



The Early Church: How Christians elevated culture

ANTHONY SOLEN

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They raised the status of women.

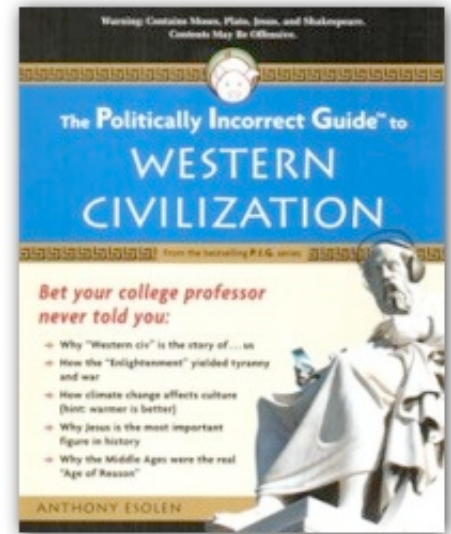
It's dogma in our public schools today that women in ancient times were oppressed, because women had no voting rights, women had not the same opportunities as men, and so forth. You will be mocked if you deny that this spells oppression. If you're a college professor and you deny it, get ready for the stake.

But the charges are anachronistic and chauvinist. People who make them never imagine what it was like for people of another culture to put food on the table, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their backs, never mind bearing enough children to keep the population stable. The Romans in general treated their wives with esteem. The matron of the house had better be consulted along with the important males if the paterfamilias was going to make a decision. Still, the Christians preached that there was no separate baptism for men and women. All were one in Christ. If Christ was Himself the Holy of Holies, then that inner sanctum was thrown open for all. Jesus had been seen on Easter first by women, then by his apostles. The Gnostic heretics, who disdained the body, have Jesus saying that one could not be blessed unless one were made male; Christians condemned that nonsense. They did not expose baby girls (or boys, either). They did not divorce their wives. They shunned sexual practices that put them and their spouses at risk. They honored women who defied emperors, centurions and soldiers to witness to the faith. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine wrote the first tribute in history to an ordinary woman, his mother Monica, without whose love and faithful prayer he would never have known the love of God. (9.8-13)

Even so, early Christians were sexist because they, like everybody else who has walked the earth until now, did not treat women as indistinguishable from men. That indifference is our politically correct ideal, though it's hard to name a time and place wherein women would not have decried such treatment as insulting.

They palliated pagan cruelties.

Christians did not take part in the blood sports of the arena. That does not mean that all of them kept away from the stands; but the Christian attitude toward the gladiatorial combats is well captured by,



again, the irrepressible Tertullian:

And are we to wait now for a scriptural condemnation of the amphitheatre? If we can plead that cruelty is allowed us, if impiety, if brute savagery, by all means let us go to the amphitheatre. (*De Spectaculis*)

Those games were as popular then as football in America is now, or soccer in Europe; but Christ's injunction to love one's enemy would eventually put to death the sport of death.

Christians were forbidden to help riddle the whores with diseases. We can't attribute moral degeneracy to the whole Roman empire; but the most populous cities really were sinkholes of depravity, if we can trust pagan and Christian testimony. Here's Clement of Alexandria again, describing how low the debauchery descended:

Such are the trophies of your social licentiousness which are exhibited: the evidence of these deeds are the prostitutes. Alas for such wickedness!...For fathers, unmindful of children of theirs that have been exposed, often without their knowledge, have intercourse with a son that has debauched himself, and daughters that are prostitutes. (*Paedagogus*,3.3)

Again, we should not expect that Christians all lived up to their ideals, any more than we live up to ours. But it's one thing to violate a law, and another to deny that the law exists.

Christians softened the institution of slavery, as common then as the service industry is now. The teachings of Jesus made it clear that it was the position of the master, not that of the slave, that placed one's salvation in jeopardy. Some Christians sold themselves into slavery to ransom a Christian brother. As the years went on, under the influence first of Stoicism and then of Christianity, laws condemning the maltreatment of slaves become common.

Contrary to what our Bible-despisers say, the Scriptures do not support slavery. They take it for granted as a social institution. How else might a poor man without land keep himself and his family alive? If a man had nothing, he at least had his back and his hands. It is not as if he could work for a day, or would even want to work for a day, and then go home, when most often there was no home to return to, or when he could have a better meal and something like a bed in the master's house. But the whole thrust of the Scriptures is towards freedom and away from bondage -- unless it is the "bondage" of love. Jesus warns his followers that if they would be great in the Kingdom of Heaven they must be slaves to everyone else.

They thrust a dagger into the heart of the State-worship.

Their failure to worship the Emperor angered a Roman like Diocletian not because he thought he was a god. Diocletian knew it was all nonsense. It angered him because they struck against the sanctity of the State he was struggling to hold together. Hence his notorious persecutions, perpetrated, as persecutions usually are, for reasons of State. But in a few decades, Constantine legalized the religion, and then Theodosius made it the official religion of the empire. That was not the same as Statist idolatry.

One example will show why not. The emperor Theodosius, a valiant soldier and a defender of the orthodox faith, attacked Arian Goths in Thessalonika and massacred them. For his pains, his bishop, Ambrose of Milan (the man who later baptized Augustine) threatened to excommunicate him unless he did immediate penance for his great evil.¹⁰ Diocletian, for political purposes, had demanded to be called *Dominus et Deus*, "Lord and God." But Theodosius had to suffer the rebuke of a mere bishop. More than

a rebuke: he had placed his immortal soul in danger. For the Emperor, though he is the legitimate ruler, is but one Christian like another, and all are servants of the one and only Lord and God.

They took up the burden of civic responsibility.



“Wives, Be Subject to Your Husbands”

Have you ever been at a wedding and watched a guest wince, gape, or maybe just giggle when the lector reads the words Saint Paul wrote the Ephesians: “Wives, be subject to your own husbands”?

Not only is this beautiful passage from Paul’s letter politically incorrect because it assigns gender roles and eschews modern notions of equality, but its deeper meaning is even more subversive to today’s mores. Read the whole passage:

[B]e subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her....

Marriage becomes not an institution for mutual gratification, but for mutual humbling. Given today’s gospels of “empowerment” and self-esteem, this universal call to servitude is pretty startling.

People trained on Hollywood epics may think that everyone in the Roman Empire wore flowing white tunics and relaxed at the baths and ate figs from silver platters. But as we have seen, the population of the Empire stalled in the third century, and the economy stalled with it. That brought de-urbanization, as did the shortsighted increase in taxes. Meanwhile, the Empire had spread its legions as thinly as possible along the thousands of miles of borderland to protect its citizens from barbarian invasions. Rarely were emperors to be found in Rome. The great city became a backwater. Constantinople was the thriving capital in the East. Milan, closer to the vulnerable passes over the Alps, became more important in the West, as did the Adriatic port of Ravenna. But with food supplies dwindling, more and more people abandoned the cities generally, nor was it lucrative for the remaining magistrates to do the

work.

Here's where Christian deacons, priests, and bishops came in. The Christians had developed networks of care for their sick, their widows, and their orphans. Moreover, a priest or a bishop did not have a family to support (celibacy among the clergy had become the norm in the East, and almost universal in the West), so they became natural choices to assume the places vacated by the old senatorial families. It was the persecutor Diocletian, and no Christian bishop, who first called sectors of the Empire "dioceses," but it wasn't long before bishops were in charge of those dioceses, for practical reasons -- as, for instance, to see that grain shipments came in to feed the poor. When Augustine traveled to Milan, then the hub of government in Italy, the man in charge was not the Emperor, who had to be on the move with his army, but the bishop, Ambrose. He was the primary man responsible for preserving law and order and promoting the common good. Two centuries later, after Rome had shrunk from a city of nearly two million to a town of forty thousand, in ruins, the people chose as their bishop a humble monk who had long served their practical needs as an able administrator. His name was Gregory, and when he first heard they might choose him, he fled -- for how could such as he be a worthy successor of Saint Peter?

Yet the people persuaded him to return. History knows him as Pope Gregory I, one of the wisest and holiest men to assume the chair -- and, after all, a true Roman.

They ennobled manual labor.

Unlike us, now. It is one of the purposes of the college degree, to safeguard the holder from a sore back and calluses. But the Christians could not look down upon the kind of labor that their Savior did, for Jesus was a carpenter. And Peter was a fisherman, and Paul a tent-maker.

We should not underestimate this acceptance of hard physical labor. It may be that Christianity is truly healthy only where this principle is affirmed, and that its denial is a symptom of a sickly faith, as among the French aristocrats in the eighteenth century, or the overschooled in ours. The principle long predates the Protestant Reformation. The craftsmen who built the medieval cathedrals often memorialized their trades in wood or glass or stone upon the very walls. But the Church was reviving a Roman ideal that had fallen into the yellow leaf. The Romans were fond of looking back upon the modest-living gentlemen farmers who had been the backbone of the Republic. By the second century of the Empire, many city people found themselves yearning for the peace and health of a farm. But it had been a long time since men with any money stooped their shoulders. A rich man might own a farm, but slaves dragged the plow.

Now, as I've said, a slave economy is a stagnant economy. The Romans were terrific engineers, as we see from their aqueducts and sewers and basilicas and roads. Were it not for slavery, they might have had an industrial revolution. By the time the Germans and the Huns had invaded, political and economic conditions made that impossible. But the Christian re-valuation of work would eventually build the continent anew.

They "baptized" the paterfamilias.

One of the great unheralded events in history occurred in the early sixth century, when a monk named Benedict of Nursia was asked to write a rule governing life in the monastery at Monte Cassino. Benedict aimed to provide a Roman orderliness and moderation, unlike the spiritual athleticism of the East, with its daring flights of physical deprivation and marathon prayer. In the East, you might find a Saint Daniel

the Stylite, sitting atop a pillar for years in swelter and storm, praying for the people and doing penance.¹¹ But Saint Benedict's genius was Roman; his instincts favored the stable and conservative.

He gave the West a blueprint for orderly life under hard conditions. Imagine twenty or thirty men in their prime, sworn to remain in one place, to observe an orderly round of prayer, reflection, labor, and rest, and to obey their *paterfamilias*, the abbot (from Hebrew *abba*, "father") who stands for them in the place of Christ. Imagine that they see their work as a form of praise and prayer. What can such men not do? They cleared the waterlogged land of Germany, all swamp and dark forest, and brought forth grain for bread and beer, and grapes for wine. They brought their learning to far Ireland and England and Scandinavia. They copied manuscripts (work more laborious than that of the plowman, without the benefit of muscles stretching in the open air) and embellished them with decorations fanciful and bright. Their monasteries became a network of economic hot spots, sharing their learning and their technological improvements.

They elevated the "barbarian" cultures from which they came.

The Poor Will Always Be with You

Everything around Him participates in His poverty;—His parents, who scarcely possess a few coarse garments to clothe Him with; the poor shepherds, who at the voice of the angels leave their flocks to come and adore Him.

Consider that this wretchedness of the Son of God was not necessary and compulsory, like the poor in the world; it is free and of His own choice. Conceive a high idea of this poverty, which appeared so precious to our Lord, that to espouse it He quitted heaven and His glory.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, "The Poverty of the Birth of Jesus Christ"

Here we have the truly Christian championing of poverty. It does not pass over the wretchedness of those who suffer hunger and thirst and nakedness; the Jesuits were tireless advocates for the poor. But it exalts poverty to its true spiritual grandeur; we are to possess things, says Saint Paul, as if we possessed none. That is incomprehensible to the materialist mind, that sees human poverty only as an evil and only to be overcome by money—other people's money.



The monks were not colonizers in any sane sense of the word. They entered a land, found what was good in it, attempted to preserve it and bring it into harmony with the faith, and gave to the people their inherited gifts of Roman and Christian civilization. So the monks gave the Irish their first alphabet. English, Gothic, and Icelandic are all first written by monks. Did they then eradicate the native oral poetry? Far from it. The genius who composed *Beowulf* was almost certainly a Christian monk, writing for his beloved Saxons soon after the dawn of the faith in England, cherishing the memories of the old

sagas, but seeing in them a heroism that without Christ was incomplete.

Let me illustrate the point with a famous account from the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.¹² Bede, writing from the Irish-founded monastery at Jarrow, recalls an incident one or two generations before, when one night the cattlemen, laymen working at the monastery, were sitting round a table drinking beer. As was the custom, they passed a harp from man to man as they drank. When it came to you, you were supposed to sing one of the old pagan heroic songs, the grand deeds of a Sigemund or a Beowulf. But one fellow at the beer feast was embarrassed and used an excuse to leave, going to the cattle shed to tend the stock for the night. When he fell asleep, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and called to him, "Caedmon! Sing me something!"

"I don't know anything to sing," replied the herdsman. "That's why I left the feast, because I can't sing."

"Nevertheless, you can sing."

"What shall I sing?" said Caedmon.

"Sing me the First-Making," said the angel. At which point Caedmon burst into a hymn glorifying God the Father who established the heavens and the earth:

Now let us laud . . . the Lord of heaven's realm,
the Measurer's might . . . and his mind-plan,
work of the Glory-Father . . . as every wondrous thing,
Chieftain eternal, . . . he established from of old.
He first shaped, . . . for the sons of earth,
the high roof of heaven, . . . holy Creator;
the middle-yard . . . mankind's Lord,
Chieftain eternal, . . . adorned after that,
made the earth for men, . . . the Master almighty.

This charming hymn he composed was in the heroic meter of the old sagas, using the same heroic language. When Caedmon awoke, he told his bailiff about it, who brought him to the abbess, and she, wise woman, instructed the monks who could read to tell him a story out of the Scriptures, to see what he would do with it. He returned the next day with a heroic narrative poem. "It is a gift from God," she concluded. So Caedmon was brought into the monastery, not to learn Latin, but to compose song after song in Anglo-Saxon. It is an astonishing instance of the fusion of two cultures, and because of it we have the glories of Old English poetry.

"What does Ingeld have to do with Christ?" asked the learned Alcuin at the court of Charlemagne, one of the bright spots in the centuries of social confusion after the breakup of the Western empire.¹³ Alcuin was annoyed that his monks were entertaining themselves with tales, passed down by song over centuries, of the feats of the pagan Germanic heroes. He was, of course, echoing Tertullian's rhetorical question from long before. But the answer would come from the experience of missionaries, and from the artists who saw in the old ways a foreshadowing of the Christian revelation. What did Ingeld have to do with Christ? According to the author of *Beowulf*, a great deal indeed.

The truth about heretics

If you study the heresies condemned by the early Church, you'll find excellent ammunition against the

accusations of the smug atheist. First, many anti-Christians believe that their opponents actually accept some of the harsher, world-loathing heresies. Alternatively, they condemn Christians for being closed-minded, authoritarian, and, yes, intolerant; while they have the privilege of condemning all to themselves. It does not occur to them, or they don't care, that a faith without definition is like a body without skin. A cursory study of heresies will reveal the folly of these positions.

True, the Church fathers spent much time debating, not always coolly, who Jesus was, what was the nature of his relationship with the Father, what was to be understood by the Holy Spirit, what was the true Church, which books were inspired by God, and how man is to be saved.

But before the reader shakes his head with a superior air (easy to do, when the debate is far away and he is ignorant of what is at stake), let's enumerate a few of the heresies.¹⁴ Some people believed that a true Christian must be a martyr of blood, so they sought violent death, sometimes by provoking their oppressors. Some, tainted by the body-hatred of certain Eastern cults and religions, believed that Jesus did not have a genuine body (because matter is intrinsically evil), and that to be saved we must cleanse away this corporal scurf, by fasting and abstaining from sex. Or, as a more convenient alternative, one might gleefully indulge in orgies, since, after all, only the soul counts for anything.

Some believed that the God worshipped by the Jews was evil, superseded by the God of love whom Jesus called Father. Some believed that Jesus was not the Son of God, but a creature, "adopted" by the Father for his obedience. Some believed that Jesus never died, and that it was only a specter that the Romans nailed to the Cross. Some believed that one could earn one's way into paradise by energetic good works, as if man needed no savior at all.

Set aside the question of whether Christian orthodoxy presents the truth about God and Christ and man's destiny. The controversies, which lasted several centuries, were no waste of time. Their resolution redounded to the cultural benefit of the West. Why?

Again, the pagan religions had nowhere to go. No educated man really believed in the Homeric gods, and as for neoplatonic mysticism, with its melange of obscure terms, airy abstractions, and magic, even the educated would find it nearly impossible to understand, let alone be guided by it from day to day. It was the superstitious and fidgety who sought out the mystery cults, with their secret knowledge and their orgies of initiation. That was a cultural dead end, and several of the heresies would have sent Christian worship along the same short unproductive road.

Most notorious was the body-reviling Gnostic heresy which, to listen to the ill-informed critics of Christianity in our schools, you would think was Christian dogma. Had the Gnostics won the day, Christians would have retreated from the world. Why bother plowing fields and copying books and repairing the aqueducts, when this world is all an illusion, and the only real knowledge is whispered from one secret master to another?

The danger (speaking culturally, not theologically) of other heresies was more subtle. The most popular heresy, Arianism, maintained that Christ was a creature, though exactly what kind of creature the Arians did not make clear. Here is Saint Jerome, discussing the verbal sleight-of-hand used by Arian-leaning bishops of the fourth century:

Eminent Christian bishops of course, began to wave their palms, and to say they had not denied that He was a creature, but that He was like other creatures. At that moment the term *Ousia* [meaning "being" or "substance," as in the credal statement that Christ is

consubstantial with the Father] was abolished: the Nicene Faith stood condemned by acclamation. The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian. (*Dialogue against the Luciferians*)

Had the Arian heresy triumphed, I would not now be writing a *Politically Incorrect Guide™ to Western Civilization*, because the Christian faith would have fizzled out, along with the Greco-Roman world it in part preserved. The reason is hard for us to see, because we do not appreciate the cultural revolution ready to explode from the declaration, God is Love.

If Arius was correct, then Jesus was only a creature, albeit the highest. Then God can be said to love, but He cannot be said to *be Love*. He is not in his own right a relationship of love among three Persons. He retreats into transcendence: he does not really enter the world to dwell among us. In that case he either becomes the inscrutable and irrational Allah of the Muslims, a universal sultan, or he vanishes into an abstraction, a Neoplatonic Being, impersonal and unapproachable. Christian worship either way loses its bridge between earth and heaven. Its commandments harden into the dictates of a despot, or decay into a moral philosophy, like Stoicism, benevolent enough, but in most men too weak to withstand the furies of the heart. It is the path Unitarianism took in nineteenth century America, from a dilute Christianity at the Harvard of John Quincy Adams, to a vague theism with an overlay of Christian moral teaching at the Harvard of his grandson Henry Adams, to the cultural nonentity it is now, a hobby for atheists or pantheists who like hymns and incense.

In one fashion or another, the heresies flatten Jesus, mostly to deny his humanity, as unworthy of him, and sometimes to deny his divinity. Here I am not arguing theologically but culturally. Christianity survives -- nay, it *exists* -- only where Jesus is affirmed as both God and Man.

That matters. Recall that the Jews and the Greeks had much to say about the natural law, what C. S. Lewis called "The Tao," a set of principles that are not the *result* of moral inquiry, but its foundation, self-evident to all men who are not corrupted.¹⁵ You do not steal. You love your family. You sacrifice for your country. You take care of the infirm. But, as well-attested as these principles are everywhere, they are also violated everywhere, and their connection with man's destiny and his being is not clear. With the Jews that connection is clear, since the laws are given by God himself. But the Jews are in part constricted by culture. The prophets do preach that the law will be given to all nations, and, as I've written, the Jews were chosen to carry that law. Yet Rome and Greece and Germany and Ireland could only become Jewish, so to speak, by becoming Christian. And then men saw not only that Christ came into the world, but that the very meaning of this world is stamped with Him, redeemer and creator both. For the world too is loved, and made new.

The Good News brings charity



A Book You're Not Supposed to Read

The Great Heresies by Hilaire Belloc; Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1991.

Belloc is always worth reading, enjoyable and perceptive, but this treatment of heresies—from the earliest Arian heresy, to the catastrophic heresy of Islam, to the seemingly benign, but mortally harmful intellectual heresies of the Modern Age—is a grand and sweeping treatment and condemnation of all things contrary to the true, the good, and the beautiful. As such, it is sure to offend many—a sure sign that it's right on target.

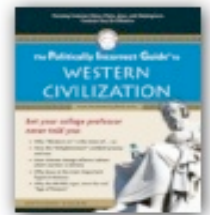
To the ends of the earth, then, came the word, brought by saints, marauders, plowmen, tyrants, ordinary people, that each human being possesses a measureless dignity, by virtue of his having been created and redeemed by a God of love; not by a philosophical idea, and not by a god bound to a mountainside or river. The Greeks had the wisdom to end slavery, but why lose the temporary economic advantage? The Jews understood why, but lacked the power. The Jews who are called Christians, after a long struggle, did put an end to it; too long a struggle, but triumphant at last. If we believe that it befits a man to enter a burning building to save someone else's child, it is because we hear the words ringing in our ears still, "Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

It may offend secularists and those prudes who think that religion ought to be kept behind closed doors, but charity and concern for the poor are integral to our culture today *because* of Christianity. If we build hospitals for the destitute beyond our own lands, with no desire for personal or national profit, and risking life and limb to do it, it is because we retain a trace, a cultural memory of the voyages of Saint Paul, of Boniface martyred by the Germans, of Cyril and Methodius trekking north among the Slavs, of Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland, of Gregory the Great seeing blond slaves in the marketplace and, hearing that they were called "Angli," replying, "*Non Angli sed angeli*," "not Angles but angels," and sending missionaries among them, to give them the best he had to give.¹⁶

That is only one benefit, and not the most important, which the priests and bishops at those early councils conferred upon us, ensuring that Christianity would survive.

Though it is not polite to say so, still it cries out for notice. Hindus do not send holy men into foreign lands to feed the hungry and house the naked; they will not do so for the pariahs in their own land. Buddhists, practicing benevolent detachment from the world, do not do so. Muslims, who conquer by force, and who reject natural law on the grounds that it "fetters" Allah, are required to take care of their own, but they ignore everyone else.¹⁷ All cults of ancestor worship, like Shinto, are too firmly fixed upon the local and the familial to care for people far away. The Jews and Christians would care, because of the God they worship: and they did. If the world speaks of human rights now, and the dignity of the poor, it is because the world has heard of Moses and the prophets -- and, summing them up in himself, Christ. Men have come at last neither to love the world nor to despise it simply, but to love its goodness, not as a final end, but as a manifestation of the goodness that is eternal.

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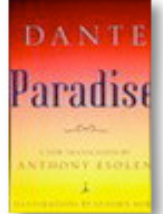
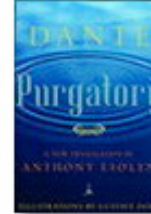
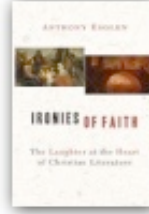
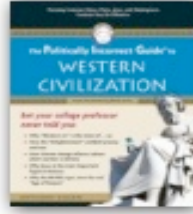
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Anthony Esolen, "The Early Church: Charity and Tolerance are Born." excerpt from chapter four of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2008): 115-129.

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