

Feature Article: JAF5393

THE STATE OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO MILLENNIALS

by Steven Reep

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 39, number 03 (2016). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

In his novel *1984*, George Orwell depicted a dystopian society succinctly characterized by its three paradoxical slogans: “WAR IS PEACE,” “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY,” and “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (emphasis in original).¹ Everything about “Big Brother’s” government was hypocritical and backward.

By God’s grace, this book was not a prophecy, and when the year 1984 arrived, we were not under the control of an evil government with these contradictory beliefs. However, thirty-two years later, I am reminded of this reverse ideology when I look at my generation’s secular view of the church: war is peace, up is down, and good is evil. This is because if you walk into your local gym and pull aside the young man with the most “frat-tastic” colorful tank top or into your local Starbucks to ask the young lady preoccupied with her iPhone wearing the most “basic” high-waisted shorts what their opinion of the church is, their answers will most likely be that Christians are hateful and ignorant. The secular view of my generation characterizes the church as hatefully oppressing the equality of homosexuals and ignorantly refusing the science of evolution. The church of the God of love and reason is seen as hateful and ignorant.

IT’S APOLOGETICS, NOT APOLOGETIC

As a product of my generation, I have experience in both the church and the secular world, and I have come to believe that there are two main reasons for this upside-down secular view of Christianity. The first reason is that the church has spent too much time practicing apologizing and not enough time practicing apologetics. That is, we have spent too much time dwelling on our own faults, mistakes, and shortcomings in history (that the secularists love bringing up) and not enough time explaining and defending how the Body of Christ has significantly shaped and benefited the world.

Of course, we ought to have a humble attitude toward ourselves and repent from all of our sins, but this does not mean that we are called to self-loathing or self-resentment. In fact, St. Francois de Sales reminds us that self-resentment is forbidden and that we should criticize our own faults “*avec des remonstrances douces et tranquilles*” (“with mild and calm remonstrance”).² And the New Testament echoes the Lord’s commands to “love thy neighbour as thy self,”³ implying that practicing true humility assumes natural love for oneself.

Moreover, G. K. Chesterton argues that today’s understanding of humility has departed from the biblical understanding. He states, “The old humility was a spur that prevented a man from stopping; not a nail in his boot that prevented him from going on. For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether.”⁴ Unfortunately, it seems that Chesterton is right, and our nail of humility has pierced not only our ability to go on but also our ability to defend ourselves. We are so caught up in being politically correct and apologizing for our darkest moments that we give no reason or defense for who we are. We allow the secular world to define us by our worst moments. The secular world defines us by the unsanctioned aspects of the historic Crusades, the scandals of televangelists and clergy, or the treatment of homosexuals by Westboro Baptist Church—and we let them. This overkill on being politically correct with an apologizing attitude is done so much that the president of the United States felt obligated to apologize for the Crusades after terrorist attacks and murders by ISIS in February of 2015.⁵

Therefore, we have striven to separate ourselves from our past, with dire consequences. For example, when we look at our mistakes in medieval times, such as the corruption in indulgences or the military abuse of some Crusaders, we tend to throw out everything from that age to distance ourselves from them. This is a tragic loss, for two reasons. The first is that we lose great features of those times, such as chivalry and medieval theology. The masters of divinity program I am currently enrolled in completely skips medieval theology. The second is that when we ignore both the good and the bad of that time period, secularists and atheists who seek to give the church a bad reputation focus only on the bad, and we are defined by that. Thus, the practice of not defending ourselves and our accomplishments and only apologizing for our mistakes has left us with a reputation of being hateful and immoral.

THE END OF REASON

The second reason that my generation’s view of the church is so negative is because the culture has defined us as living by blind faith, having in their view forfeited reason and science. However, throughout history, Christians have seen reason as one of our most powerful gifts from God to finding Him and His ways. But once again, we have thrown out the good with the bad. Christianity today has developed such a phobia of all things

medieval that we have distanced ourselves from great theologians of that time, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, who emphasized the importance of reason in faith.

Understanding fundamental aspects of Aquinas's theology and philosophy shows how important reason is to the Christian faith. In his works, Aquinas follows, adds to, and baptizes Aristotle's metaphysics. This includes the doctrine of "The Four Causes" –material, formal, efficient, and final. The material cause is what the object is made out of; for example, a nail is made out of steel. The formal cause is the form, shape, pattern, or structure that the object has; a nail has a flat head, a long cylinder body with a pointed tip, and is very hard. These first two causes are pretty simple and self-explanatory, but the next two are a little more complicated and lay the foundation for all of Aquinas's metaphysical arguments.

The efficient cause is what acts on the object to bring it from potentiality to actuality. For the example of the nail, it would be the steel factory engineers and workers who made the nail. Aquinas saw that everything in the universe could be changed, moved, or actualized only if it was acted on by another object. Thus, an efficient cause is necessary to bring everything into being.

The final cause can be described as the end, goal, or purpose and is what the object is made for or supposed to do. In the example of the nail, its purpose is to be driven into a piece of wood to hold it in place. Final cause is not limited to manmade objects. Aquinas argues that everything has an end or purpose in the natural world. For example, it is almost impossible to talk about organs without talking about their function in the body: the heart pumps blood, the stomach digests food, and the lungs take in oxygen. Aquinas further argues that final cause applies to human beings, and in showing this, he underscores the value and importance of reason.⁶

Aquinas argues that the final cause is the "cause of causes"⁷ because it determines the first three causes. In the example of the nail, its material is steel because steel is sufficiently malleable and hard to be driven into wood; its form is a flat head, cylinder body, and pointed tip so it can be driven into wood; and it was made by steel factory workers because of the demand for something to be driven into wood. Thus, the final cause of a nail is to be driven into wood. Therefore, if the purpose or end of human beings is in question, it would be appropriate to look at the other causes of them.

The material cause of humans can be stated simply as organic material. Our efficient cause is that we are made by God. (This bold statement is based on the conclusions of Aquinas's "Five Ways," in *Summa Theologica*, which prove God's existence and far exceed the scope of this article.) So far, it has been determined that humans are physical, and living creatures are made for and by God. The formal cause, or form, of human beings is what Aquinas regards as the human soul, including both physical and metaphysical aspects of humans.

Aquinas acknowledges that we share the aspects of the form of plants in being able to grow and reproduce⁸ and the aspects of the form of nonhuman animals in

having sensations and the ability to move.⁹ However, unlike plants and animals, humans have a metaphysical aspect of our form, namely our intellect and our will, which is the ability to grasp concepts and reason along with the ability to choose between different actions based on reasoning.¹⁰ Intellect and will are the metaphysical aspects of the soul that survive and go on after the physical body has perished, and these make us different from other living organisms, pointing to our final cause. Moreover, Aquinas says that the end of reason is to attain truth, and the highest truth is to know that God exists and sustains the universe.¹¹ Therefore, the final cause of human beings (the meaning of life) is to use our intellect to find God, which is the fulfillment of reason, and to use our will to choose to act according to His ways, which is the fulfillment of love.¹² In other words, we are to be the church of reason and love.

It is evident that reason and intellect have been seen as essential aspects to the Christian life in the past, and there is no place for blind faith. We are, however, called to a childlike faith.¹³ A child fully trusts her parents, but this is because she has good reason to do so; the parent has taken care of the child her whole life. Therefore, once we have used our reason to find God, we are to trust fully in His teachings that can be known only through revelation. Moreover, C. S. Lewis adds that faith “is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.”¹⁴ However, it seems that as a result of my generation’s one-sided view of the past, we have thrown out what reason once accepted and instead have embraced the secular view of Christians as relying on blind faith, forfeiting science and reason to non-Christians. We have sheathed the sword of reason and handed it over to secularists and atheists, pommel first, enticing them to beat us over the head with it.

A CALL OUT OF THE CAVE

Aristotle writes, “For as the eyes of bats are to the blaze of day, so is the reason in our soul to the things which are by nature most evident of all.”¹⁵ Bats’ eyes are so accustomed to darkness that they are nearly blinded by daylight. I am afraid that this might happen to my generation. We have been taught from both the secular world and the church itself that the church has a very shameful history and that it totally disregards reason, without ever being exposed to all the good of the church and the reason that supports Christianity. However, there is a minority of us who have seen “the things which are by nature most evident of all.” As I strive to show my generation these things, I call for the help of older generations to show the world that Christianity does not thrive on hate and blind faith but on love and reason.

Steven Reep is in his final year as a masters of divinity candidate at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is also involved with teaching youth at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.

NOTES

- 1 George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 4.
- 2 St. Francois de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 3, chap. 4 (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2012).
- 3 Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8 KJV.
- 4 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 1994), 38.
- 5 See "Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 5, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/05/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>.
- 6 Edward Feser, *Aquinas (A Beginner's Guide)* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 16–23.
- 7 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, Book II, Lecture 5, Section 186 (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999).
- 8 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book II, lectures 7–9 (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999).
- 9 *Ibid.*, Book II, lecture 10.
- 10 *Ibid.*, Book III, lecture 7.
- 11 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Book I, Lecture 1 (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999).
- 12 Rom. 13:10.
- 13 Matt. 18:3.
- 14 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2000), 140.
- 15 Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, Book I, Lecture i (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999).