



Legatees of a  
Great Inheritance:  
How the  
Judeo-Christian  
Tradition Has  
Shaped the West



Civilisations die from suicide, not murder.  
—Arnold J. Toynbee

Throughout its most flourishing periods, Western civilization has produced a culture which happily absorbs and adapts the cultures of other places, other faiths, and other times. Its basic fund of stories, its moral precepts, and its religious imagery come from the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament.

—Roger Scruton

Western civilization is indebted to the Judeo-Christian tradition for its notions of human dignity and human rights, its innovation in science and medicine, its habits of humanitarian charity and universal education, and its rich contribution to the arts. Though once commonplace, this claim has become increasingly controversial, challenged by the revisionists of late modernity as well as those who suffer from historical amnesia. As the prodigious Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner has said, “Religion has written much of the history of the West.”<sup>3</sup> Or as British sociologist and historian of culture Christopher Dawson once put it, “Western culture has been the atmosphere we breathe and the life we live: it is our own way of life and the way of life of our ancestors; and therefore we know it not merely by documents and monuments, but from our personal experience.”<sup>4</sup> Even the notorious atheist Christopher Hitchens agrees that Western culture makes little sense without attending to the contribution of biblical religion: “You are not educated,” he maintains, “if you don’t know the Bible. You can’t read Shakespeare or Milton without it . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Today the resurgence of Islam in the West makes it urgent that we recall our experience and retell our story. What we do not value, we will not protect, much less cultivate. If we fail to appreciate the contributions of the Judeo-Christian tradition to Western civilization, we will be unable to sustain the virtues of that tradition against the juggernaut of Muslim advance. As the legatees of this great inheritance, we believe it is important to remember and celebrate those contributions. We do so fully aware that the narrative of the West is not an unblemished record. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the resilience of the tradition has meant that errors of the past have led to the evolution of increasingly greater respect for human persons and the erosion of practices and institutions that have harmed them. We—all of us who are beneficiaries of Western civilization—are in danger of forfeiting many of the gains we have made. “We are on the brink of decisions,” warns British philosopher Roger Scruton, “that could prove disastrous for Europe and for the world, and that we have only a few years in which to take stock of our inheritance and to reassume it.”<sup>6</sup> That threat has led us to re-examine how the Judeo-Christian tradition has shaped the West. So here we retell the story.

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## Constitutionalism and Limited Powers of Government

As Judaic studies professor William Scott Green has observed, the covenants of the Bible are the source of constitutionalism and the limited powers of government, two of the most important features of Western democracy.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, constitutionalism “seeks to prevent tyranny and to guarantee liberty and rights of individuals on which free society depends.”<sup>8</sup>

Citizens of constitutional democracies experience freedom from tyrannical power, have a significant voice in their own government, and may, therefore, live secure from the threat of capricious rule. Under this form of “republicanism” the citizens themselves are appointed to administer government. Because of the constitutional stipulations and the limitation of powers of government, trust among citizens does not depend upon sectarian religion, family connections, tribal loyalties, or favors. And as Francis Fukuyama has shown, trust is a necessary condition for the cultivation of social virtues and the creation of wealth.<sup>9</sup>

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Likewise the remainder of the Western legal system owes its origins to religious ideas, not least to Christianity. In his magisterial *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, distinguished Harvard jurist Harold J. Berman argued that, “It is impossible to understand the revolutionary quality of the Western legal tradition without exploring its religious dimension.”<sup>10</sup>

## Common Ancestry and Universal Human Rights

### *Human Dignity and the Sanctity of Every Human Life*

The Western tradition is indebted to Judeo-Christian conceptions of the special dignity of human beings and the rights and responsibilities which are theirs by virtue of that dignity.<sup>11</sup> All human beings owe their ancestry to a set of common parents according to the Hebrew Bible. These parents, Adam and Eve, were made in the image and likeness of their Creator (Gen. 1:27), and thus all their progeny bear that image (i.e., *the imago Dei*). From these beginnings we inherit the concept of human exceptionalism—the belief that human beings are unique, possessors of inalienable rights, and ought to exercise managerial stewardship over nature.<sup>12</sup>

## *Infanticide and Abortion*

European historian W. E. H. Lecky called infanticide “one of the deepest stains of the ancient civilisation.”<sup>13</sup> Yet Judaism always forbade infanticide. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that, “The law orders all the offspring to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus.”<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew origins of the “sanctity of human life” provided the moral framework for early Christian condemnation of infanticide against the bleak backdrop of the barbarism of Roman culture.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the *Didache* (c. 85-110), sometimes called “The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles,” commanded: “thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born.”<sup>16</sup> Some biblical scholars have argued that the New Testament’s silence on abortion per se is due to the fact that it was simply beyond the pale of early Christian practice.<sup>17</sup>

More than merely condemning abortion and infanticide, however, early Christian communities provided alternatives, adopting children who were destined to be abandoned. For instance, Callistus (died c. 223) provided refuge to abandoned children by placing them in Christian homes and Benignus of Dijon (3rd century) offered nourishment and protection to abandoned children, including some with disabilities caused by failed abortions.<sup>18</sup>

## *Gladiatorial Brutality*

In addition to eschewing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion, early Christians denounced human sacrifices, suicide, and the gladiatorial games. Because of their conviction of the special dignity of every human being, they found the games detestable. As the gladiators were usually criminals, prisoners of war, or slaves, in the eyes of the Romans their lives were expendable. But in the eyes of church leaders the practice was barbaric, and they called on Christians to boycott the “games.”<sup>19</sup>

## *Gender Equality*

In both Judaism and Christianity women and men are viewed as equal in their natures—both were made in the image and likeness of God. Hence, in biblical times women held positions of high honor. The Ten Commandments require obedience to both father and mother; Deborah, a prophetess, was a judge in Israel; and seven of the 55 biblical prophets were women according to Judaism.

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Among the Greeks, however, women were treated very differently. Homer had Agamemnon exclaim, “One cannot trust women.”<sup>20</sup> This doleful attitude toward women meant that female infanticide was morally licit in Greece. Roman women were no better off.

In contrast, the New Testament Gospels show Jesus of Nazareth treating women with great respect. He broke the tradition of some of the rabbis, speaking with and listening to the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-29).<sup>21</sup> He violated contemporary customs by teaching Mary and Martha (Luke 10: 38-42; John 11:25-26). Christians of the apostolic age welcomed women, according men the status of “brother” and women the status of “sister.”<sup>22</sup> Examples can be multiplied, but perhaps the greatest affirmation of the equal value of men and women is St. Paul’s declaration in Galatians 3:28-29: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”<sup>23</sup>

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Thus, the biblically informed countries of the Western world have repudiated the Hindu practice of sati, the Chinese practice of footbinding, the African practice of female genital mutilation, and the Muslim devaluation of a woman’s testimony in a court because they violate the dignity of women made in God’s image.

### *Racial Equality*

Our common ancestry also has implications for racial equality. In a culture in which slavery was normative, St. Paul’s instruction to Philemon not to treat Onesimus as his slave, but as his brother, was revolutionary (Philem.16). According to Lecky, Christians often freed slaves: “St. Melania was said to have emancipated 8,000 slaves; St. Ovidius, a rich martyr of Gaul, 5,000; Chromatius, a Roman prefect under Diocletian, 1,400; Hermes, a prefect in the reign of Trajan, 1,250.”<sup>24</sup>

Though a very virulent form of slavery was revived in the seventeenth century in England and the eighteenth century in America, long political and armed battles were fought to abolish it. One of the most noteworthy examples of the efforts to end the slave trade was that of William Wilberforce and his Clapham Group, whose motivation to abolish

slavery was underwritten by belief in the special dignity of every human being. Artisan Josiah Wedgwood even crafted a lapel pin to be worn by the abolitionists. The brooch showed an African slave, his shackled wrists lifted high, exclaiming, “Am I not a man and a brother?”

## Innovation, Labor, and Economic Freedom

Another Western distinctive has been the ability to marshal innovation and development. Rooted in the mandate to “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth” (Gen. 1:28, NJPS *Tanakh*), the Judeo-Christian tradition provides rich impetus for the stewardship of invention. God put primordial humans in a garden “to till it and tend it” (Gen. 2:15, NJPS *Tanakh*),<sup>25</sup> to classify the natural order (Gen. 2:20), and sustain themselves by the sweat of their brow (Gen. 3:17). They made tools (Gen. 4:22), planted vineyards (Gen. 9:20), made weapons (Gen. 10:9), and built great cities (Gen. 10:10). *Homo sapiens* (human knowers) are by their very nature *Homo faber* (human fabricators).

### *Labor and Vocation*

Among Jews and Christians, honest labor has been a validation of human dignity. Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) honored both work and the laborer when he said, “Just as the employer

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is warned not to steal the wages of the poor and not to delay them, so is the poor person warned not to steal the work of the employer by idling a little here and a little there, until he passes the whole day in deceit. Rather, he must be scrupulous with himself regarding time” (*Laws of Hire* 13:7).

Likewise early Christians valued work highly. Jesus, after all, grew up in a carpenter’s home, most of the disciples were bi-vocational, and St. Paul admonished Christians to avoid “any brother who is walking in idleness and not in

accord with the tradition that you received from us. . . . If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:6, 10). Instead, he enjoined the faithful “to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thess. 3:12).

Against the medieval tendency to dichotomize work as either sacred or secular, the Reformation saw the development of a doctrine of work as vocation (*vocatio*). Martin Luther famously argued that all (morally virtuous) work was God’s work and was to be done so as to glorify God and serve others.<sup>26</sup>

## *Work and Remuneration*

In the ancient world, work was certainly necessary, but in many of the nations surrounding the Jewish culture, slavery was the norm. Slaves almost always received little more than their bare subsistence. Rather than being dignified, work was dehumanizing. People were either rich or poor, and often grindingly poor. There was no middle class.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, work is honorable and labor is worthy of remuneration. Although ancient Israel was largely agrarian, the Bible is not silent about the relationship between work and wages. The Torah, for instance, required a servant who was poor to be paid daily by the master, “else he will cry to the LORD against you and you will incur guilt” (Deut. 24:15, NJPS *Tanakh*). To refuse to pay daily was a form of oppression and a denial of neighbor love (Lev. 19:13). Even the lowly ox was not to be muzzled while treading the grain so he could take advantage of the “wages” of food (Deut. 25:4). In the New Testament it was Jesus who stated that the “laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7).

## *Property Rights and Trade*

Though “the earth is the LORD’s” (Ps. 24:1, NJPS *Tanakh*), the emphasis on stewardship dominion in the Judeo-Christian tradition gave rise to the appropriateness of property rights. To be sure, modern concepts of property differ in some ways from those of ancient Judaism and Christianity, but the idea that one could justly own property derives from Judeo-Christian principles. The Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal” (Exod. 20:13, NJPS *Tanakh*) and the Tenth Commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house . . .” (Exod. 20:14, NJPS *Tanakh*) would be meaningless without the notion of private property. And what one may own, one may sell, trade, or give away—the primary means of transfer of property.

Sociologist Rodney Stark has chronicled the influence of Christianity on the economic success of the West in his trenchant volume *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*. His closing remarks are instructive: “The modern world arose only in Christian societies. Not in Islam. Not in Asia. Not in a ‘secular’ society—there having been none. And all the modernization that has since occurred outside Christendom was imported from the West, often brought by colonizers and missionaries.”<sup>27</sup>

## **Education and the University System**

Universal education is a signal contribution of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Torah enjoins parents to educate their children to love the Lord with “all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5, NJPS *Tanakh*). The New Testament emphasizes the



importance of educating the “mind,” most notably in Romans 12:1-8 and in Colossians 1 and 2. Among early Christians catechetical schools arose as a means of following the spirit of these texts. Justin Martyr, for instance, established schools in Ephesus and Rome by 150 AD. Contrary to the misogyny of the Greek gymnasia, both boys and girls were taught. Soon, not only was doctrine taught, but in Alexandria, for instance, mathematics, medicine, and later, through Origen, grammar were part of the curriculum. The affirmation that “all truth is God’s truth” led to a comprehensive curriculum.

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The great universities of the West stand as monuments to the influence of the tradition. Founded by the Catholic Church, the Sorbonne has been known as a seat of higher learning since 1257. The Universities of Bologna, Oxford, Cambridge, and many of the medieval universities became the seedbed from which the curriculum sprang. For instance, the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) were developed in those contexts, becoming synonymous with university education. In the United States, every college or university established up to the time of the nation’s founding (except the University of Pennsylvania) was begun by a Christian denomination. Congregationalists founded Harvard, Episcopalians founded William & Mary, Roman Catholics founded Georgetown, Brown University was founded by Baptists, and Princeton by Presbyterians.

Thus, the Judeo-Christian tradition has put a high value on universal education. The Western literary canon was formed in the crucible of that tradition. Students from all over the world still flock to Western universities.

## Critical Realism and the Observable World

God’s wisdom entailed that the world was rational, and his goodness entailed that it was knowable. Without these assumptions there could be no science. As British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has observed:

For the most part, the ancients saw the world as a dangerous and threatening place, full of dangers, disasters, famines and floods. There was no overarching meaning to any of this. It was the result of clashing powers, personified as conflicts between the G-ds. Religion was either an attempt to assert human power over the elements through magic and myth, or a mystical escape

from the world into a private nirvana of the soul. Against this, Judaism made the astonishing assertion that the world is good. It is intelligible. It is the result not of blind collisions and random mutations but of a single creative will. This alone is enough to set Judaism apart as the most hopeful of the world's faiths.<sup>28</sup>

### *Science*

While the earliest days of science were largely the province of the philosophers, the stage was set for the Scientific Revolution largely by Christians who introduced the inductive method that underwrites

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modern science.<sup>29</sup> By the fourteenth century, Christian thinkers had come to embrace the view that just as God had written normative principles into the fabric of the moral universe, so had he written laws that governed the natural universe. Thus, the early chemist Robert Boyle (1627-1691) was later able to say: “Nature is nothing else but God acting according to certain laws he himself fix’d.” The notion of eternal and fixed laws of nature set up the conditions under which modern mathematics and science could flourish. Mathematics could provide a true account of the universe and empirical science could discover the

verities revealed there by God himself. Both the “book of Scripture” and the “book of nature” had the sovereign God as their author and humanity as their recipients.

Could modern science have emerged from other conditions than these? It is impossible to say. That it did have, in fact, Christian roots is clear.<sup>30</sup> Doubtless some will point to Copernicus or the Galileo affair as repudiation of Christianity’s role in shaping modern science. In fact, Christian opposition to the Copernican model was by no means universal. And the fact that Pope John Paul II urged a reopening of the Galileo case and, in 1992, before the Pontifical Academy admitted Catholicism’s “error of judgment” is further evidence of Christianity’s capacity for self-critique and reform.

Despite the exaggerations of the popular media, the relationship between faith and science has been anything but constant warfare. There have been significant battles to be sure, but the history of science is populated with a great number of faithful Jews and Christians who saw no antagonism between orthodox faith and empirical science.

## *Medicine and Hospitals*

Rabbinic sources often cite the second-century BC apocryphal book *Ecclesiasticus* as a reminder that medicine owes its origins to God:

“Honor the physician . . . from God the physician gets wisdom . . . God brings forth medicines from the earth and let a prudent man not ignore them” (38:1-4). The Jewish contribution to medicine is illustrious. For instance, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) pioneered clinical medicine,

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Ferdinand Cohn (1828-1898) germ theory, Paul Ehrlich (1854-1915) immunology, and Selman Waksman (1888-1973) antibiotics.<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly, the Greeks and Romans made great contributions in medicine from the fifth century BC to the third century AD. The period commences with Hippocrates of Kos (460-370 BC) and ends with the Greek physician Galen (129-199 AD). However, as Albert Jonsen, University of Washington historian of medicine, maintains, “the second great sweep of medical

history begins at the end of the fourth century, with the founding of the first Christian hospital at Caesarea in Cappadocia, and concludes at the end of the fourteenth century, with medicine well ensconced in the universities and in the public life of the emerging nations of Europe.”<sup>32</sup>

This extraordinary, formative period in medicine was characterized by intimate involvement by the Church. “During these centuries,” argues Jonsen, “the Christian faith . . . permeated all aspects of life in the West. The very conception of medicine, as well as its practice, was deeply touched by the doctrine and discipline of the Church. This theological and ecclesiastical influence manifestly shaped the ethics of medicine, but it even indirectly affected its science since, as its missionaries evangelized the peoples of Western and Northern Europe, the Church found itself in a constant battle against the use of magic and superstition in the work of healing. It championed rational medicine, along with prayer, to counter superstition.”<sup>33</sup>

The Church engaged the healing arts not least because its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, healed the sick during his ministry (cf. Matt. 9; 10:8; 25:34-36). The early Church not only endorsed medicine, but also championed care for the sick.<sup>34</sup>

As a means of caring for those who were ill, St. Basil of Caesarea founded one of the first hospitals (c. 369). Christian hospitals grew apace, spreading throughout both the East and the West. By the mid-1500s there were 37,000 Benedictine monasteries alone that cared for the sick.

Furthermore, as Charles Rosenberg shows in his volume *The Care of Strangers, The Rise of America's Hospital System*,<sup>35</sup> the modern hospital owes its origins to Judeo-Christian compassion. Evidence of the vast expansion of faith-based hospitals is seen in the legacy of their names: St. Vincent's, St. Luke's, Mt. Sinai, Presbyterian, Mercy, and Beth Israel. These were all charitable hospitals, some of which began as foundling hospitals to care for abandoned children.

Similarly, in Europe, great hospitals were built under the auspices of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, an ancient French term for hospital is *hôtel-Dieu* ("hostel of God"). In 1863, the *Société Genevoise d'Utilité Publique* called on Swiss Christian businessman Jean Henri Dunant to form a relief organization for caring for wartime wounded. Thus, the emblem of the Red Cross was codified in the Geneva Convention one year later. In Britain, Dame Cicely Saunders founded the hospice movement by establishing St. Christopher's Hospice in the south of London in 1967.

## Principled Pluralism and Human Freedom

One of the most spectacular contributions of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the development of principled pluralism, including religious freedom and freedom of speech.

Due to its origins and tribal context, Judaism was in many ways admittedly theocratic. Even so, the people of God were commanded to "Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads" (Deut. 1:13, NJPS *Tanakh*). So some form of representative government was ordained. Likewise, when Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21), he recognized the separation of religion and government.

St. Peter reminded the Christians of Asia minor: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good . . . Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the Emperor" (1 Pet. 2:13-14, 17).<sup>36</sup>

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Separation of church, synagogue, and state is not, therefore, the invention of modernity or secularism, but of Christianity. In *The City of God*, St. Augustine laid the foundations of contemporary church/state

separation, arguing that Christians are members of two cities: the earthly and the heavenly. God will one day unite the two, but in the mean time the faithful are to take up the duties of each realm. In contrast, under traditional Islam, religious institutions and the state are inseparable.

Sadly, there have been periods in history when even Christians were confused on the relationship between the church and state. The Spanish Inquisition, Calvin's Geneva, the martyrdoms of John Wycliffe and John Hus, and the repressive Massachusetts Bay colony on American soil are cases in point. Attempts to establish a heavenly city on earth through the rule of law have been notorious failures. Nevertheless, in the crucible of these failures a more vigilant resolve to preserve religious tolerance has emerged. That resolve is enshrined in the establishment clause of the American Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion . . ."

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### *Freedom of Conscience*

Because the American founders understood so well the importance of religious liberty, the free exercise clause of the Constitution completes the circle: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The founders intended to create a state that was free of religion, but not free from religion.

Free exercise means that individuals must have the liberty to worship God (or not to worship at all) according to the dictates of conscience. The offspring of the Lutheran Reformation in Europe, the doctrine of liberty of conscience came into its adulthood in the American context, especially among the Baptists and others in the free-church tradition.<sup>37</sup>

Islam, however, does not have a concept of separation of mosque and state. In fact, quite the contrary is the case, as we read in the standard instruction book for Islamic converts, *What Islam is All About* by Yahiya Emerick. Says Emerick in "Lesson 89: What is an Islamic State": ". . . There is no separation of Masjid [Mosque] and state for the object of the Islamic state is the establishment of the Deen [religion] of Allah . . . Muslims know that Allah is the Supreme Being of the universe, therefore, His laws and commandments must form the basis for all human affairs. If we didn't follow Allah's commandments, but then still called ourselves Muslims, we would be hypocrites like the Christians, Buddhists and Jews are today."<sup>38</sup>

### *Freedom of Expression*

Another legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West is freedom

of expression, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Corollaries of freedom of conscience, free speech, and a free press are enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights. Freedom of expression is an integral part of liberal democracies and derives from the Jewish and Christian affirmations of the free moral agency of every human being.<sup>39</sup>

### *Universal Human Rights Tradition*

Again, it is important to point out in this context that the human rights tradition has roots that reach much deeper and are much older than the “self-evident” truths recognized in the Enlightenment. Our unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not ours by virtue of a social contract but are ours by virtue of divine donation. They are a status we possess, not a quality we are granted by family, society, or the state.

Long before Descartes and Locke, Montesquieu or Rousseau, the Hebrew prophets wrote and preached with crystal clarity that all men, women, and rulers were equally accountable before the Almighty (cf. Isa. 10:1-2; Jer. 5:26, 28-29). Likewise, Jesus broke down racial, ethnic, economic, gender, and ageist barriers in his dealings with people. Even Friedrich Nietzsche, as opposed as he was to Christianity, recognized the origins of the notion of human equality and human rights when he lamented: “Another Christian concept, no less crazy....: the concept of the ‘equality of souls before God.’ This concept furnishes the prototype of all theories of equal rights.”<sup>40</sup>

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### *Charity and Humanitarian Aid*

Charity and care for the poor are nearly synonymous with the tradition on which the West is built. In ancient Israel, YHWH commanded that the corners of the fields remain unharvested so that the poor would have sustenance (Lev. 19:9). And the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) is a defining image of charity. Likewise, the apostle Paul enjoined followers of Christ to do honest work, “so that he may have

something to share with anyone in need” (Eph. 4:28). The early Christians were so committed to this charitable ethic that even non-canonical documents underscored it.<sup>41</sup>

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Interestingly, today, 68.4% of all religious-based non-governmental organizations are either Christian (57.4%) or Jewish (11%). Where the legacy of the tradition is weakest, so is charitable giving. In his recent survey of the data, Syracuse University professor Arthur C. Brooks maintains that, “There is so little private charity in Europe that it is difficult to find information on the subject—so irrelevant is it that few researchers have even bothered to investigate . . . Specifically, no Western European population comes remotely close [to] the United States in per capita private charity. The closest nation, Spain, has average giving that is less than half that of the United States. Per person, Americans give three and a half times as much as the French, seven times as much as the Germans, and fourteen times as much as the Italians.”<sup>42</sup> These data should not be an occasion for American triumphalism, but a solemn warning about what the erosion of the Judeo-Christian tradition may mean for the world’s poor.<sup>43</sup>

## Just War, Not Vengeance

Just war doctrine is also a contribution of the Judeo-Christian tradition. While the notion of just war finds its origins in principles revealed in both testaments of the Bible, Saints Augustine and Aquinas provided the first explicit, systematic development of the doctrine. St. Augustine (354-430) argued in *The City of God* that wars may be fought to establish peace and secure justice. The war must be just in intent, disposition, auspices, and conduct. That is, it must be just in its motives, vengeance is not to be an ingredient, a lawful authority must execute the war, and non-combatants are to be spared. “A war is just,” said Isidore of Seville more than a century later (c. 560-636), “when it is fought by command [of a lawful ruler] in order to recover a property or to repel attackers.”<sup>44</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) refined just war doctrine, maintaining that war must be authorized by legitimate authority, just in its cause, a last resort, with reasonable likelihood of success, and in a context in which the good achieved in victory would outweigh the evils associated with the conflict.

Later, Francisco Suarez (1548-1617), Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), and Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1704), made further refinements to the doctrine. Grotius, for instance, argued that “right punishment” is not a ground for war. Social welfare must also figure in the equation when considering whether or not to engage an enemy. Moreover, he taught that Christians must operate with higher standards of humanity and



moderation than the other nations.<sup>45</sup> It is no accident, therefore, that just war doctrine resulted in the four great Geneva Conventions.

## The Arts

The canon of Western civilization includes such incomparable literary figures and practitioners of the arts as Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Mendelssohn, and Tolstoy. It is a tradition rich in media and genres. Often, Judeo-Christian convictions were the inspiration for achievement. Furthermore, people of faith provided the freedom for non-believers to work their craft. These two factors together have been the seedbed for a flowering of artistic culture such as the world has never seen.

### *Painting and Sculpture*

Painting and sculpture have been mainstays in worship centers—from illuminated manuscripts (Book of Kells) to Byzantine icons; from Giotto's murals in the Arena Chapel in Padova to the Vatican's Bernini colonnade; from the stained glass of Notre Dame and Sainte-Chapelle to the Marc Chagall windows in the Hadassah-Hebrew University synagogue. Then, beyond the walls of churches and synagogues, the visual arts have flourished in many forms. The European Renaissance gave the world Botticelli and Raphael in the South, Breughel and Dürer in the North. And who can count the various artistic "isms," such as Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, and Cubism, emerging in subsequent centuries.

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### *Architecture*

The West is home to Gothic, Romanesque, Baroque, Neo-classical, Italianate, Spanish mission, Colonial, Prairie, Federal, Art Deco, Bauhaus, Post-Modern, and Expressionist architecture. It has given the world the Hagia Sophia, the Spanish Steps, the Ponte Vecchio, the Eiffel Tower, Versailles, and the Royal Albert Hall.

### *Music*

Christianity alone has contributed the oratorio, cantata, hymn, gospel song, requiem mass, Negro spiritual, and Gregorian chant. It has birthed Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," Handel's "Messiah," and Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Western orchestras abound, with music scored for a wealth of finely engineered instruments, from violin to trumpet to oboe. National arts commissions and private patrons underwrite the performance of



symphonies, operas, and folk song festivals. Popular music of every sort issues from Western recording studios. Some of it is original, some of it internationally eclectic. But inceptive or hybrid, the production is Western and the audience is worldwide.

### *Fiction*

From the early days of Cervantes (*Don Quixote*) and Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*), through the days of Dumas (*The Three Musketeers*), Dickens (*Oliver Twist*), and Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*), to the modern work of Orwell (1984) and Hemingway (*The Old Man and the Sea*), the novel has been a mainstay of Western civilization.

### *Theatre*

The theatre has enjoyed unparalleled vitality in the West, with its West End, repertory, summer stock, and touring companies. The names of venues (the Globe in London; the Abbey in Dublin), playwrights (England's Shakespeare; Norway's Ibsen; Russia's Chekov), and dramas (*Tartuffe*; *The Cherry Orchard*) are legendary.

### *Film*

Western films are the gold standard, dominating theaters from Jakarta to Nairobi. Notable is the contribution of Eastern European Jews and their progeny, who founded America's great companies (*MGM, Fox, Paramount, Columbia*, etc.) and of Italians of Catholic tradition (Fellini, Bertolucci, Zeffirelli, etc.). Europe is dotted with historic studios (Shepperton and Ealing in England, Cinecittà in Italy, Pathé in France) and influential film festivals (Venice, Cannes, Berlin).

### *Comedy*

Comedy rates special notice because it flourishes in free societies of the West. Indeed, the work of satirists, comedians, cartoonists, parodists, caricaturists, clowns, and jesters is a vital check on absurdity, hypocrisy, pomposity, and tyranny. Judaism has been particularly fruitful in this connection, providing the West with many of its comedic luminaries.

### *Creativity and Diversity*

This is not to gainsay the wonderful contributions of Islamic art. As Sir Ernst Gombrich puts it in his classic *The Story of Art*, Muslim artisans "created the most subtle lacework ornamentation known as arabesques," and he observed, "It is an unforgettable experience to walk through the courtyards and halls of the Alhambra and to admire the inexhaustible variety of these decorative patterns."<sup>46</sup> But Muslim theology, whether through disdain for sacred music, figurative depictions<sup>47</sup> (aniconism),<sup>48</sup> or dissenting expression, has limited creativity and diversity, hallmarks of Western civilization.

Given, then, the great treasure of Western culture, one must ask how the arts and literature would manage should Europe fall under the sway of Islam, either through overwhelming numbers or through the imposition of strictures designed to honor Muslim sensitivities. It can scarcely be an encouraging prospect, either for the generation of new art or the preservation of existing art.

## Conclusion

In legal parlance a legatee is a person named in a will to receive a property, a person to whom a legacy is bequeathed. We are, as we have seen, legatees of a great tradition. We have, all of us, drunk deeply from the springs of the Judeo-Christian tradition and have been beneficiaries of its life-giving sustenance.

Today, however,  
Western  
civilization is at  
risk of forfeiting  
the very tradition  
that has led to  
her greatness.

In sum, we have inherited a worldview—a way of inhabiting the world—with its reservoir of stories, moral precepts, and religious imagery. This worldview has created a culture that, as we have seen, has contributed to human flourishing for millennia. Today, however, Western civilization is at risk of forfeiting the very tradition that has led to her greatness.

The acids of modernity and our contemporary historical amnesia have eroded the legacy of the West from the inside. The tradition may be recoverable if faithful men and women are committed to its renovation. But that presumes that the West is not moribund. The vitality of the tradition depends on the commitment of those who embrace, nurture, and propagate it. Traditions do not spring *ex nihilo* from the soil of culture. They are planted, watered, and cultivated. Since the Judeo-Christian worldview created Western culture as we know it, only those who value the tradition can sustain it. We owe it to our forbears and to the future.

We are witnessing, from the outside, the failure of secularism to sustain the ideals that built the West. The moral source of our solidarity—viz., the affirmation of human dignity and concomitant respect for human freedom, responsibility, and benevolence—is found most robustly in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We have no reason to believe that self-interest (rational or not), nationalism, or even secularism can adequately secure reasons for treating every human being as a possessor of dignity worthy of respect. The recovery of the tradition, then, will mean a recovery of the sanctity of every human life, and with it a celebration of liberty of

conscience, protection of freedom of religion, and championing of innovation, economic development, and the arts. For these are the ideals that have animated the Western imagination.

On the other hand, resurgent Islam offers its own moral source for its claims. By definition, Islam is also a worldview that is animated by its text and traditions. But Islam understands what has seemingly been forgotten in Europe, the United Kingdom, and America: that religion shapes culture. Muslims know that when Islam is followed most faithfully, it is both a theological system and a political ideology that promotes a theocratic regime for every population under its authority. The entailments of human dignity (e.g., freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion) are suppressed under the requirements of the Qu'ranic faith. *Hijabs* and shari'a are not optional among the faithful or among those who live within the boundaries of the Islamic rule of law.

Europe, and the rest of the West, face a pressing challenge, therefore. Nature abhors the vacuum created by inattention to the moral—and spiritual—sources of our solidarity. Islam has stepped up, ready to fill that gap. Thus, in our view, the West will either succumb to resurgent Islam or she must re-embrace the vitality of the faith that has grounded her narrative, practices, institutions, and resilience. Europe has become the grand laboratory in which this experiment is being executed.

We are engaged in a battle of ideas—a clash of worldviews. Our future, and more importantly, the future of our children's children, will not be won or lost with swords or landmines, machetes or nuclear missiles. It will be preserved either by a return to the faith and tradition which we have been bequeathed, or at the very least, a renewed appreciation for the primary sources of our collective cultural identity.

May Providence, vigilance, and steadfast resolve be ours.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 1961.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Neusner, ed., *Religious Foundations of Western Civilization: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), xi.

<sup>4</sup>Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 11.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Hitchens, in Mindy Belz, “The World According to Hitch,” *WORLD Magazine*, June 2, 2006, <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/11908> (accessed March 20, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>Roger Scruton, *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism* (London: Continuum, 2006), 5.

<sup>7</sup>William Scott Green, “What Do We Mean by ‘Religion’ and ‘Western Civilization?’” in Neusner, 11.

<sup>8</sup>Herman Belz, “Constitutionalism,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court*, ed. Kermit L. Hall (London: Oxford University, 1992), 190.

<sup>9</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983), 165, 29-33.

<sup>11</sup>The late University of Virginia postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty was so palpably aware of this when taking up objections to his own positions that he declared: “. . . on my view a child found wandering in the woods, the remnant of a slaughtered nation whose temples have been razed and whose books have been burned, has no share in human dignity. This is indeed a consequence, but it does not follow that she may be treated like an animal. For it is part of the tradition of our community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity. This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully invoked by freeloading atheists like myself . . .” Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991), 201-202.

<sup>12</sup>Though humans are material beings made of flesh and blood, in remarkable ways they are unlike the other animals on the earth. As a species, *Homo sapiens* is distinct. Thus, in God’s covenant with the patriarch Noah and his progeny—what University of Chicago professor Leon Kass calls “the founding document of the new world order”—God makes it clear that while humans may kill animals for sustenance, to kill a human being is a qualitatively different matter: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, / By man shall his blood be shed; / For in His image / Did God make man” (Genesis 9:6, NJPS *Tanakh*).

Observes Kass,

Indeed, the first story's celebrated 'image of God' description of man (1:26-27) here becomes the basis for legal responsibility to execute justice (9:6). Whereas order had been originally created out of chaos through separation and distinction, here order is prevented from dissolving back into chaos through law and punishment. . . . Civil society is instituted, first of all, to protect and preserve human life; civil society stands or falls on the basis of whether or not it can do so successfully. For this reason, the foundation of civilized life demands (in practice) an unqualified respect for human life.

See Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 175-176, 181.

<sup>13</sup>W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), 2:24.

<sup>14</sup>Furthermore, the Jewish wisdom literature *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* (c. 50 BC-50 AD) says that "a woman should not destroy the unborn in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures as a prey." In the apocalyptic *Sibylline Oracle*, included among the "wicked" were women who "produce abortions and unlawfully cast their offspring away" and sorcerers who dispense abortion-causing drugs. Similarly, the apocryphal book *1 Enoch* (first or second century BC) declares that an evil angel taught humans how to "smash the embryo in the womb."

<sup>15</sup>Cicero (106-43 BC) indicated that according to the Twelve Tables of Roman Law, "deformed infants shall be killed" (*De Legibus* 3.8). Plutarch (c. 46-120 AD) spoke of those whom he said "offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan" (*Moralia* 2.171D). According to an inscription at Delphi, because of the infanticide of female newborns, only one percent of six hundred families had raised two daughters. Jack Lindsay, *The Ancient World* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), 168.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1898), 229-230. For an online version of Joseph B. Lightfoot's translation of the Didache, see *Early Christian Writings Website*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html> (accessed March 15, 2008).

<sup>17</sup>Another non-canonical early Christian text, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 130 AD), said: "You shall not abort a child nor, again, commit infanticide." Additional examples of Christian disapprobation of both infanticide and abortion can be multiplied. See Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982); Michael J. Gorman, "Why Is the New Testament Silent on Abortion?" *Christianity Today*, January 11, 1993, 27-29; and Germain Grisez, *Abortion: the Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments*, (New York: Corpus, 1970).

<sup>18</sup>See George Grant, *The Third Time Around: A History of the Pro-life Movement from the First Century to the Present* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), 27.

<sup>19</sup>In his book, *De Spectaculis*, for example, Tertullian (died c. 220), devoted an entire chapter to the games, enjoining Christians not to attend—powerful testimony to Christianity’s humanitarian impulse. Lecky opined that, “There is scarcely any other single reform so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of the gladiatorial shows, and this feat must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian Church” (2:34). Happily, the gladiatorial games in the East were finally terminated under Christian emperor Theodosius I (378-395), and in the West they were ended in 404 AD under his son Honorius.

<sup>20</sup>*Odyssey* 11.

<sup>21</sup>All New Testament quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>22</sup>For instance, St. Paul addressed one of his letters to “Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister . . .” (Philem. 1-2). Phoebe was called a “deaconess” (Rom. 16:1-2, Jerusalem Bible), and Priscilla was described as a “fellow worker” (Rom. 16:3).

<sup>23</sup>Sadly, during the third through fifth centuries women did not fare so well. Clement of Alexandria (died c. 215), taught that women should blush because they were female; Tertullian (died c. 220) blamed Eve for the fall of man, and thereby the death of Christ; and Cyril of Jerusalem (died c. 387) maintained that women may pray with moving lips, but their voices should not be heard. At the same time, women were protected from polygamy in Christian cultures. Just as Jesus’ view of marriage supported monogamy, so the nearly universal affirmation among Christians down the ages has been that marriage consists of one man and one woman, in a one-flesh relationship, for life (cf., Matt. 19:5). Our own age can give ample testimony of the trauma associated with the abandonment of that maxim.

<sup>24</sup>Lecky, 2:69. In his *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius declared that there were no slaves in God’s eyes. In the fourth century Chrysostom preached that “in Christ Jesus there is no slave. . . . Therefore it is not necessary to have a slave. . . . Buy them, and after you have taught them some skill by which they can maintain themselves, set them free” (*Homily 40 on 1 Corinthians 10*). Cited in Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 65. Augustine forthrightly maintained in *The City of God* (19.15) that slavery was a product of sin and not God’s plan.

<sup>25</sup>All quotations from the Old Testament are from Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh* Translation.

<sup>26</sup>In his lectures on Genesis, Luther declared, “. . . we should not give ourselves to ease and laziness; but with all zeal and diligence we should submit to the labors which the calling of each and every one requires. And to these labors there should be added at the same time a cheerful spirit in every trouble, exertion, and tribulation. In this way a blessing should be expected from the Lord.” See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 38-44*, vol. 7 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), 65-67.

<sup>27</sup>Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), 233.

<sup>28</sup>Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from the Chief Rabbi* (London: Adler House, 2003), 2.

<sup>29</sup>Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168-1253), was a Franciscan monk and the first chancellor of Oxford University. He was the first to propose the empirical method. His student and fellow Franciscan, Roger Bacon (1214-1294), asserted that “all things must first be verified by experience.” William Ockham (c. 1288-1348), yet another Franciscan monk with Oxford connections, forsook both the pantheism inherent in Aristotelianism and the consensus that science must proceed deductively.

<sup>30</sup>Among faithful Christian pioneers of science were Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), the father of modern anatomy; Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), the father of modern astronomy; William Harvey (1578-1657), the father of modern medicine; Robert Boyle (1627-1691), the father of modern chemistry; Antony van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723), the father of microbiology; Isaac Newton (1642-1727), the father of modern mechanistic physics; and Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), the father of genetics.

<sup>31</sup>See Frank Heynick, *Jews and Medicine: An Epic Saga* (KTAV Publishing House, 2002) for a bracing account of this history.

<sup>32</sup>Albert R. Jonsen, *A Short History of Medical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 13.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>St. John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Dionysius, and many others called on Christians to provide care for the sick regardless of their beliefs or ability to remunerate in any way. In fact, Roman Emperor Julian II (ruled 361-363), who also came to be known as Julian the Apostate, grudgingly said of Christians during this period: “These impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well.” *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>35</sup>In 1800, with a population of only 5.3 million, most Americans would only have heard of a hospital. Philadelphia’s Pennsylvania Hospital was founded in 1751, New York Hospital in 1771, and Boston General did not open until 1821. But by just after the mid-century mark, hospitals were being established in large numbers, and most of them were religious. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America’s Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), especially Chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup>When, under Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in the second century AD, the Christians were accused of rebellion because they would not embrace the divinity of the civil ruler, a Christian apologist called Athenagoras pointed out that their fidelity to the one true God did not mean rebellion against the emperor. Declared Athenagoras to his earthly rulers:

And now do you, who are entirely in everything, by nature and by education, upright, and moderate, and benevolent, and worthy of your rule, now that I have disposed of the several accusations, and proved that we are pious, and gentle,

and temperate in spirit, bend your royal head in approval. For who are more deserving to obtain the things they ask, than those who, like us, pray for your government, that you may, as is most equitable, receive the kingdom, son from father, and that your empire may receive increase and addition, all men becoming subject to your sway? And this is also for our advantage, that we may lead a peaceable and quiet life, and may ourselves readily perform all that is commanded us.

Athenagoras, "A Plea for the Christians," in *Fathers of the Second Century*, vol. 2 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 148.

<sup>37</sup>An early Baptist in America, Roger Williams, argued over against the Puritans in the early 17th century that citizens should be free to follow their own convictions in religious matters. His founding of Providence, Rhode Island, was an effort to establish a community based on, among other things, liberty of conscience.

Less than one hundred years later, John Leland, a prominent Baptist minister and acquaintance of Thomas Jefferson's wrote: "Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise, let men be free." See John Leland, *The Writings of the Late John Leland* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 181.

On January 1, 1802, Jefferson wrote his famous letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in which he declared: "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and State." See Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (H. W. Derby, 1859), 113.

Like Luther, Mr. Jefferson did not believe it was the role of the civil magistrate to dictate either a person's religious practices or conscience.

<sup>38</sup>Yahiya Emerick, *What Islam is All About* (Noorart, 1997), 381.

<sup>39</sup>God made us in his image, vesting us with freedom to make choices based on our own interests, desires, and duties, insofar as those choices do not harm others who are likewise exercising their freedom. Though this doctrine was articulated philosophically by thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, it is clearly built on assumptions that owe their origins to Judeo-Christian anthropology.

<sup>40</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 401.



<sup>41</sup>For instance, *The Didache*: “Give to everyone who asks thee, and do not refuse”; and the *Shepherd of Hermas*: “Give simply to all without asking doubtfully to whom thou givest, but give to all.”

<sup>42</sup>Arthur C. Brooks, *Who Really Cares: America's Charity Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 120.

<sup>43</sup>Many Europeans argue that their high taxes pay for what Americans cover with private funds. Observes Brooks, “One technical problem arises with this argument: The average tax burden in all European countries is *not* higher than it is in the United States. A British family, for instance, relinquishes an average of 10.8 percent of its household income to the government in income taxes. This is lower than what an average American family pays—11.3 percent.” *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>44</sup>Cited in James A. Brundage, “Latin Christianity, the Crusades, and the Islamic Response,” in Neusner, 266.

<sup>45</sup>See *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, eds. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 790.

<sup>46</sup>E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, pocket ed. (London: Phaidon, 2001), 111.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius, *Islam Art and Architecture* (Cologne: Konemann, 2004), 38.