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Abstract

"Reno devotes most of the book to developing an account of what he calls the 'postwar consensus,' which arose out of the west's revulsion at the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century."

Posting about the book *Return of the Strong Gods* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/western-society-and-cultural-elites-a-review-of-return-of-the-strong-gods/>

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in things

August 13, 2020

Western Society and Cultural Elites: A Review of *Return of the Strong Gods*

David Westfall

Title: *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West*

Author: R.R. Reno

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The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana famously said, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” While I’ve heard this quote throughout my life, I especially recall seeing it revisited several years ago, when a study revealed that approximately two-thirds of millennials did not know what “Auschwitz” was. The finding prompted much discussion at the time, and renewed calls of “never forget” and “never again” among many who took notice.

Indeed, if headlines are any indication, there does seem to be a mounting fear in our society that we are well on our way toward repeating the era of Hitler and Stalin. This fear surfaces especially in criticisms of the current presidential administration and its supporters, and of the populist and nationalist movements that recent years have seen gaining traction in North America and Europe. What accounts for their growth and influence? Why the recent backlash against the increasingly global and pluralistic mindset that has characterized western politics for the past half-century?

In his recent book, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West*, R.R. Reno argues that such movements are not the harbinger of a return to fascism, as their critics fear. Rather, western elites are now tasting the bitter fruit of their own policies and agendas. In effect, Reno argues, we are living amid the ruins of a culture led by people whose “never again” mindset has morphed into a socio-political wrecking ball that frantically demolishes any effort to construct a positive basis for civic life. The present upheavals represent a desperate cry of “Enough!”

Reno devotes most of the book to developing an account of what he calls the “postwar consensus,” which arose out of the west’s revulsion at the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century. In the wake of two massive global conflicts driven by nationalist ideology, the cultural elites and leadership class of the west sought to define principles of social order that would make the world secure from any resurgence of totalitarianism and world-consuming violence. In their eyes, this demanded that we cleanse political and public life of strong loyalties to those traditional sources of solidarity that have united societies in the past, such as nation, class, traditional morality, or religion. These Reno refers to as the “strong gods,” realities that transcend the human individual, lay claim to his assent and allegiance, and (according to these figures) thereby lay the foundation on which totalitarianism is built.

In their stead, elites asserted that the autonomy of the individual is to be prized above all else. Rather than looking to the strong gods to provide social cohesion, maximizing the liberties of self-interested individuals would ensure the diffusion of power necessary to organize society while also preventing the return of dictators and death camps. Meanwhile, the influence of the strong gods must be fiercely opposed wherever it begins to re-assert itself. Empirically verifiable “facts,” rather than value-laden and non-empirical “truths,” should determine the shape of the social contract, and attempts to ground public discourse or policy in the latter rather than the former should be censured. In this way, the postwar consensus is anti-metaphysical and procedural in its approach to social order: just as prioritizing the nation or the state over the autonomous individual funds totalitarianism, so does positing *any* “truth” that purports to stand over and above the self and demand its assent. In the place of solidarity around strong transcendent claims, we need an “open” society in which minimal restraint is placed on the individual’s pursuit of his or her own aims, and in which attempts to impose external limitations on this effort are deconstructed and unmasked as the naked aggression of an “authoritarian personality.”

According to Reno, “[t]his basic pattern of analysis—the source of totalitarianism is found in the impulse to reach for something greater, and the remedy lies in ‘going small’ and adopting a weakening discourse—has been recapitulated countless times in the postwar era” (89). It is advanced in the philosophy of Albert Camus and Jacques Derrida,

in Joseph Fletcher's "situation ethics," in the work of postwar theologians such as Harvey Cox and Karl Rahner. At the popular level, and more recently, it appears in the celebration of anything transgressive or ambiguous, the dissolution of all "binaries" as oppressive, and the policing of "microaggressions." The present regime of political correctness is the definitive widespread expression of this cultural-political project. And yet, with no small irony, its role in this project displays markedly totalitarian tendencies: the "openness" that it advocates it is "a managed, orchestrated, and finally *compelled* openness" (91, *emph. mine*).

According to Reno, this consensus is well-established, at least in practice, among liberals and conservatives alike. Whether through interventionist economics and the ministrations of "social technologists" (e.g. Karl Popper, Arthur Schlesinger) or through the autonomous self-regulation of the free market itself (e.g. Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman), western elites promote a metaphysically void, non-transcendent means of sustaining the west's liberal democratic project. Even the would-be detractors from this consensus (here Reno devotes particular attention to William F. Buckley) have in effect made peace with it, in that they pragmatically uphold and defend the system's requisite pluralism in the name of winning and keeping "a place at the table" for themselves.

The effect of the postwar cultural project, in the end, has been to deprive western society of any positive basis for the social contract. The only acceptable solidarity is to be found in sharing the project of *dissolving* objective bonds of solidarity. In the cheerfully self-contradictory words of the 1968 Paris student revolt, "It is forbidden to forbid!" But humans cannot live forever on a specious solidarity of this sort: "A society lives on answers, not merely questions; convictions, not simply opinions" (95). Human nature itself abhors this vacuum and craves an authority beyond itself to provide it with meaning and guidance.

We are by nature "eccentric" beings, oriented ultimately toward that which is beyond ourselves, and attempting to deny or eradicate this eccentricity represents the most profound defection from nature imaginable. It leaves us "homeless" in a world with no meaning for us beyond the caprice of our own desires. Throughout history, human societies have made a home for themselves within a shared sense of collective identity and solidarity rooted in transcendent realities whose influence is preserved by tradition. But now we have responded to this history's excesses by celebrating its opposite and refusing "to settle into stable convictions or common loves." Accordingly, Reno concludes, the present crisis amounts to "a disquietude born of homelessness" (103).

This, Reno argues, is what lies at the roots of the populism and nationalism now gaining traction throughout the western world. These movements do not amount to a resurgence of the kind of totalitarian spirit that western elites fear. Rather, they reflect a

desperation to fill the very vacuum that the western world's leaders *themselves* have created and actively defend. It is society's response to an unfulfilled hunger for a solidarity rooted in something more ultimate than the individual self. The metaphysical vacuum that the "open society" deliberately creates is ultimately responsible for phenomena such as Donald Trump's election, Brexit, and so forth. "For," Reno says, "deprived of true and ennobling loves, of which the patriotic ardor is surely one, people will turn to demagogues and charlatans who offer them false and debasing loves" (162).

Engaging with these movements fruitfully therefore cannot be a matter of re-asserting and defending the tenets of the postwar consensus. Rather, "[t]he essential task of political leadership is to help men shelter together within traditions and communities of shared loves" (106). Thus Reno concludes the book:

Our task, therefore, is to restore public life in the West by developing a language of love and a vision of the "we" that befits our dignity and appeals to our reason as well as to our hearts. We must attend to the strong gods who come from above and animate the best of our traditions. Only that kind of leadership will forestall the return of the dark gods who rise up from below. (162)

On the whole, I find Reno's analysis of the present situation and its historical origins to be compelling, if perhaps a bit monolithic. I particularly appreciate the Augustinian anthropology that grounds much of his discussion, and value his insistence that a coherent social contract depends upon widely shared objects of love that transcend the individual. My questions and concerns, meanwhile, have to do with where Reno's description of the "strong gods" fits within a larger theological account of how the cities of God and man, with their respective objects of love, relate to each other.

These concerns undoubtedly owe to the parameters and limitations of Reno's argument, which is not primarily theological in nature, nor are his proposals directed toward the church in particular. The questions are surely relevant for that argument, however: to what extent do the church's shared loves overlap with those of western society as Reno would have it exist? Where are they in tension? What, moreover, are the ramifications of readmitting the "strong gods" of nation and tradition when most of the western world today is thoroughly secularized? (To what extent would Reno's proposal amount to a "de-secularization"?) So long as the "strong gods" do in fact remain "gods," to what degree should Christians view their return as a positive development?

It is clear enough in the book (and given his Catholic background, unsurprising) that Reno would be happy to see the church regain its former cultural and political prominence in the western world. And yet, it is not clear that he thinks this would be

necessary for the realization of his proposal, nor that the church's proclamation of the gospel would be needed to prevent the return of the strong gods' darker cousins (e.g. militaristic nationalism, totalitarianism). For Reno, the church features as but one of several sources of solidarity within the west's larger cultural-political project, alongside other religious organizations or "communities of transcendence" (159). But to what extent will the strong gods' return truly serve the welfare of the modern west—or, at least, the welfare of the church *in* the modern west—without their overt and ultimate allegiance to the one whom strong gods slew, and under whose feet they've now been placed?

The likes of Karl Popper and John Rawls were not wrong in their judgment that transcendent realities can exercise a destructively self-totalizing influence in the world. This does not owe to their transcendence as such, but to the *ultimacy* that we give to such realities—an ultimacy that belongs properly to the triune God and to no other. Idolatry, in other words, is the origin of totalitarianism, and the twentieth century reveals nothing if not the destructive potential of human ideals that have become ultimate reality. What, in Reno's account, is supposed to stand between such recovered ideals and their idolatrous ultimacy in a largely post-Christian society? Given that human nature is unchanged and that its bearers are eminently forgetful creatures, I find Reno's repeated assurances that the danger is past to be less than convincing. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the insights he offers into the nature of the problem.