall, he instead presents images of our state of crisis and possible hope of resurrection. Reno provides us an accessible read that is both culturally relevant and classically informed.

Reno approaches our cultural decline and malaise from an alternative perspective. Instead of establishing ground zero, Reno argues that there are inherent problems in the way our society is organized. Although the book’s observations could be extrapolated to diagnose problems throughout the West, Reno only focuses on particularly American issues. In doing so, he traces many of our present woes to distinctly American ideals. Because of this, he cedes much ground to his supposed political contraires. Issues such as equivocal understandings of marriage, inter-class conflict, and our present inability to engage in dispassionate dialogue are all presented as possible results of certain conceptions of the

“American Dream.” In a society that prizes the freedom of self-determination, one can see how it could easily go wrong.

And Reno is keen to show that things have gone horribly wrong. The greater part of the work consists of anecdotes pertaining to the broad cultural problems we find ourselves in today. Drawing upon the thought of political scientist Charles Murray, Reno analyzes likely outcomes for Americans in typical towns. While the upper and upper-middle classes are thriving, things have rarely been worse for everyone else. Much of America is rife with poverty, drug-use, and broken families. Beyond the moral evils now permitted in America, the expected outcomes of those who are not well-off should give us pause. Divorce rates continue to rise, stable employment continues to fall, and community bonds have progressively weakened. As Reno states, “there’s a word to describe this trend: collapse” (47).

America seemed to work for a couple hundred years. But, as Reno argues, this was not simply a result of American ideals. In fact, those American ideals, when removed from the Christian soil in which they grew, are harmful. Americans were virtuous because Christianity helped develop virtuous people. That is not to say Americans have always been good Christians. Far from it. However, the collective influence of Christian virtues, and the corresponding social shame that deviating from such norms entailed, allowed for a flourishing society. For America to once again enjoy its success, a return to such roots is necessary.

Self-consciously following T. S. Eliot’s *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Reno seeks to show that not only is a Christian society necessary, but it is indeed possible. Eliot gave his lectures on the importance of a Christian society at the dawn of the Second World War—a time when few imagined that Christianity would exert influence in the coming decades. However, that is exactly what happened. Reno thus tries to undertake the same genre as Eliot, but adapted to the present.

After six chapters of describing our present woes, in the final chapter of the book Reno argues that there is still yet hope.

This chapter could stand on its own, as it contains the entirety of the book's arguments and proposal. As Reno succinctly puts it, the book is essentially an argument that post-Christian culture in America "is failing" since "it promises freedom, but delivers tyranny" (181). However, such a failure could occasion a chance for growth. Time will provide Christians with an opportunity to exert influence. While "sit-and-wait" may seem like an insufficient method for resurrecting a Christian society, Reno is confident that the right moment will inevitably present itself. Eliot's own example should suffice to convince us that openings for Christianity will arise. When it does, Christians should be confident that they possess the tools and truths that can best "resurrect" society.

Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society is ultimately less a broad cultural criticism than a reassurance that Christianity will again have its day. Post-Christian societies do not work. Reno offers abundant evidence to this effect. They can be healed, but it requires embracing their Christian influence. Reno argues that when this influence becomes vital, society can again flourish. His presentation is convincing, even if he admits that he may be overly optimistic. Nevertheless, this book, while not a manual for action, merits a read. It is a prescient work on the state of our culture and the inescapability of Christianity's impact upon it.

Reviewed by Constantius Sanders, O.P.

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