

Trust in an Age of Arrogance

“. . . I came to understand that sin is not a matter of morality or conduct, but a state or orientation of a man’s entire consciousness which does not make God its center.”¹

—Arthur McGill

C. S. LEWIS HAS diagnosed the arrogance of our age in his essay, “God in the Dock.”

The ancient man approached God (or even gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge, God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.²

What was true in Lewis’s day, the middle of the last century, is even truer in post- modernity. We who live in modern (and post-modern) times have traded our role with God’s role. God is no longer the judge of us but we of him. We have arrogated to ourselves the attributes of deity and given to God the responsibility to justify himself, repent, change, or disappear as irrelevant. Lewis’s prophetic and diagnostic description, written in 1947, has clearly come to pass. At no time in the history of either Christian or pagan religions has a people shown such hubris toward God or to the gods. Even pagans believed that hubris in the face of the gods would bring judgment and destruction. Awe, fear, trembling, dread, rever-

1. McGill, *Sermons*, 149.

2. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 245.

ence, and even respect are almost absent today from the human posture before God.

Barbara Tuchman, the eminent historian, writes: “In the search for meaning we must not forget that the gods (or God, for that matter) are a concept of the human mind, they are creatures of man, not vice-versa.”³ This voice of arrogance can clearly be heard also in the writings of Karen Armstrong, the widely praised and rarely criticized ex-Roman Catholic nun and formidable scholar. She claims that the deity is a product of humankind’s creative imagination. Her book, *A History of God*, ends with this comment: “if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century we should, perhaps, ponder the history for some lessons and warnings.”⁴ She has examined in this much praised book the deity whom humans have imagined and recommends the lessons she has learned as we “create a new faith” for the current century. Like a black cat in a dark night this example of arrogance is hardly noticeable.

And Armstrong is not alone. Another ex-Roman Catholic author, Jack Miles, claims in *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (2001) that Christ died not for our sins, but for God’s sins! Our cultural leaders often take these assumptions and judgments as worthy reflections of Judaism and the Christian faith. Responsibility for our actions is removed as well as our hope for repentance, redemption, and transformation. Miles panders to our self-centeredness by placing blame on God who must change to meet our needs and desires.

Miles is no offbeat exotic scholar but a seriously respected and reviewed author, another black cat in the dark night of cultural arrogance. His book, a best seller, not only received a Pulitzer Prize but also the John Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. “If I were God, I do not think I would want to be studied by most contemporary theologians” is the understandable response by Alasdair MacIntyre, Professor at Notre Dame.⁵ This role reversal between us and God is characteristic of our age. No longer is it “he who made us and not we ourselves” (Psalm 100) but we who have made him.

Another example of our age’s arrogant treatment of God can be seen in Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His

3. Tuchman, *March of Folly*, 45–46.

4. Armstrong, *History of God*, 399.

5. MacIntyre, “Books and Culture,” 5.

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sensitive and poignant reaction to his son's fatal illness is a needed and convincing demonstration that all tragic things that happen to people are not to be understood as punishment for sins. Jesus clearly taught us in Luke 13:1–5 and John 9:1–3 that those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell or the man born blind were not instances of punishment for sin. But at the end of this reassuring message about false guilt, Kushner resolves the profound mystery of iniquity (2 Thess 2:7 KJV) by exhorting us to love God “and forgive Him despite His limitations.”⁶ Here the inexplicable matter of innocent suffering is resolved by this condescending gesture to an imperfect God who is reduced to an object of our forgiveness. In other words, our knowledge of right and wrong is superior to God's.

Perhaps the epitome of this arrogance is Norman Mailer's autobiography of Jesus, *The Gospel According to the Son*. A reviewer described the work:

In recent years, Mr. Mailer has tried to dress his all-too-human subjects, Lee Harvey Oswald and Pablo Picasso, in the garments of heroism. This time he has tried to do the reverse, with equally distressing results. In trying to describe Jesus and God as accessible novelistic characters, Mr. Mailer has turned them into familiar contemporary types; he has knocked them off their celestial thrones and turned them into what he knows best, celebrities.⁷

The best comment on this was a cartoon in *The New Yorker*. A man, standing before the eternal throne of judgment, is screaming, “Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I just look like Norman Mailer!” Our cultural arrogance has changed God and Jesus into mere celebrities. Another age would have called this blasphemy. That we will all appear for judgment before the throne of almighty God becomes a subject for humor in contemporary journalism. Trust in God has been replaced by trust in man, the hallmark of secularism. The air we breathe is saturated with such hubris.

Although not widely recognized as such, secularism is a faith in “this-world-is-all-there- is-ism,” as Reinhold Niebuhr termed it. Western civilization has no evidence for this confidence, historically, empirically, or scientifically, but this hope and trust rests on assumptions that have replaced those of the Christian faith. God is no longer a player among the many changes and disappointments of hope and trust.

6. Kushner, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 148.

7. Kakutani, review of *Gospel According to the Son*, April 14, 1997.

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Nor is the church immune to our current proclivity or tendency to secularism. As Christians we, too, tend to replace confidence in what is perfect with what is imperfect. Trust in self-centered humans has resulted in an inflation of confidence in autonomous humanity to arrogant proportions. We must come to accept the existence, and understand the nature, of this secular dogmatism in our culture in order to comprehend the extent to which it has captured our churches. If God is not to be trusted, what or whom can we trust?

SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY

The substitution of secular psychology for trust in God was perhaps best illustrated in the works of Philip Rieff, especially his *Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966). Rieff claimed that these psychotherapeutic religiosities represent a failure of nerve by both psychotherapists and clergymen. One of the most influential psychotherapists, Erich Fromm, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, claimed:

If man gives up his illusion of a fatherly God, if he faces his loneliness and insignificance in the universe, he will be like a child that has left his father's house. But it is the very aim of human development to overcome infantile fixation. Man must educate himself to face reality. If he knows that he has nothing to rely on except his own powers, he will learn to use them properly.⁸

The assumption that one can educate oneself to reality, and know that there is nothing to rely on but one's own powers, and that one will learn to use them properly, is a confidence (a faith, a trust). As a substitute for Christianity, it is an example of hubris begging for judgment.

The psychiatrist Allen Wheelis, in his book *The Quest for Identity*, gives another example of replacing trust in God with trust in human beings. He describes his approach to a hypothetical clergyman:

If the clergyman remains intellectually and emotionally open, his work may provide him with such insight as will force him eventually to relinquish belief in a personal God, in life after death, and in other absolutes which had guaranteed his security.⁹

A symptom of secular society is its unexamined and gratuitously assumed dogma that this world is all there is. Especially noteworthy is

8. Fromm, *Psychology and Religion*, 126.

9. Wheelis, *Quest for Identity*, 109.

the claim that: “Psychoanalysis provides no value system, nor should it.”¹⁰ But Wheelis is clearly carrying into his therapy his unacknowledged naïve secular value system. “Everyone has values and dogmas but me. My beliefs are not beliefs but truths” seems to be the arrogant assumption of the new therapeutic age. At the same time the therapist who claims to have achieved objectivity “knows” that his patient’s value system is not true and that he must relinquish the beliefs that nurtured some of the most creative and productive individuals throughout history—not only Dante, Shakespeare, Handel, and Bach but T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and C. S. Lewis, among millions of other believing Christians throughout the centuries. Wheelis assumes that Christian beliefs do not correspond to reality but reality is inaccessible to those whose hubris limits their trust to an encapsulated history. A person cannot trust simultaneously in the ultimate sufficiency of human ingenuity and in God.

The belief that we have controlling power over our wills is another symptom of secular dogma. Wheelis claims: “Whether or not [the clergyman] can survey the damage, salvage those elements which are sound, and build a new structure of belief depends upon the courage, tenacity, and creative ability which he alone can mobilize to meet the crisis.”¹¹ Behind this statement is the clear but unacknowledged secular dogma that the clergyman’s historic faith must give way to a trust in his ability to “build a new structure of belief.” His client is being taught to leave the “structure of belief” of 2,000 years and build another one to resolve the human condition described earlier by William Temple. Laying aside the essential question of truth, Wheelis here dumps on his client the burden of having the courage, tenacity, and creative ability that he alone can mobilize. If his client could do that he would not be in therapy in the first place. This belief that our wills have the power of themselves to do what we should—to love others as ourselves—is called the Pelagian heresy in Christian teaching. Belief that my heart can be changed by my will alone is an arrogant, cruel, and misplaced confidence.

Wheelis’s book contains much wisdom and numerous examples of self-effacing humility. He is no straw man but rather an outstanding example of a whole generation of therapists who have had an incalculable influence on our age. His popularity and talent is such that his works have

10. *Ibid.*, 50.

11. *Ibid.*, 110.

been printed in *The New Yorker*. He has authored some fourteen books and was one of the most respected and admired therapists of his generation. At issue, however, is the gratuitous assumption, now the unacknowledged dogma of the times, that we alone can resolve the condition of our destructive selves. Those who look to transcendent hope are regarded by Wheelis (and others) as neurotic or pathological. "Modern man cannot recapture an identity out of the past; for his old identity was not lost, but outgrown. Identity is not, therefore, to be found; it is to be created and achieved."¹² This dogma claims to solve the great mystery of human identity by our ability to be our own creator and thereby become just, loving, and merciful by our own endeavors. Yet in his mature years he shows a commendable humility: "I have not found in psychoanalysis the meaning I sought. I function as a guide to the lost, but do not myself know the way."¹³ Wheelis is obsessed with the idea, as T. S. Eliot put it, that human kind cannot bear very much reality. He is unpersuaded by his previous attempts to render death as a meaningful conclusion rather than a fated, inescapable end. "A symphony has a climax, a poem builds to a burst of meaning, but we are unfinished business. No coming together of strands. The game is called because of darkness."¹⁴ Darkness of death is the final secular word. Arrogance leads to darkness and it is in this darkness that we now live.

THE CLIMATE OF OPINION

The historian, Carl Becker, in his book, *Heavenly City of the 18th Century Philosophers* (1932), coined the phrase "climate of opinion." He taught scholars that it is well nigh impossible for a historian to escape the climate out of which he or she writes. Inevitably the object of study will be influenced by the assumptions of the historian's own period. He illustrates this, on the one hand, by the example of Edward Gibbon writing out of the eighteenth century's confidence in reason. Gibbon attributes the fall of the Roman Empire largely to religion and particularly to Christianity. He treats Christianity with some surprising respect, but then dismisses it on the basis of his pre-Freudian and optimistic eighteenth-century confidence in reason.

12. Ibid., 205.

13. Merkin, "Neurotic's Neurotic," 47.

14. Ibid., 48.

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On the other hand, Professor Michael Rostovtzeff, a twentieth-century White Russian, expresses his century's particular concerns in the title of his work, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926), in which the object of his study of the fall of the Roman Empire is narrowed to social and economic factors. Each historian looks at the same material through the lens of the concerns of his own times, his own climate of opinion that determines much of the result. This emphasis of concern, and consequent distortion of reality, describes not only historians, but everyone.

An accurate diagnosis and understanding of our age is necessary to free us from the limitations and false assumptions of our own climate of opinion, the lens by which we unconsciously view reality. Reinhold Niebuhr calls the study of history "the fulcrum of freedom" because only by the perspective of another age can we get purchase or a clear view of our own. Only then can we begin to have some objective questions and choices concerning our ideas and beliefs. Otherwise, we will be carried blindly along by the unacknowledged and unconscious opinions of our time. This is especially true in an age where hopes are limited to transactions and developments among self-centered human beings.

As Gibbon's views were molded by confidence in human reason in the Age of Enlightenment and Rostovtzeff's by trust in the social and economic preoccupations of the twentieth century, our views are inevitably influenced by the dominant beliefs of our present age. In response, we need a critical perspective on our own time if we are to begin to be free from its inhibiting, although largely unconscious, influences. The following works help verify this diagnosis of arrogance:

Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*

D. W. McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*

W. C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendent Thinking About God*

E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self Realization*

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Vitz shows what is happening as Christianity is diminished to meet the modern person's perception of his or her self-centered psychological needs. McCullough gives us a bracing criticism of the trivialization of God in the current search for a manageable deity. Placher traces the roots of this reductionist tide to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Holifield's subtitle shows the lamentable departure from Christianity in the training of American clergy. Where this present-day hubris prevails, evangelism is a stillbirth. Churches thus corrupted become impotent to speak to the culture whose prevailing hope, amid the dissolution of the therapeutic trust, is that of inevitable progress

PROGRESS

One trust left to a world without God is a future of progress. Before we simply dismiss the idea of progress, we should appreciate how much actual progress has been made and what makes this hope tempting. We humans are not naturally grateful. We tend to overlook much that is good. We have better teeth than George Washington and live in a society whose defeated party in presidential elections acquiesces even in exceedingly close contests. In the history of civilization and in many contemporary countries, such peaceful transitions of power are rare indeed.

As Stephen Moore and Julian L. Simon have pointed out:

Over the course of the 20th century life expectancy rose from 47 to 77 years of age. Deaths from infectious diseases fell from 700 to 50 per 100,000 of the population . . . auto ownership rose from one to 91 per cent of the population and patents granted rose from 25,000 to 150,000 a year. Controlling for inflation, household assets rose from \$6 trillion to \$41 trillion between 1945 and 1998.¹⁵

Progress in communication, engineering, technology, and medicine has produced undreamed of accomplishments. I recall leaving the Bodleian Library in Oxford one day in considerable discomfort from the effects of a kidney stone. I wandered into a nearby medical museum and looked at some non-flexible seventeenth-century catheters. Any temptation to romanticize my love for the seventeenth century was somewhat diminished by my gratitude for the progress made by modern medicine.

Contemporary reports of the lack of discipline in schools, the accelerating population of prisons, high incidences of abortion, divorce,

15. Moore and Simon, "Greatest Century that Ever Was."

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and suicide highlight the limitations of progress as a religious hope. The Heritage Foundation released a study of trends between 1960 and 1990. These thirty years showed a 560 percent increase in violent crimes, 400 percent increase in illegitimate births, a quadrupling of divorce, a tripling of children living in single-parent homes, a 200 percent increase in teen-age suicide, and a drop of 75 points in the average SAT scores. In 1940 teachers identified top problems with their students as talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the hall, cutting in line, dress code infractions, and littering. When asked the same question in 1990 teachers identified drug use, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.¹⁶ Now this trend has extended to increasing sexual pathologies, terror, violence, and rampages of murder in schools and colleges.

Professor John Witte of Emory Law School quotes Don Browning concerning the dangers that result from:

increased separation of love from sexual exchange, sexual intercourse from marriage, marriage from conception, marriage from childbirth, childbirth from parenthood, sexual intercourse from parenthood, child-rearing from marriage, child-rearing from biological parenthood, and the economic viability of individuals from the economic dependencies of marriage.¹⁷

Witte goes on to point out that sex may be free but children are not.

Aside from moral and spiritual decadence the economic cost to the culture is devastating. Thirty-eight percent of all American children are now born out of wedlock, and it costs American taxpayers \$112 billion per year. Those are the sobering numbers recently reported by the U.S. Census Bureau and by the Institute for American Values. The Census Bureau numbers break down as follows: 25% of all Caucasian, 46% of all Hispanic, and 69% of all African-American children were born to single mothers in 2007. Compared to children born and raised within marital households, nonmarital children, on average, impose substantially higher costs on society in lost tax revenues and for antipoverty, criminal justice, and education programs. According to the Institute for American Values, those costs exceeded \$1 trillion this past decade.¹⁸

16. Bennett, "Getting Used to Decadence," Lecture 477.

17. Witte, "Emory Law Journal," vol. 58, p. 90.

18. *Ibid.*, 98-99.

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Our technological achievements seem to be negatively matched by homegrown terror and cultural decadence. General Omar Bradley's comment is not irrelevant: "We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount . . . The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants."¹⁹ With the failing trust in inevitable progress many signs indicate that this trust is being replaced by a recognition of decadence.

DECADENCE

We are only beginning to realize, especially after 9/11, that the future may not be one of progress but of decadence. Richard Weaver's book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, describes it well.

Yet to establish the fact of decadence is the most pressing duty of our time because, until we have demonstrated that cultural decline is a historical fact—which can be established—and that modern man has about squandered his estate, we cannot combat those who have fallen prey to hysterical optimism.²⁰

The fact of decadence is impressively established by Jacques Barzun in his work *From Dawn to Decadence, 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (2000), 900 pages produced by an authority on history, education, art, music, science, philosophy, drama, and religion. These 500 years of life in the West are characterized by a cultural decline. His work is a salutary antidote to "hysterical optimism": All the modern technological achievement cannot hide the alarming trend in Western society. The reality of civilization's slide, illustrated so impressively, does not mean that one would prefer to live in the sixteenth century, which had its own share of difficulties. It does mean that secular hope of inevitable progress is no longer tenable. The hope that education and other cultural accomplishments will provide inherent progress as a substitute for Christian trust in Providence is obsolete. Barzun's book may justifiably be called the epitaph on the grave of the doctrine of progress that has largely replaced the Christian concept of Providence. A whole chorus of thoughtful scholars echoes his dire warning.²¹ A growing realization that something is terribly wrong is a sobering mirror to our arrogance.

19. Bradley, "Patriot Post," vol. 3.

20. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 10.

21. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know*; Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*; Schlesinger, *Disunity of America*; Bennett, *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*; Sykes, *Nation of Victims*;

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Richard Weaver's insistence in 1948 "that cultural decline is a historical fact—which can be established" is amply verified by the literature and subsequent events. The twentieth century exceeded all centuries in genocide, persecution, and war. This, however, is not to claim that those in the persistent state of denial, who have "fallen prey to hysterical optimism," have acknowledged this degeneracy and the need for grace and transcendence. On the contrary, trust and hope confined to secular limits has resulted in a presumptive and growing dismissal of the religious beliefs of others.

NAIVETÉ

Madeleine Albright in her book, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs*, exposes this failure. The former Secretary of State and UN delegate admits that on her watch U.S. foreign policy made every effort to ignore religion. Under the influence of the secular contempt for religion (or the assumption that religion is merely a matter for private consumption in civilized societies like our own), America's leaders assumed that religion was not an important force in the world, and that the Balkan crisis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and al-Qaida-sponsored terrorism were "not about religion."

This distorted vision stems from the compulsive hope that humans, with reason, education, and new scientific discoveries, have progressed beyond any need for religion. The pervasiveness of secular commitments is indicated by the fact that Albright wrote this critique "against the advice of friends." Neither the commitment of suicidal terrorists nor the commitment of medical missionaries in Rwanda can be comprehended by those limited to a truncated secular trust. Trust in inevitable progress helped bring about the rise of secularism as a substitute for the Christian trust in Providence. Providence, "making provision for" or "providing," had gradually begun to be used as a term for God. It was a favorite phrase of America's founding fathers. "Divine Providence" appears in the last sentence of the Declaration of Independence.

The very idea of Providence came to Britain with Christianity. Before Christianity the pervasive idea that corresponded to personal destiny was

Hendershott, *Politics of Deviance*; Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*; Cheney, *Telling the Truth*; Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*; Carter, *Culture of Disbelief*; Himmelfarb, *Demoralization of Society and Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians*.

the term, “Weird.” This Anglo-Saxon term was a near equivalent of the Greek term *moira*, the word for fate. If people drowned fording a stream, or died of consumption, it was their Weird or fate, their assigned lot or fortune. Providence gradually supplanted the pagan concept of Weird. Providence was a product of the Christian gospel. It gave a radically different lens through which to see one’s life and one’s end, one’s blessings and one’s calamities. One’s fate, or apparent end, was not seen as the last word. All things, even disasters were regarded as clouds hiding the provision of God. “We know that in everything God works for good, with those who love him . . .” (Rom 8:28). This hope is no natural idea, but something revealed in Scripture.

Over centuries a people’s hope was transformed from Weird to Providence. One result of this confidence provided by Providence was that nature came to be regarded as a source of knowledge and power, rather than superstition and magic. Creation was believed to be the handiwork of the second person of the Trinity, the *Logos*. This gave confidence in the logic of cause and effect and helped take the spooks out of the woods. Unfortunately this, in turn, was gradually seen not as a provision of God but as a work of man. The unprecedented power, which resulted in knowledge of nature and man’s ingenuity to use it, gradually replaced trust in Providence with trust in Progress.²² Thus, over the centuries, to perceive reality the pagan lens of Weird was replaced by the Christian trust in Providence and that in turn was replaced by trust in inevitable Progress.

This latter belief, the pervasive hope for Western people for more than a century, was deeply undermined by the events of the twentieth century. Confidence in inevitable Progress, as a hope that gives meaning to life, is expressed by the figure Bildad in Archibald MacLeish’s play, *J.B.: A Play in Verse*. Bildad, the modern Job comforter, responds to J. B.’s claim of innocence and cry for justice:

22. Lloyd, *Providence Lost*.

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History has no time for innocence.

...

One man's suffering won't count, no matter

What his suffering; but All will.

At the end there will be justice!

...

On the way—it doesn't matter.²³

Reducing Christian belief to a trust in an impersonal future sacrifices any meaning for an individual's suffering in this life. "On the way—it doesn't matter" is a disconsolate substitute for divine Providence. We have returned to something very Weird indeed as a replacement for the dashed reliance on progress. The result is a crisis of confusion devoid of meaning.

Not unlike the rulers of Renaissance Europe who were profoundly influenced by Machiavelli's famous work, *The Prince*, the present-day leaders in universities and churches have replaced the search for truth with the acquisition of power.²⁴ Consequently, art has become ugly and music has become noise; worship has become entertainment, while poetry now laments the loss of meaning and confidence. Surely something Weird has come upon us when the most quoted serious poem of our times is that of W. B. Yeats' "The Second Coming," which ends with these lines:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?²⁵

One can hope that Yeats is wrong about the coming of the rough beast and that Progress will continue, but we cannot trust that it will be so. Weird, Providence, Progress, and Weird again describe our history. Like the people of Israel during the Babylonian captivity we must learn to sing the Lord's song in an increasingly strange land. The issue before us is how we can bring the trust in Providence to these Weird times.

23. MacLeish, J. B.: *A Play in Verse*, 121.

24. Marsden, *Soul of the American University*, and Sommerville, *Decline of the Secular University*; also Russell's early perception of power replacing truth in *Scientific Vision*, 262 ff, and MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*.

25. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 215.

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TRUST IN THIS AGE OF ARROGANCE

The word trust comes from the Greek word *pistis* and is translated as faith, belief, and trust. Its essential meaning is to rely on, or depend upon, something or someone. It is quite different from mere acknowledgment that something exists. Unfortunately both the words, faith and belief, have (for popular usage) too often been reduced to a mere recognition of existence. One can believe that God exists without trusting him. In regard to the word, faith, certain propositions can be written down, bound in a book and called *The Faith of the Church*. Hence, the words belief and faith can be used even when they lack the essential biblical meaning of personal reliance on and dependence upon. Trust, on the other hand, still seems to carry the essential meaning of *pistis*. I will therefore use the word trust for the most part rather than faith or belief.

TRUST AND HOPE

The relationship between trust and hope is important but difficult to describe precisely. Hope is an essential part of life: *dum spiro spero*: while I breathe I hope. A doctor friend observed the opposite: "When my patients cease to hope they cease to breathe." Bishop William Frey expresses it well: "Hope is the ability to hear the music of God's future. Faith (trust) is the courage to dance to it today."²⁶

Peter Kreeft has a wonderfully picturesque way of describing how essential hope is to life.

No one can live without hope . . . we creatures of time are constantly moving into the future, and our eyes are usually facing forward. Hope is like headlights. It is not easy to drive without headlights in the dark.²⁷

Hope is vital to humans and cannot successfully be amputated nor should it be. When facts and reality contradict our hopes, facts and reality are often deflected to keep a false hope alive. Hope is inevitable but its objects are various and are often inappropriate. Job denies that his hope is in gold. In the book of Esther the Jews' enemies hope to have power. Felix, in the book of Acts, hoped Paul would give him money. Hope in false objects or ideology can be devastating.

26. Frey, *Dance of Hope*, 1.

27. Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, 176.

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I once asked a friend about someone I had just met. He replied with a picturesque, old-fashioned expression, “He’s a nice guy but he’s about a half bubble off plumb.” A carpenter’s level has a bubble to indicate whether something is level or plumb. No one is exactly level or plumb. The Greek philosopher Protagoras wrongly claimed that “Man is the measure of all things.” When we measure ourselves by others, or others by ourselves, we are using flawed instruments. Building hope or confidence in this off plumb human nature results in a crooked foundation. When we fail to appreciate the fact that all are flawed, much hurt, both personally and socially, results. In a secular, post-Christian world, we are left with no objects for our hope other than off plumb crooked humanity. As hope is essential to life, in the absence of the Christian gospel, a compulsive and blind commitment to a fatally flawed humanity often results.

Trust is different from hope in several ways. Hope can often express merely a desire or a wish about something in the future, something not seen. “I hope the Redskins will win the football game.” “I hope my daughter gets into Oxford.” In contrast, trust exposes us to a vulnerability and disappointment more serious and sometimes more devastating than hope. In 1952, I hoped Adlai Stevenson would defeat Dwight Eisenhower for President. Fortunately I did not trust or rely on this. Credulity is not a synonym for trust. No one wishes elderly parents to be victims of fraud because of misplaced trust. W. C. Fields wisely taught us: “Trust everybody and cut the cards.”

A theological student working in a hospital oncology ward was said to have made the common mistake of new trainees: premature reassurance. A ministry to cancer patients in a hospital needs more substance than mere optimism. Patients need to be given a hope beyond physical survival. Not everyone recuperates. Much of Western culture is making the same mistake on a grander scale in its premature reassurance about human nature. What is needed is recognition that humans are impotent to cure themselves and that they need to know the reality and power of a deeper hope accessible only by a right placed trust. We hope the cancer patient will not die. What is our hope if she dies? Trust enables deeper hopes. We trust that death is not the end because we trust God and his promise.

Another difference between hope and trust is that the latter is more dangerous. Although some hopes can approach the commitment level of trust, the latter’s biblical meaning carries the sense of “you bet your

life” dependence. This exposes us to a vulnerability to suffering that is not often present in our hopes. Trust penetrates the armor of shyness with which we protect ourselves from exposure and hurt. Without trust there can be no friendship, love, or community, but the risks of embarrassment, disappointment, or betrayal are there.

Trust opens our hearts to both love and hurt. This is true regarding Christian trust. Christian discipleship promises no safety. William Alexander Percy’s hymn speaks of John dying homeless on Patmos and Peter being crucified head down. Paul is thrown in prison, beaten with rods, stoned, and shipwrecked. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Christians “will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Luke 21:16–17).

We are too often reassured by the lie that nothing can harm our churches. It is true that “the gates of hell shall not prevail” (Matt 16:18), but that does not mean that congregations (and souls) will not be lost. Even in a war whose victory is assured, soldiers and whole armies perish. Similar losses can be seen in the churches of Constantinople, Cappadocia, Ephesus, Egypt, Tripoli, and in the abandoned ecclesiastical edifices in metropolitan cities today. We live in an age where both culture and church give us premature reassurance. We badly need the bracing honesty, together with the promised endurance, that comes with suffering and deliverance.

We are invited to trust Jesus Christ who has promised us final and eternal justice that even we can endure because of his dearly bought mercy; that courage and honor in this life are not forever lost; that freedom and joy are begun here and consummated in his kingdom. All we lose is our self-centered self, although this loss is a bigger price than we naturally want to pay. The words of Robert Penn Warren show us that this loss of self is the only door to authentic hope and trust.

The recognition of the direction of fulfillment is the death of self,
And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood. All else is
surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit.²⁸

Warren is speaking here of baptism—the death to self and the beginning of a new center. As we abandon this hope we are in danger of becoming victims of an age in which we swap roles with God. Arrogance is truly

28. Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, 214–15.

Trust in an Age of Arrogance

a substitute, a replacement (surrogate), of hope and leaves us with a spirit destitute of the trust needed to relinquish our center to the true Center. Such trust is stifled in an age of arrogance. But it is recoverable by letting Jesus's warning remove the barriers to this trust: "Take heed! Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

SAMPLE