

Humanism on Trial

By Hugh Mercer Curtler

A review of *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited*, by John Carroll

(Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008)

John Carroll is not concerned about the decline of Western culture; in his mind that ship has sailed. Western culture is no more and lies scattered about us in ruins. He sees the fall of the Twin Towers in New York as symbolic of the wreck of Western culture that perished over one hundred years ago. He makes a persuasive case in this book which is nothing less than an intellectual *tour de force* taking us breathlessly from the heights of Western culture in ancient Greece past its funeral dirge, sung by Nietzsche, to the films of John Ford and the novels of Henry James—“two later attempts to build anew within the wreckage.”

On that journey, which incorporates key works of literature and philosophy together with remarkably sensitive and insightful interpretations of selected paintings and film, not to mention a discriminating ear for the music of Bach, Carroll seeks to “arouse disgust” in the reader and make him yearn for the restoration of faith in God. Western culture, culminating in the humanities, has transformed the “I” into the “me” of self-satisfied Occidentals who think living the good life means “to consume, to procreate, and to sleep.” In these terms, says Carroll, “there was giant progress.” But along the way what we call “high culture” slowly crumbled into a pile of rubble.

Carroll greatly admires Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and applauds his “fight against the advance of nihilism.” But, in the end, he considers the conservative movement in general “a futile reaction against the juggernaut of modernity, a series of last-ditch stands here and there, on occasion successful for the moment while the war is steadily lost.” His real heroes are Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard, the former because he led the attack—not against the Roman Catholic Church, but against the dawning of humanism with its self-worship; the latter because he sought to breathe new life into the dying carcass of

Protestantism. Kierkegaard's mistake was trying to find his way to the faith of Martin Luther by means of human reason, whereas Carroll is convinced that our confidence in reason, which reached its height during the Enlightenment, coupled with our mistaken notion that humans have free will, brought about the wreck of Western culture. He seeks to have us return to Luther's "death of death" by way of a blind faith in the necessity of God's will: a "faith in a stable world predicated on a fixed higher order strong enough not to come tumbling down if [things] start to run amok."

Make no mistake: this is a deeply disturbing book—not because the thesis is disquieting (to say the least), but because the thesis is so convincingly argued. Carroll makes a strong case, and while some readers—like the reviewer in the *Guardian* quoted on the dust jacket—might find Carroll "half-crazed," they will have to admit (along with that reviewer) that he is also "at times brilliant." The journey this author would take us on is breathtaking and exhilarating, while at the same time it does indeed arouse disgust when we consider that "the heritage of the death of culture in the humanist mode has been a routine public life, and a retreat into the individual unconscious in the hope of staving off madness or melancholia.... [Herbert Hendon's] rat girl is the reality, the true child of modern culture." The epitaph for this culture, as written by John Carroll, is, "I no longer believe in anything beyond myself." What possible role could such institutions as the universities play in the world John Carroll describes?

Traditionally, the university's primary role has been to preserve high culture and pass it along to the younger generation. Additionally, as Max Weber noted a century ago, students came to universities "in search of answers to the great metaphysical questions—what to do and how to live." Today, however, we find mainly a few scattered graybeards who know or care about high culture standing among hordes of students who think the meaning of life is to be found in the pursuit of pleasure.

Surrounding the graybeards are legions of brash young faculty members busily stuffing their political agendas down the throats of uninterested and unprepared undergraduates who want only to have fun, get their degree, and go to work and make a living. The function of the university in our postmodern world has clearly changed, and this change supports John Carroll's thesis that, at the very least, high culture shows little sign of life. In his words, "the university [has become] a conglomerate of single-person sects each obeying his or her individual conscience, while all around the institution decays into an aimless and moribund bureaucracy." If this author is right about the current condition of the university, is he also right about the wreck of that culture as a whole?

On the face of it, this book might seem like just another postmodern attack on the "despised *log*

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" since Carroll holds human reason in low esteem, subject to "demonic forces" within the individual that render it "weak, subsidiary, and circumscribed." His choice of faith over reason is avowedly that of "the darkness of faith where the light of reason does not shine." But postmodernism, despite its devastating effect on higher education, is simply a reappearance of the Romantic revolt against reason that began with Goethe; it has no intellectual credibility. The author sees it as little more than a feature of our "fantasy life" on a level with the Hollywood movie and the popular song. Carroll's position, in contrast, has considerable intellectual credibility and must be taken seriously.

At the same time, Carroll most assuredly agrees with postmodernism in his rejection of human reason. He notes that any attempt to reason our way to human goodness, as was attempted by Immanuel Kant, is doomed to failure as was Kierkegaard's attempt to reason his way to faith. "The forces that determine goodness—that is, whether humans obey the moral law or not—have little to do with either reason or will. They have to do with faith and its obscure minions." And here lies the critical difference between John Carroll and the zealots in the academy who are intent on replacing reason and truth with a thin pabulum of sociology and cultural anthropology. Postmodernists embrace themselves and their own theories; Carroll embraces faith in God.

As well, despite his call for a return to "the darkness of faith" in God, Carroll differs in important respects from the evangelical fundamentalists in this country. One must suppose that this author has no time for the "feel-good" religion of the fundamentalist variety that has done so much to foster anti-rationalism in our schools: the goal here is to "kill Luther's monster and once again achieve the death of death." Compromise is unacceptable: commitment to God must be total. Most comfortable Christians who attend Sunday service while sipping a latté would find Carroll's agenda too demanding. One must find salvation by an extinction of self, finding meaning outside the self in love for others and, ultimately, in an unflinching faith in God. In order to accomplish that "it is time to bury the dead and to start the difficult business of restoring our capacity for life." This sounds alarmingly like a formula taken from a postmodern text, but, once again, we must bear in mind that for John Carroll the restoration of "our capacity for life" is not to be found in shallow self-indulgence, or condemnation of creeds and people we find intolerable, but only through a leap of faith in a loving God that even Kierkegaard was unable to take.

This book is unquestionably as brilliantly written as it is disturbing. At the end of the day, however, after we have paid the author due homage, we must pause. If we are to agree with Carroll that Western culture has been dead for more than one hundred years and that we have lately been rummaging around among the broken remnants of a culture that is rapidly turning to dust, we must face the question of where we go from here. It is not enough to insist that we recover the blind faith of a Martin Luther. That is no longer possible for the vast majority of

Westerners who are lost in a cloud of hedonistic pleasure they mistake for happiness—though this could end suddenly if we lose control of our own technical wizardry. Nor is it possible, or acceptable, to reject human reason altogether as Carroll seems to do. In his insistence that we embrace “the darkness of faith where the light of reason does not shine,” his argument smacks of bifurcation, and we must reject his final conclusion as too extreme and leading to helplessness in the face of seemingly insurmountable real-world problems.

What he means, of course, is that we must not blanch at the contradictions that reason tells us lie at the heart of faith in God—that humans are responsible for their acts while at the same time they are not truly free; that God is good, but His creation is flawed; that innocents suffer while evil men prosper. To be sure, paradox and contradiction lie at the heart of faith and must be embraced as mysteries beyond human understanding. But at the same time, we must act as if we are free and act responsibly. And in doing so we must try to determine what is the right thing to do to save a planet we are rapidly destroying with our expanding population and stubborn demands that the earth sustain us at our present level of comfort. As we do this we may want to continue to plumb the depths of the extraordinary works of men and women that defined Western culture—to the extent that this is still possible.

Human reason may be a fragile thread, but it is the only one we have to lead us out of our present labyrinth. Faith alone leads to quietism, and that will not allow us to address our many problems; to do that we must remain engaged. Machiavelli was not alone in thinking that the devout Christian makes a poor citizen. It is certainly the case that Western culture has replaced God with the human ego (as Nietzsche saw so clearly that it drove him mad), and Carroll is correct to see this as a major cause of our present malaise. But any workable solution to real-world problems must reach outside the self to find meaning while at the same time rethinking the thoughts of the great minds that have come before us and trusting to reason and science to make possible what we come to realize is absolutely necessary for the survival of the human race.

At a time in our history when more than two-thirds of the American public do not know that DNA is the key to heredity and one in five think the sun revolves around the earth, we must repulse any attempt to denigrate reason. Faith begins with self-denial, but it must find room for reason if we are to survive as a people and begin to fashion a new culture to replace the old one we have destroyed. All of the rubble must not be discarded.

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Selected quotations:

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