



The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God

George Weigel

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Why do Europeans and Americans see the world so differently? Why do Europeans and Americans have such different understandings of democracy and its discontents in the twenty-first century? Contrasting the civilization that produced the starkly modernist “cube” of the Great Arch of La Défense in Paris with the civilization that produced the “cathedral” of Notre-Dame, George Weigel argues that Europe’s embrace of a narrow secularism has led to a crisis of morale that is eroding Europe’s soul and threatening its future—with dire lessons for the rest of the democratic world. Weigel traces the origins of “Europe’s problem” to the atheistic humanism of the nineteenth-century European intellectual life, which set in motion a historical process that produced two world wars, three totalitarian systems, the Gulag, Auschwitz, the Cold War—and, most ominously, the Continent’s de-population, which is worse today than during the Black Death. And yet, many Europeans still insist—most recently, during the debate over a new EU constitution—that only a public square shorn of religiously-informed moral argument is safe for human rights and democracy. Precisely the opposite, Weigel suggests, is true: the people of the “cathedral” can give a compelling account of their commitment to everyone’s freedom; the people of the “cube” cannot. Can there be any true “politics”—any true deliberation about the common good, and any robust defense of freedom—without God? George Weigel makes a powerful case that the answer is “No,” because, in the final analysis, societies are only as great as their spiritual aspirations.

The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God Details

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From Reader Review The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God for online ebook

Diane says

This book deals with Europe's declining religious faith and its implications for politics in that continent. The author makes a number of good points, particularly about the role of the Catholic Church in the fall of Communism, and how that has affected Europe's public intellectuals. Although I agree with the author's conclusions overall, I felt that many of the assertions weren't supported as well as they could be. For instance, the author argues that a Europe where faith plays a more important role would be better at protecting human rights than Europe is currently, but he leaves this assertion relatively unsupported.

Alan Lampe says

A really good, easy to read argument on what is happening, spiritually at least, between Europe and America. It was written in 2004 / 2005 so that needs to be taken into consideration as well. George makes a very good point that what is happening in Europe could very well happen in America by the end of the century.

Will says

Favorable review in Nat'l Review. "Learn what happens to Europe when nothing but the Enlightenment is left."

Dustin says

RECOMMENDED READING for anyone wanting to think clearly about culture and how it is shaped.

"It is not true, as is sometimes said, that man cannot organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can only organize it against man."

It was helpful (and highly recommended) to read this book alongside How the Irish Saved Civilization by Thomas Cahill and When a Nation Forgets God by Erwin Lutzer.

It would be a tragedy to "erase" the influence, benefits, and responsibility that Christianity and Christian thinking had on the history of Western Civilization.

Why do Europeans and Americans see the world so differently? Why is Europe dying demographically? When you suppress the history of God in the world you remove the ability to pursue justice, truth, and beauty because you remove an absolute standard to appeal to - in turn, everything becomes a power struggle, survival of the strongest.

"The deepest currents of history are spiritual and cultural, rather than political and economic. History is

driven, over the long haul, by culture - by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship: by which societies deem to be true and good and noble; by the expressions they give to those convictions in language, literature, and the arts; by what individuals and societies are willing to stake their lives."

John Roberson says

Weigel pits the coldly rational impersonal culture of high humanism ("The Cube," L'Arche De La Defence) against the personal, character-filled, tradition-bound culture of medieval Christianity ("The Cathedral," Notre Dame). That architectural analogy (explored in the first couple of pages) is the high point of the book; other than that, treat it as an annotated bibliography of other authors (de Lubac, John Paul II, etc.) who are worth reading. Ultimately I think he's over-committed to making the project of The West work, which is why he seems to think that one of the best things about Christianity is that it underwrites a pluralistic, democratic State (seems dubious to me).

Thomas says

Despite it's now being ten years old, this essay is still very much needed. The forces at work in Europe, predictably, are now afflicting the United States, but meeting much more resistance here. This is Weigel at his economic best, being concise, yet thorough, in warning us about the need for the transcendent, even in political life.

Axel says

Insightful summary of the intertwining of the church and state in the development of Europe. Chapters are brief like essays or articles. Skillful blend of history, government, and philosophy - he presents the rationale on both sides of church and state as seen at 1648 in Westphalia and in the forming of the constitution of the European Union. Points considered - human freedom not exhausted by personal autonomy, the worth of a human being far exceeding arguments for utility.

Manda says

This was a really good look at the current situation facing European culture in regards to the conscious dismissal of Christianity. Weigel examines the causes, going back to the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as possible repercussions.

The book also gave insight to the prevailing philosophies of the day, in both Europe and America.

Altogether, a very interesting read that is thought provoking and well written.

Rebecca says

This was one of those books that I read because it popped up on an "important conservative books that came out this year" list, but I didn't expect to really enjoy it. To my surprise, not only was it a quick read, but it was actually an enjoyable and informative one. Since the author is Catholic I didn't agree with all his viewpoints, but his points on the humanization and loss of faith of Europe not only made a lot of sense, but explained a lot of what I saw when I was there.

John says

This is an excellent examination of the spiritual life of contemporary Europe, its relevance to American spiritual life--written by a Catholic theologian. Weigel argues that prior to the Reformation, the seeds of human autonomy were sown--as they blossomed, they lead to the human cry for freedom from the perceived slavery of the Christian God.

Europe is now bent on forgetting its Christian heritage, and is about to lose all its inheritance as the population is diminishing and about to abandon itself to Islamic immigrants who will eliminate the Christian heritage of Europe entirely--as they did in North Africa.

This is a worthwhile and quick read.

Victoria Claire says

This book critiques the culture of modern Europe, represented by the constitutional treaty that was being written in 2004 for the European Union, where the topic of controversy was the exclusion of acknowledging Christian roots. The book examines a history of ideas and traces how Europe "forgot God" at the beginning of the 20th century, resulting in the rise of atheistic humanism, where democracy, equality, and tolerance are the "virtues" of the time--but with no basis. Weigel shows just how inseparable Christianity is from the formation of Europe and how Europe's attempt to "forget" its Christian past has caused intense cultural, economic, and political harm. He talks in depth about the success of Polish culture because faith is an integral part of the country, and not feared or excluded as it is in other parts of Europe where it is seen as a threat. Much is mentioned of the intellectual and cultural work of John Paul II, and his vision and hope for the modern world, not to revert to premodernism, but that living in sanctity and Christian humanism is the alternative to the devastating secularism of modernity.

One of the things that struck me was the distinction of the modern conception of freedom. The Thomist view (the Catholic view) views freedom as the freedom to do the right, to pursue excellence, whereas the influence of writers beginning with Ockman and continuing all the way with Nietzsche has brought a prevailing idea that freedom is simply the ability to choose...well, whatever you want, instead of whatever is good. Just don't hurt anyone else's ability to choose whatever they want. This leads to radical autonomy infecting societies' ability to unite over common values, allowing for "freedom" to become "indifference." As Europe loses sight of any kind of common value other than the value of letting everyone have their own values and not imposing them on others, it loses all conviction that united them. Stand for nothing, and Europe will "die out" in a sense, replaced by those who have convictions such as the rapidly increasing Muslim population (whose only nationalism is their religion), as Europeans fail to produce the next generation due to the

breakdown of the family.

After reading this book I am left with a clearer picture of the misconceptions by which the modern culture has allowed itself to become slowly drugged. That they think they can cut off the roots of democracy and still have sustenance to live. They are suffocating themselves.

Also after reading this book I am left with a stronger conviction that Christianity is the answer for modern world just as it has been for every age. The Church is actually quite adaptable--precisely because of its solid unchangeable foundation of Truth. Sanctity and the modern world are not mutually exclusive, but must become united! John Paul II called for a revolution of conscience, to awaken the adventure and purpose of BEING. And not only as individuals, but to hope to build a culture of life.

A passage that shined to me like a beacon of light, where Weigel recounts a conversation he had with a Pole describing why the Solidarity worked in Poland. Beyond the clumsiness of historical surface view, It was the spirit of the thing! It worked because of a "Dramatic sense of interior liberation..The exhilarating determination to live "as if" they were free" (128). I want to live this way too.

Christian Dibblee says

As far as arguments go, this is very 20,000 feet. I tended to agree with a lot of his assertions, particularly about the strange definition of "tolerance" being peddled in Europe today. He also did a good job pointing out the problem with widespread secularization, and that losing faith in core principles of truth will change how a society reacts to various factors. That said, it might have been a little more enjoyable had it been more in-depth. He certainly raises some good theories and authors to the fore, and I began to think I should read Lubac and JPII. Good, but not great.

Caleb says

This book offers some good insights into Europe's past and present, tolerance, and the importance of Christianity in public. However, the Cube and the Cathedral is too much of a polemic to be anything more than a political statement. It is very much of its time, especially regarding the tensions between Europe and America in the midst of the Bush era. Weigel doesn't really engage the ideas of those that he is criticizing and his history is deceptively selective at best. A more honest book would be much more useful in this kind of debate.

Andy Erickson says

My brain hurts... but in a good way.

I may not be learned enough for this book. I had to keep Wikipedia open for all of his references to war, politics and people. I also used a dictionary more than I'd like to admit.

Overall very challenging, slow at times and it seemed to be in the weeds at times without great flow. He seems more like a researcher than a writer.

Great insight, super smart dude, I liked the book.

Christopher says

Weigel's **THE CUBE AND THE CATHEDRAL** is a slim collection of brief meditations on the problems affecting Europe and some possible solutions. Weigel draws together the thoughts of Robert Kagan on geopolitics, and Joseph Weiler on the continent's Judaeo-Christian heritage, and is informed by the author's own experiences with Polish history.

The book takes its title from the cubiform Grande Arche de la Defense in Paris, which is often claimed in guidebooks big enough to hold the entire Cathedral of Notre Dame within it. While touring this monument, the author thought about the increasing secularism of Europe, where its churches and traditional beliefs are now entirely forgotten. Among the problems Weigel discusses are "Christophobia", a reluctance to admit that the Judaeo-Christian tradition shaped Europe, an existential crisis brought on by total relativism and no sure navigation points, and the demographic suicide brought on by a low birthrate and large amounts of Muslim immigrants who not only don't assimilate, but tend to become radicals. These are all problems which many in Europe ignore, and such head-in-the-sand approach is worrying when we live in such a decisive era when Europe can either flourish or collapse.

The second half of the book contains Weigel's solutions to Europe's malaise, and here I became quite disappointed, for it is a gushing praise of Roman Catholicism and Pope John Paul II. The author feels that "returning" to Roman Catholicism is the right course for the continent, and he seems generally unaware that the E.U. is expanding to countries that were never Catholic (Romania, Bulgaria) and which, furthermore, see Catholicism as an aberration from the universal Church of the seven ecumenical councils which Rome abandoned but which lives on in Eastern Orthodoxy. The author's only consideration of non-Catholic Christianity is when he claims that the Eastern Church was gripped by caesaropapism where the Patriarch of Constantinople had to blindly follow the orders of the Byzantine Emperor, and therefore this form of Christianity is not acceptable for Europe. This is total nonsense.

If you've been following the problems of Europe, then Weigel's small book (only 1977 pages of text, and typeset double-spaced) will tell you little. However, if you are interested in how Roman Catholic thought would like to reshape Europe's cultural life and institutions, then **THE CUBE AND THE CATHEDRAL** might be a worthy little read. Too bad he had to slur the Orthodox tradition along the way.
