

Reviews

edited by
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***Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West.* By R. R. Reno. Washington, D.C.: Gateway Editions, 2019. xviii, 182 pp.**

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The recent revival of American religious history from a transnational perspective encourages one to take a closer look at contemporary Christian periodicals and monographs in the United States. In the tradition of Richard John Neuhaus's famous *The Naked Public Square* (1984),¹ Russell Ronald Reno believes that the main problem with Western society today is a moral rather than a material war between the rich and the poor: the rich avail themselves of a politically correct non-judgmentalism, which the poor take at face value, thereby perpetuating their own miserable predicament. Reno previously laid out his view of contemporary politics and religion in *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (2016).² He succeeded Neuhaus as editor of the ecumenic Catholic American journal *First Things*, and, like Neuhaus, is a Protestant-Catholic convert. Interestingly, in his critique of society, Reno never explicitly articulates his accusation concerning the insincerity of the rich, which seems to be the basis of his argument.

In his latest political essay, *Return of the Strong Gods*, Reno develops his earlier view, according to which the strong gods of early twentieth-century political visions return in contemporary society. Reno deplores the “*anti* imperatives” underlying a political and cultural postwar consensus, openly deploring identitarianism, inclusionism, and what he sees as an increasingly oppressive dominant discourse of political correctness (xi). According to him, these “*anti* imperatives are now flesh-eating dogmas masquerading as the fulfillment of the anti-dogmatic spirit” that came to hold reign as the postwar generation tried to ward off what had brought forth the crises of their parent generation in the early twentieth century.

Reno deplores a “negative piety” and the lack of a transcendent frame of refer-

ence for public policy in this era of “open societies,” an ideal which he is particularly critical of. He sees political correctness already at work in the 1950s (14, 18, 45, 50, 101). This political and cultural postwar consensus is based, according to Reno, on a common opposition to failed political visions of the early twentieth century rather than on a religious, conservative vision of faith. He believes this oppositional stance has weakened the Western tradition and deprived it of a holistic vision of the common good (xii–xiii).

Reno develops his argument in five chapters: “The Postwar Consensus,” “Therapies of Disenchantment,” “Weakening as Destiny,” “The Homeless Society,” and “The Return of the Strong Gods.” He closes with an afterword in which he seeks to rehabilitate the work of the German writer Ernst Jünger (1895–1998). Reno claims that his interpretation of Jünger’s “Bestand” may serve as a wellspring for the modern-day religious and political conservatism he advocates in his monographs and his editorial work for *First Things*.

Readers may take issue with his sweeping argument insofar as the single “Western Tradition” he opposes with his argument appeals to a role for Catholic religious conservatism (if ever so vaguely, but tenaciously) in the “public square” that does not presently exist: Peter Harrison, for example, has shown that the use of “Western tradition” in contemporary political parlance is as vague as it is ahistorical. The title is a placeholder for a whole range of different traditions, since the West was marked for a long time by a capacity to adapt to other traditions without ever clearly adopting and asserting its own.³

Another point of critique is Reno’s use of the term “therapeutic Christianity” (chapter two) in his anti-Protestant polemic. He speaks of the “vacuous therapeutic clichés of ‘growth’ and ‘self-acceptance’” in a similarly dismissive manner. He targets the idea that postwar societies should relax their “cultural super-ego,” which he sees as an outgrowth of the individualist postwar consensus (31, 44). In connecting “therapeutic Christianity” to the Weberian theory of disenchantment, Reno links two especially vague concepts that belong rather to a history of ideas. He contrasts the postwar fear of the authoritarian personality with the “therapeutic personality” and the “ascendancy of a therapeutic mentality,” seeing the postwar consensus as dependent on “psychological help from therapists” for the individual due to its overall spiritual and dogmatic dearth (92, 95, 141). For this, he adopts the theories of the American sociologist and cultural critic Philip Rieff from his work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (1966).⁴

In addition to diverting attention away from contemporary developments and shortcomings of the Catholic Church, Reno’s perspective silences the latest findings of the psychology of history when he claims that “it is high time that we recognize

our intellectual, moral, and spiritual freedom from the traumas that so affected our grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents” (xv). Yet he seems to undermine this very claim when he speaks in the same breath of “curses we have inherited, a sin of the fathers visited upon their sons unto the third and fourth generations” (xv–xvi). His denial of the findings of a broad strand of research on inter-generational trauma and the epigenetics of trauma is misleading,⁵ for he resorts to the visions of these generations when referring to Ernst Jünger.

In Reno’s view, humans are inheritors of a tradition of faith, but not subjects endowed with a complex emotional inheritance that shapes and limits their “intellectual, moral, and spiritual freedom.” One may object that his view of the “solid convictions about what it means to be human” is therefore incomplete. It is this same view that underpins his discussion of “The Homeless Society” in his penultimate chapter, calling for a new sense of home (15, 97–134). Ultimately it is unclear why his preferred subject is “the Western tradition” and its decline, when his own personal faith, namely, Roman Catholicism, presently sees its greatest development not in the West, but in Asia.

Despite my critique, this political essay is worth reading in order to familiarize oneself with a voice that, in all likelihood, is not going to disappear soon. It is best read alongside Reno’s other publications, especially his commentary on Genesis (2010),⁶ which may spark reflections on how theological thought and exegesis may go hand in hand with political and missionary intent. Overall, a staggering historical selectiveness enables Reno’s sweeping arguments, which may have their greatest value in the merciless mirror they hold up to current “liberal pieties,” revealing to what extent contemporary liberalism itself bears characteristics of dogmatic belief.

Notes

- 1 Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984).
- 2 R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (Washington, D.C.: Regeneray Faith, 2016).
- 3 Peter Harrison, “The Paradox of Western Values,” *ABC*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/an-eccentric-tradition-the-paradox-of-western-values/10095044>.
- 4 Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).
- 5 See, for example, Jason M. Fogler and Randall A. Phelps, ed., *Trauma, Autism, and Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Integrating Research, Practice, and Policy* (Cham: Springer, 2018).
- 6 R. R. Reno, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010).