

How
Should We
Then Live?

*The Rise and Decline of
Western Thought and Culture*



FRANCIS A.
SCHAEFFER

How Should We Then Live?

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Author's Note

IN NO WAY DOES THIS BOOK make a pretense of being a complete chronological history of Western culture. It is questionable if such a book could even be written. This book is, however, an analysis of the key moments in history which have formed our present culture, and the thinking of the people who brought those moments to pass. This study is made in the hope that light may be shed upon the major characteristics of our age and that solutions may be found to the myriad of problems which face us as we look toward the end of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER ONE

Ancient Rome

THERE IS A FLOW to history and culture. This flow is rooted and has its wellspring in the thoughts of people. People are unique in the inner life of the mind—what they are in their thought-world determines how they act. This is true of their value systems, and it is true of their creativity. It is true of their corporate actions, such as political decisions, and it is true of their personal lives. The results of their thought-world flow through their fingers or from their tongues into the external world. This is true of Michelangelo's chisel, and it is true of a dictator's sword.

People have presuppositions, and they will live more consistently on the basis of these presuppositions than even they themselves may realize. By *presuppositions* we mean the basic way an individual looks at life, his basic worldview, the grid through which he sees the world. Presuppositions rest upon that which a person considers to be the truth of what exists. People's presuppositions lay a grid for all they bring forth into the external world. Their presuppositions also provide the basis for their values and therefore the basis for their decisions.

“As a man thinketh, so is he,” is really most profound. An individual is not just the product of the forces around him. He has a mind, an inner world. Then, having thought, a person can bring forth actions into the external world and thus influence it. People are apt to look at the outer theater of action, forgetting the actor who “lives in the mind” and who therefore is the true actor in the external world. The inner thought-world determines the outward action.

Most people catch their presuppositions from their family and surrounding society the way a child catches measles. But people with more understanding realize that their presuppositions should be chosen after a careful consideration of what worldview is true. When all is done, when all the alternatives have been explored, “not many men are in the room”—that is, although worldviews have many variations, there are not many basic worldviews or basic presuppositions. These basic options will become obvious as we look at the flow of the past.

To understand where we are in today’s world—in our intellectual ideas and in our cultural and political lives—we must trace three lines in history, namely, the philosophic, the scientific, and the religious. The philosophic seeks intellectual answers to the basic questions of life. The scientific has two parts: first, the makeup of the physical universe, and then the practical application of what it discovers in technology. The direction in which science will move is set by the philosophic worldview of the scientists. People’s religious views also determine the direction of their individual lives and of their society.

As we try to learn lessons about the primary dilemmas which we now face, by looking at the past and considering its flow, we could

begin with the Greeks, or even before the Greeks. We could go back to the three great ancient river cultures: the Euphrates, the Indus, and the Nile. However, we will begin with the Romans (and with the Greek influence behind them), because Roman civilization is the direct ancestor of the modern Western world. From the first conquests of the Roman Republic down to our own day, Roman law and political ideas have had a strong influence on the European scene and the entire Western world. Wherever Western civilization has gone, it has been marked by the Romans.

In many ways Rome was great, but it had no real answers to the basic problems that all humanity faces. Much of Roman thought and culture was shaped by Greek thinking, especially after Greece came under Roman rule in 146 BC. The Greeks tried first to build their society upon the city-state, that is, the *polis*. The city-state, both in theory and fact, was comprised of all those who were accepted as citizens. All values had meaning in reference to the *polis*. Thus, when Socrates (c. 469–399 BC) had to choose between death and exile from that which gave him meaning, he chose death. But the *polis* failed since it proved to be an insufficient base upon which to build a society.

The Greeks and later the Romans also tried to build society upon their gods. But these gods were not big enough because they were finite, limited. Even all their gods put together were not infinite. Actually, the gods in Greek and Roman thinking were like men and women larger than life, but not basically different from human men and women. As one example among thousands, we can think of the statue of Hercules, standing inebriated and urinating. Hercules was the patron god of Herculaneum, which was destroyed at the same time as Pompeii. The gods were amplified humanity, not divinity.

Like the Greeks, the Romans had no infinite god. This being so, they had no sufficient reference point intellectually; that is, they did not have anything big enough or permanent enough to which to relate either their thinking or their living. Consequently, their value system was not strong enough to bear the strains of life, either individual or political. All their gods put together could not give them a sufficient base for life, morals, values, and final decisions. These gods depended on the society which had made them, and when this society collapsed the gods tumbled with it. Thus, the Greek and Roman experiments in social harmony (which rested on an elitist republic) ultimately failed.

In the days of Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), Rome turned to an authoritarian system centered in Caesar himself. Before the days of Caesar, the senate could not keep order. Armed gangs terrorized the city of Rome, and the normal processes of government were disrupted as rivals fought for power. Self-interest became more significant than social interest, however sophisticated the trappings. Thus, in desperation the people accepted authoritarian government. As Plutarch (AD c. 50–120) put it in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, the Romans made Caesar dictator for life “in the hope that the government of a single person would give them time to breathe after so many civil wars and calamities. This was indeed a tyranny avowed, since his power now was not only absolute, but perpetual, too.”

After Caesar's death, Octavian (63 BC–AD 14), later called Caesar Augustus, grandnephew of Caesar, came to power. He had become Caesar's son by adoption. The great Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BC) was a friend of Augustus, and he wrote the *Aeneid* with the object of showing that Augustus was a divinely appointed

leader and that Rome's mission was to bring peace and civilization to the world. Because Augustus established peace externally and internally and because he kept the outward forms of constitutionality, Romans of every class were ready to allow him total power in order to restore and assure the functioning of the political system, business, and the affairs of daily life. After 12 BC, he became the head of the state religion, taking the title *Pontifex Maximus* and urging everyone to worship the "spirit of Rome and the genius of the emperor." Later this became obligatory for all the people of the empire, and later still, the emperors ruled as gods. Augustus tried to legislate morals and family life; subsequent emperors tried impressive legal reforms and welfare programs. But a human god is a poor foundation, and Rome fell.

It is important to realize what a difference a people's worldview makes in their strength as they are exposed to the pressure of life. That it was the Christians who were able to resist religious mixtures, syncretism, and the effects of the weaknesses of Roman culture speaks of the strength of the Christian worldview. This strength rested on God's being an infinite-personal God and His speaking in the Old Testament, in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and in the gradually growing New Testament. He had spoken in ways people could understand. Thus the Christians not only had knowledge about the universe and mankind that people cannot find out by themselves, but they had absolute, universal values by which to live and by which to judge the society and the political state in which they lived. And they had grounds for the basic dignity and value of the individual as unique in being made in the image of God.

Perhaps no one has presented more vividly to our generation the inner weakness of imperial Rome than has Fellini (1920–1993) in

his film *Satyricon* (1969). He reminded us that the classical world is not to be romanticized, but that it was both cruel and decadent as it came to the logical conclusion of its worldview.

A culture or an individual with a weak base can stand only when the pressure on it is not too great. As an illustration, let us think of a Roman bridge. The Romans built little humpbacked bridges over many of the streams of Europe. People and wagons went over these structures safely for centuries, for two millennia. But if people today drove heavily loaded trucks over these bridges, they would break. It is this way with the lives and value systems of individuals and cultures when they have nothing stronger to build on than their own limitedness, their own finiteness. They can stand when pressures are not too great, but when pressures mount, if *then* they do not have a sufficient base, they crash—just as a Roman bridge would cave in under the weight of a modern six-wheeled truck. Culture and the freedoms of people are fragile. Without a sufficient base, when such pressures come only time is needed—and often not a great deal of time—before there is a collapse.

The Roman Empire was great in size and military strength. It reached out over much of the known world. Its roads lead over all of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. The monument to Caesar Augustus at Turbi (just north of modern Monte Carlo) marks the fact that he opened the roads above the Mediterranean and defeated the proud Gauls. In one direction of Roman expansion the Roman legions passed the Roman city Augusta Praetoria in northern Italy, which today is called Aosta, crossed the Alps, and came down the Rhone Valley in Switzerland past the peaks of the Dents du Midi to that place which is now Vevey. For a time the Helvetians, who were Celtic and the principal inhabitants of what is now Switzerland,

held them in check and made the proud Romans pass under the yoke. The Swiss painter Charles Gleyre (1806–1874), in a painting which now hangs in the art museum in Lausanne, has shown the conquered Roman soldiers, hands tied behind their backs, bending to pass under a low yoke. All this, however, was temporary. Not much could hold back the Roman legions, neither difficult terrain nor enemy armies. After the Romans had passed what is now St. Maurice and the peaks of the Dents du Midi, and as they flowed around Lake Geneva to modern Vevey, they marched over the hills and conquered the ancient Helvetian capitol, Aventicum, today called Avenches.

I love Avenches. It contains some of my favorite Roman ruins north of the Alps. Some have said (although I think it is a high figure) that at one time forty thousand Romans lived there. Today the ruins of Roman walls rise from the blowing wheat in the autumn. One can imagine a Roman legionary who had slogged home from the vastness of the north, mounting the hill and looking down on Avenches—a little Rome, as it were, with its amphitheater, theater, and temple. The opulence of Rome was at Avenches, as one sees by the gold bust of Marcus Aurelius which was found there. Gradually Christianity came to Roman Avenches. We know this by studying the cemetery of that time—the Romans burned their dead, the Christians buried theirs. One can find many monuments and towns similar to Turbi, Aosta, and Avenches all the way from Emperor Hadrian's wall, which the Romans built to contain the Scots (who were too tough to conquer), to the forts of the Rhine and North Africa, the Euphrates River, and the Caspian Sea.

Rome was cruel, and its cruelty can perhaps be best pictured by the events which took place in the arena in Rome itself. People

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Rome was cruel, and its cruelty can perhaps be best pictured by the events which took place in the arena in Rome itself. People

seated above the arena floor watched gladiator contests and Christians thrown to the beasts (see Plate 1). Let us not forget why the Christians were killed. They were *not* killed because they worshiped Jesus. Various religions covered the whole Roman world. One such was the cult of Mithras, a popular Persian form of Zoroastrianism which had reached Rome by 67 BC. Nobody cared who worshiped whom so long as the worshiper did not disrupt the unity of the state, centered in the formal worship of Caesar. The reason the Christians were killed was because they were rebels. This was especially so after their growing rejection by the Jewish synagogues lost for them the immunity granted to the Jews since Julius Caesar's time.

We may express the nature of their rebellion in two ways, both of which are true. First, we can say they worshiped Jesus as God and they worshiped the infinite-personal God only. The Caesars would not tolerate this worshiping of the one God *only*. It was counted as treason. Thus their worship became a special threat to the unity of the state during the third century and during the reign of Diocletian (284–305), when people of the higher classes began to become Christians in larger numbers. If they had worshiped Jesus *and* Caesar, they would have gone unharmed, but they rejected all forms of syncretism. They worshiped the God who had revealed Himself in the Old Testament, through Christ, and in the New Testament which had gradually been written. And they worshiped Him as the *only* God. They allowed no mixture: All other gods were seen as false gods.

We can also express in a second way why the Christians were killed: No totalitarian authority nor authoritarian state can tolerate those who have an absolute by which to judge that state and its actions. The Christians had that absolute in God's revelation. Because the Christians had an absolute, universal standard by which to judge

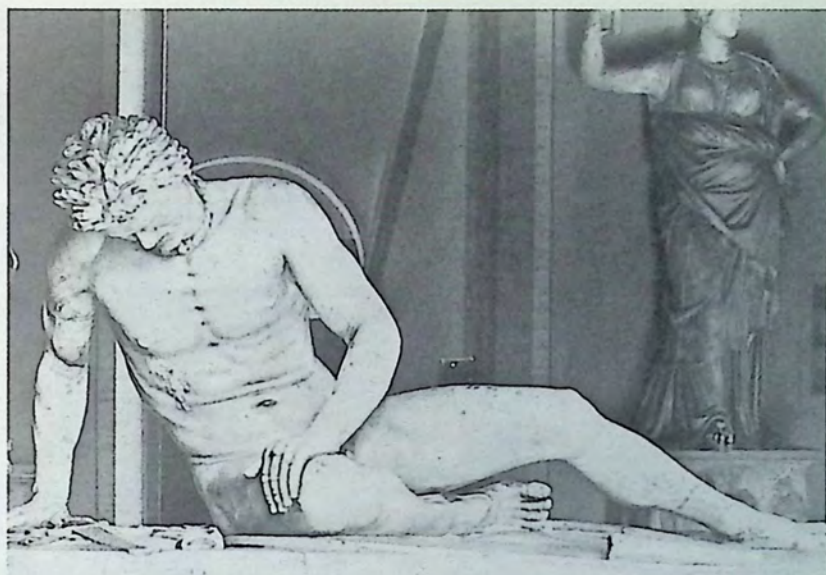


Plate 1 *The Dying Gaul* (also known as *The Dying Gladiator*), Capitoline Museum, Rome. "Rome was cruel . . ." Photos by Mustafa Arshad.



Plate 2 Detail of the Arch of Constantine, Rome. "In poor contrast to its second-century sculptures . . ." Photo by Mustafa Arshad.

not only personal morals but also the state, they were counted as enemies of totalitarian Rome and were thrown to the beasts.

As the Empire ground down, the decadent Romans were given to a thirst for violence and a gratification of the senses. This is especially evident in their rampant sexuality. For example, in Pompeii, a century or so after the Republic had become a thing of the past, the phallus cult was strong. Statues and paintings of exaggerated sexuality adorned the houses of the more affluent. Not all the art in Pompeii was like this, but the sexual representations were unabashedly blatant.

Even though Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of the Christians and Christianity became first (in 313) a legal religion,



Plate 3 Ruins at Pompeii, Italy. "And Rome gradually became a ruin."
Photo by Mustafa Arshad.

and then (in 381) the official state religion of the Empire, the majority of the people went on in their old ways. Apathy was the chief mark of the late empire. One of the ways the apathy showed itself was in a lack of creativity in the arts. One easily observed example of the decadence of officially sponsored art is that the fourth-century work on the Arch of Constantine in Rome stands in poor contrast to its second-century sculptures, which were borrowed from monuments from the period of Emperor Trajan (see Plate 2). The elite abandoned their intellectual pursuits for social life. Officially sponsored art was decadent, and music was increasingly bombastic. Even the portraits on the coins became of poor quality. All of life was marked by the predominant apathy.

As the Roman economy slumped lower and lower, burdened with an aggravated inflation and a costly government, authoritarianism increased to counter the apathy. Since work was no longer done voluntarily, it was brought increasingly under the authority of the state, and freedoms were lost. For example, laws were passed binding small farmers to their land. So, because of the general apathy and its results, and because of oppressive control, few thought the old civilization worth saving.

Rome did not fall because of external forces such as the invasion by the barbarians. Rome had no sufficient inward base; the barbarians only completed the breakdown—and Rome gradually became a ruin.

CHAPTER TWO

The Middle Ages

WITH THE BREAKDOWN of Roman order and the invasions came a time of social, political, and intellectual turmoil. The artists of the Middle Ages forgot many technical things, such as the use of that type of perspective which the Romans employed in their paintings and mosaics. Roman painting had been full of life. In the early days Christian art was also full of life. One can think of the catacombs where the figures on the walls were realistically though simply portrayed. For all the limitations of the visual means, the people were real people in a very real world (see Plate 4).

A parallel can be drawn between the "living" quality of this early Christian art and the living Christianity of the early church. Leaders like Ambrose of Milan (339–397) and Augustine (354–430) strongly emphasized a true biblical Christianity. Later in the church there was an increasing distortion away from the biblical teaching, and there also came a change in art. Interesting examples of a carryover of the earlier, more living Christian art are the mosaics in the Arian Church of St. Lorenzo in Milan. These mosaics are probably from the mid-fifth century. The Christians portrayed in these mosaics were not symbols but real people.



Plate 4 Catacomb frescoes in Rome. "... real people in a very real world."
Photos by Mustafa Arshad.



Plate 5 Typical Byzantine mosaics, detail of *The Last Judgment*, Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, Italy. "The last vestiges of realism were abandoned." Photo by Anderson.

Michael Gough in *The Origins of Christian Art* (1973) writes of the change from "the acceptance of an element of naturalistic realism to a preference for the fantastic and unreal." He also points out that by the mid-sixth century "the last vestiges of realism were abandoned" (see Plate 5). The Byzantine art became characterized by formalized, stylized, symbolic mosaics and icons. In one way there was something good here—in that the artists made their mosaics and icons as a witness to the observer. Many of those who made these did so with devotion, and they were looking for more spiritual values. These were pluses. The minuses were that in the portrayal of their concept of spirituality they set aside nature and the importance of the humanity of people.

Since AD 395 the Roman Empire had been divided into eastern and western portions. The Byzantine style developed in the east and gradually spread to the west. This art had a real beauty, but increasingly only religious themes were given importance, and people were depicted not as real people but as symbols. This came to its climax in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. The portrayal of nature was largely abandoned, and even more unhappily, the living, human element was removed. This, we should stress once more, was in contrast to the early Christian catacomb paintings in which, though simply portrayed, real people lived in a real world which God had made.

Ravenna was a center of the Byzantine mosaics in the west, a center brought to its greatness by the eastern Emperor Justinian, though he never visited it. Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565, built many churches in the east, the most famous being Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which was consecrated in 537. These new churches of the east stressed the interior, placing an emphasis on light and color.

During this time there was a decline in learning in the west, though the growing monastic orders, gradually organized around the rule of Benedict (c. 480–547), provided a depository for many of the things of the past. Benedict himself had built a monastery on Monte Cassino near the main road from Naples to Rome. In the monasteries the old manuscripts were copied and recopied. Thanks to the monks, the Bible was preserved—along with sections of Greek and Latin classics. The old music, too, was sometimes kept alive by constant repetition. Some of the music came from Ambrose, who had been bishop of Milan from 374 to 397 and who had introduced to his people antiphonal psalmody and the singing of hymns.

Nevertheless, the pristine Christianity set forth in the New Testament gradually became distorted. A humanistic element was added: increasingly, the authority of the church took precedence over the teaching of the Bible. And there was an ever-growing emphasis on salvation as resting on man's meriting the merit of Christ, instead of on Christ's work alone. While such humanistic elements were somewhat different in content from the humanistic elements of the Renaissance, the concept was essentially the same in that it was man taking to himself that which belonged to God. Much of Christianity up until the sixteenth century was either reaction against or reaffirmation of these distortions of the original Christian, biblical teaching.

These distortions generated cultural elements which mark a clear alternative to what we could otherwise call a Christian or biblical culture. Part of the fascination of medieval studies is to trace the degree to which different aspects of the complex Western cultural inheritance were emphasized or deemphasized according to the moral and intellectual response of people to the Christian God they claimed to worship. It would be a mistake to suppose that the overall structure of thought and life was not Christian. Yet it would be equally mistaken to deny that into this structure were fitted alien or half-alien features—some of Greek and Roman origin, others of local pagan ancestry—which at times actually obscured the outlines of the Christianity underneath.

This was not and is not a peculiarly medieval problem. From the earliest days of the Christian church, when Christianity was a small minority movement, believers had struggled with their personal and corporate response to Christ's prayer that they be *in* the world but not *of* it. On one level, this challenged Christians in their

attitude toward material possessions and style of living. Not only in the time of Peter and Paul but for generations after, believers were noted for openhanded generosity. Even their enemies admitted it.

On another level, this raised the issue of God's law as against the will of the state, especially when the two came into conflict. During the persecutions of the Christians under the Roman emperors, the action of the Roman military commander Maurice is a good example of a possible response. When he received an order to direct a persecution of Christians, he handed his insignia to his assistant in order to join the Christians and be killed as a fellow believer. This action took place in the Rhone valley in Switzerland about AD 286, against a giant cliff just under the peaks of the Dents du Midi. It is for him that the little town of St. Maurice is now named.

Finally, on the intellectual level, Christ's prayer posed the problem of whether or not it was edifying to read or quote the non-Christian classical authors. Tertullian (160–240) and Cyprian (c. 200–258) decided not, but they proved to be in the minority. It is interesting that in the area of music a strict view did prevail. The reason for the disappearance of the traditions of Roman musical practices in the beginning of the Middle Ages was that the church looked with indignation on the social occasions and pagan religious exercises connected with them. And thus the old Roman musical traditions disappeared.

In the Middle Ages proper, which everyone defines his own way but which we will call the period from about 500 to 1400, we can trace in general terms the continuing response to these same issues. Concerning material possessions, the pendulum swung back and forth between utter disregard of the command to live modestly (caring for the poor, orphaned, and widowed) and a razor-sharp

application of these same injunctions (the early monastic ideal to have no money). Thus, at one extreme one could have a papal court popularly rebuked for its material lust. The twelfth-century *Gospel According to the Mark of Silver* pictured the pope egging on his cardinals to fleece litigants at the papal court, using phrases deliberately mimicking Christ's teachings: "For I have given you an example, that ye also should take gifts, as I have taken them," and "Blessed are the rich, for they shall be filled; blessed are they that have, for they shall not go away empty; blessed are the wealthy, for theirs is the Court of Rome." John of Salisbury (c. 1115–1180), friend of Thomas à Becket and no enemy of the church hierarchy, told a pope to his face that people thought that

the Roman Church, which is the Mother of all Churches, behaves more like a stepmother than a mother. The Scribes and Pharisees sit there placing on men's shoulders burdens too heavy to be borne. They load themselves with fine clothes and their tables with precious plate; a poor man can seldom gain admittance. . . .

In the midst of all this, Saint Francis (c. 1182–1226), recognizing the corrupting effect of this emphasis on wealth, forbade his followers to receive money at all.

Even if its upper echelon was far from pure, the church did make an effort to control the destructive effects of exorbitant money-lending by first prohibiting it and later trying to limit the interest rate on loans to an accepted market level. With further support of secular rulers, the church also sought to enforce just prices, by which it meant prices which did not exploit human beings through selfish manipulation or through hoarding goods during scarcity. However much one may argue about the success of these attempts

at economic control in the name of love for one's neighbor, it would be false to assume no difference between a society which at least makes repeated public efforts to control greed and economic cruelty and a society which tends to glorify the most expert economic manipulators of their fellow-citizens.

Even beyond this, the medieval economic teaching was not wholly negative. It exalted the virtue of honest, well-executed work. This is no better illustrated than in the beautiful late-medieval Books of Hours, private prayer books in which typical occupations are depicted as month succeeds month. The most famous of such books belonged to Jean, duc de Berry, and was executed by the Limbourg brothers in 1415. An earlier illustration of the same thing was the series of reliefs from the early fourteenth century on the campanile in Florence (see Plates 6-7). And if age or infirmity precluded work, the church provided society with an impressive network of hospitals and other charitable institutions. One in Siena is still in working order. The downstairs women's ward, just through the main entrance, has a fifteenth-century display of frescoes illustrating what went on in a medieval hospital. If twentieth-century patients are grateful for modern medical advances, they can at the same time admire the superior artistic taste of the old Sienese interior decorators. Nowadays we expect the state to provide hospitals or deal out charity, and this expectation underlines a vast change in the powers of the modern state as against its medieval counterpart. But the state, strong or weak, has always posed a problem to the church, especially when it concerns questions of moral principle. To this area we must now turn.

The medieval situation was at the same time easier and more complex than it had been for the Roman officer Maurice. It was



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