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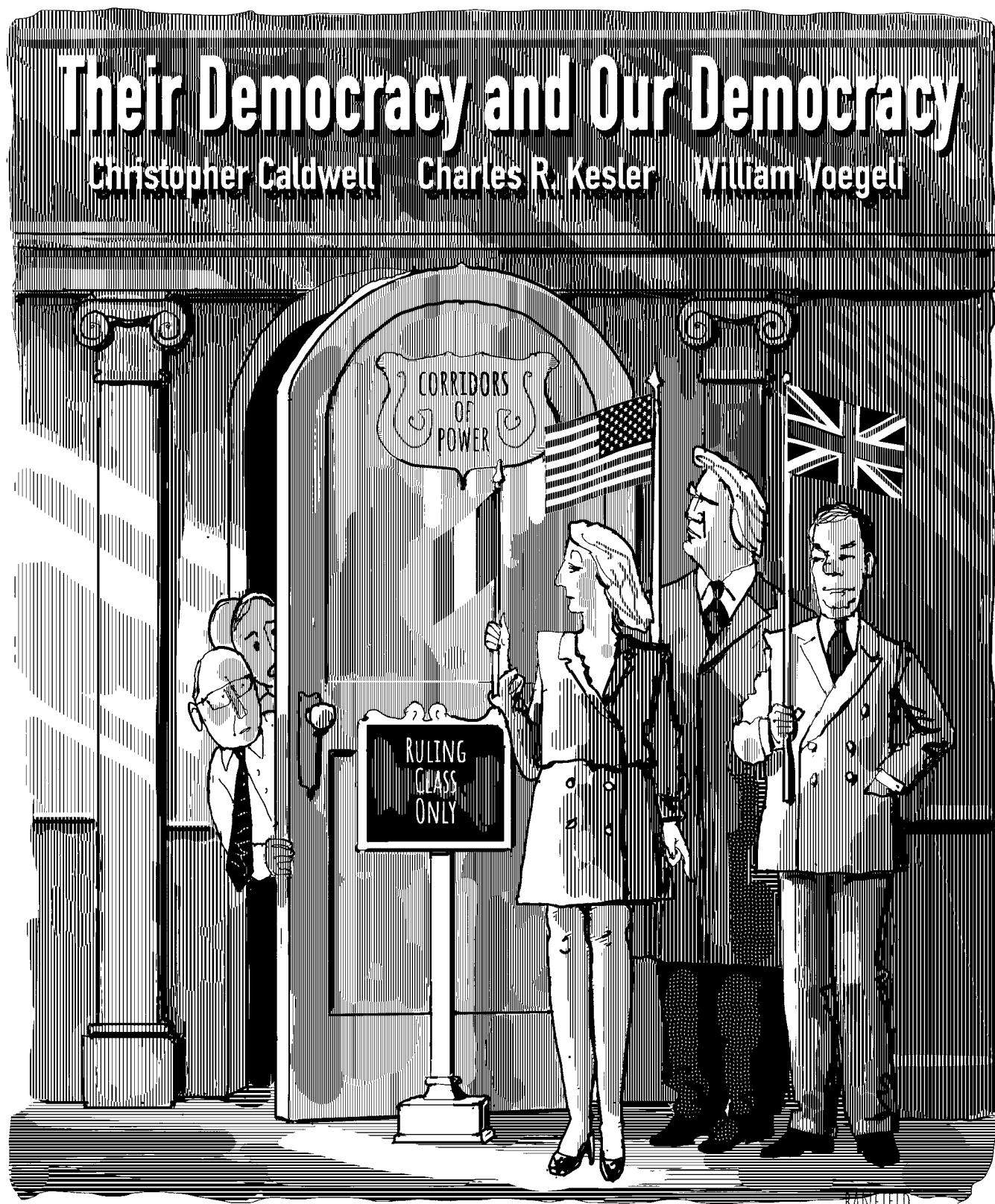
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Book Review by R.R. Reno

A GOOD TIME TO BE A PASTOR

Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture, by Aaron M. Renn.
Zondervan, 272 pages, \$26.99

Pagan America: The Decline of Christianity and the Dark Age to Come, by John Daniel Davidson.
Regnery Publishing, 368 pages, \$29.99



IT'S HARD FOR A PERSON UNDER 50 TO imagine how Christian America was half a century ago. The shattering experiences of the Great Depression and World War II sent Americans back to church. The 1950s marked a high point in church attendance. Facing down godless Communism, in 1956 Congress passed a bill that made "In God We Trust" the official motto of the United States. Representatives of the leading Protestant denominations had political pull. Cardinal archbishops in Boston, New York, and Chicago were kingmakers.

I grew up in the shadow of that seemingly all-powerful Christian consensus. In my childhood, Maryland was governed by strict blue laws that closed down commerce on Sundays. The only establishments open were drugstores, gas stations, and restaurants. Thus my lasting childhood memory from the '60s: stopping at Asbill's Pharmacy

after church, where my parents treated us to phosphate sodas as they picked up their reserved copy of the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*.

There was a great deal of hypocrisy in those years. John F. Kennedy was a notorious philanderer, and I dare say he was far from the only American of that era who talked the talk of Christianity while walking down a different path. And there were critics. The atheist Bertrand Russell won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950. In his youthful polemic *God and Man at Yale* (1951), William F. Buckley, Jr. inveighed against the ascendancy of godlessness among the professors. But the general outlook remained punitive of those who strayed. Nelson Rockefeller divorced his wife of 31 years in 1962, and the offense impeded his effort to secure the Republican nomination for president in 1964.

IN A WIDELY READ *FIRST THINGS* ARTICLE, "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism," Aaron Renn described the milieu of my childhood as a "positive world" for Christianity. Christian morality was taken for granted as the social norm, and deviance was censured. Even rich and powerful men like Rockefeller bore the consequences. Renn is a co-founder and senior fellow of American Reformer, a new organization dedicated to renewing Protestant institutions in order to respond vigorously to contemporary cultural challenges. He reckons that the positive world lasted until the mid-1990s. I'd date its demise much earlier. In 1969, California was the first state to allow no-fault divorce. Governor Ronald Reagan signed the bill. He later became the first divorced man to be elected president, a transgression that caused some to grumble but had no political consequences in the 1980 election. In 1973, The Supreme Court

MEDIEVAL LIVES FROM REAKTION



Geoffrey Chaucer
Unveiling the Merry Bard
Mary Flannery



Bede and
the Theory of
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The Teutonic
Knights
Rise and Fall of
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discovered a right to abortion, and that same year the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. At the 1980 Democratic National Convention the delegates endorsed a gay rights platform.

Those changes had effects. I was a college freshman in 1979. I can attest that the atmosphere was what Renn calls the "neutral world." Christian morality, certainly regarding sex, was not enforced—but neither was it censured. It was simply ignored. In those bright college years, I hitchhiked back and forth across the continent. My rides came from those at the bottom of the social ladder. There as well I found little in the way of adherence to the older Christian norms.

THOUGH I MAY DISPUTE RENN'S DATING of the demise of Christianity's ascendancy in American culture, there can be no doubt that he is correct in his general scheme. American society has undergone a process of de-Christianization. The positive world gave way to a short-lived neutral one. As theologian Richard John Neuhaus often said, "When orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later become proscribed." Already during my years of graduate studies at Yale University in the late 1980s, I sensed a growing animus toward Christianity, which was deemed a malign engine of patriarchy and the source of homophobia. The forces of moral revolution were gathering their strength. President Bill Clinton triangulated, but at the end of his second term in the late 1990s he declared June "Gay & Lesbian Pride Month." In 2015, the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision invented a right to same-sex marriage. As Justice Antonin Scalia noted, the moral logic of the majority's reasoning marked as an "enemy of human decency" anyone who dissented from the fittingness of gay marriage. Scalia's lament was the cry of a faithful Christian in what Renn calls the "negative world"—our present condition.

Renn recounts his three-world scheme at the outset of his new book, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture*. But his main object is not to convince his Protestant brethren that the weight of cultural prestige has turned against them. Rather, he seeks to plot a path forward for American evangelicals. How can the faithful thrive in the negative world? It might go without saying that the first step is to become more faithful, to pray more regularly, and to burrow more deeply into the truths revealed in scripture. But Renn says it nonetheless, and rightly so. We cannot sustain what we do not possess. Obedience to God's will is the high-

est good. But Jesus calls us to be wise as serpents, not just innocent as doves. The bulk of *Life in the Negative World* is given over to practical advice. Renn covers a great deal of ground. Three insights stand out.

THE FIRST CONCERNS THE NEED FOR intellectual excellence. In the mid-20th-century, debates raged about the credibility of Christian teaching: Is it reasonable to imagine that Jesus rose from the dead? Can we believe in miracles? Is the Bible historically accurate? Those questions were pressed again in the 2000s by Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and other New Atheists. But in the main, since the 1960s objections to Christianity have revolved around its moral teachings, especially those concerning marriage, sex, and family.

As Renn notes, evangelicals are largely unprepared. Unlike Catholicism, which has an extensive tradition of natural law teaching, Bible-based Protestantism took for granted the shared social consensus in the positive world. Who could imagine that men might marry men? Today, even public schools in red states propagandize children, inculcating rainbow dogmas at an early age. Certainly, for a faithful Christian the book of Genesis and letters of Saint Paul provide sufficient reason to remain loyal to traditional norms. But life in the negative world requires constant buttressing. What are the mistaken assumptions undergirding transgender ideology? In accord with what larger purpose did God establish the institution of marriage? How should we understand the moral significance of sexual acts? Why did the secular West go off the rails? These are questions for historians, philosophers, and theologians. Churches need their expertise to sustain a deep catechesis, one that instructs the faithful in why what they believe is true—and what they reject, false.

Second, Renn emphasizes resilience, which he thinks is best developed through ownership. As Hobby Lobby's Green family has demonstrated, those who own businesses (rather than index funds) can withstand the pressures of the negative world, protecting not just their own consciences but those of the people whom they employ. In the last century, Jews and Catholics often formed tight-knit communities that not only worshipped together but bought and sold together. Renn recommends this approach for evangelicals in the 21st century.

And third, the most important basis for success in the negative world is institutional integrity: financial, interpersonal, and doctrinal. Polling indicates that we live in a time of profound distrust of institutions, and rightly

so. Last year exposed the fecklessness of university leaders. Ordinary people are aware that talk of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) often amounts to little more than corporate virtue signaling. At bottom, we suspect that everyone is selling or being sold to. In this environment, churches run by courageous leaders who speak confidently and boldly will win admiration. Churches that serve rather than use, manipulate, and gaslight their members will win loyalty.

IN PAGAN AMERICA: *THE DECLINE OF CHRISTIANITY and the Dark Age to Come*, John Daniel Davidson frames our present situation in stark terms: either we restore Christianity to the moral and spiritual center of gravity for American society, or “we will be slaves in a pagan empire.” A senior editor of *The Federalist* online journal, he holds to the view that America’s culture of freedom rests on Christian foundations. As the negative world waxes, America’s Christian foundations erode. The boot of what I have elsewhere called the “Rainbow Reich” presses down upon us.

Davidson’s account is strong on details showing how the American regime has become hostile to Christians, nicely filling out Renn’s notion of a “negative world.” The relentless persecution of Colorado baker Jack Phillips offers an exemplary instance. Persecuted for the grave sin of refusing to make a wedding cake for a gay couple (who had targeted him for this purpose), he was vindicated by the Supreme Court in 2018. Yet the same Colorado Civil Rights Commission that first charged him with violations did so again in 2018. Lawsuits stymied this effort. Then a third charge was brought in 2019.

I have my doubts about the usefulness of “pagan” as a description of post-Christian America. It’s an omnibus term, used by the ancient Romans in the way we might say “hick” or “hayseed.” But the case of Jack Phillips suggests the term’s fittingness. The gay couple who originally targeted Phillips and the gay lawyer behind the subsequent lawsuits against him are not concerned with his beliefs. They do not seek his conversion. They want him to burn incense at the altar of progressive dogma. The same holds for DEI struggle sessions. Participants are not asked for confessions of faith; they are tested to see if they are willing to submit by mouthing the right words.

French philosopher Chantal Delsol—whom both Renn and Davidson cite—argues that a distinction between public and private

morality was a central feature of pagan Rome. The apparatus of the state was not concerned with the soul; it sought only outward signs of submission to public authority. By her reckoning, the post-Christian West has adopted this approach. We are not asked to believe; we are compelled to genuflect and show our fealty.

In that regard, today’s Rainbow Reich adheres to the liberal doctrine of separation of church and state. It demands obeisance to official doctrines: antiracism, climate change, and the affirmation of privileged deviancies, especially sexual perversions. These doctrines are normative but they are not moral, at least not in the ordinary sense of that term. Think what you wish, but don’t dare say “faggot.” This distinction is why we speak of political correctness, not moral correctness. In this regard, the tyrannical ambitions of the Rainbow Reich fit into liberalism’s theoretical framework, which is why liberals find it so difficult to oppose its excesses. Its goal is political, not metaphysical (to echo John Rawls). It seeks a change in power relations, not moral or religious conversion.

THOUGH THE FORM MAY BE “PAGAN” BY Delsol’s definition, the substance of our present afflictions are better described as debased Christianity. As G.K. Chesterton quipped, “The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad.” The zeal for “inclusion” of the “marginalized” reflects charity without obedience to the God who commands it. Progressive denunciations of purported injustices usurp God’s role. Progressives take it upon themselves to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. They aren’t hostile to traditional Christianity because they have read Seneca or Lucretius—we’d be a lot better off if they did—but because they believe that progressivism supersedes Christianity, casting off the husk of musty old dogmas and outdated moral notions so as to embrace the true, final, and universal outlook, one that serves the “arc of history.”

Davidson predicts that “the post-Christian American order will be one of unrelenting cruelty, violence, narcissism, and despair.” It already is. More than 100,000 people die each year from drug overdose. Teen suicide rates are rising. Marriage and fertility rates are falling. Mexican gangs infiltrate cities. Homeless encampments dot the landscape. Privileged college students wave Hamas flags and mouth anti-American propaganda.

Truth be told, our country is not a happy place. In the years of my childhood, life was not perfect. Jim Crow was slow to die in Baltimore. But a young black man in a lousy part of town was less likely to be raised by a single mother—and far, far less likely to die of gunshot wounds. A man with a high school education could get a decent-paying job, support a family, buy a ranch house in Dundalk, and trailer a boat to fish in Middle River on the weekends. Institutions were trusted because they were trustworthy. Today, the regime is not only negative for Christians; it’s a hostile, negative world for most American citizens.

WHEN I PUT DOWN THESE TWO books, I found myself smiling. In the negative world, Christianity is not part of the dominant regime. This imposes burdens. The outsider does not get preferment, and he’s sometimes persecuted. Aaron Renn and John Daniel Davidson are correct to counsel the faithful to put on the armor of God, a task both spiritual and practical. But we are living in a time when populism is on the rise. The insiders are under assault. And people know that the architects of the present regime, and the enforcers of its increasingly insane dogmas, are not evangelical pastors or Catholic bishops.

In 2016, a large body of alienated, angry Americans noticed that a brash, boastful New York developer attracted the ire of the Great and the Good. The more he was denounced, the more they loved him. Perhaps something similar will happen in the spiritual realm. The more hostile the people who brought us Drag Queen Story Hour are toward Christianity, the more obvious it will be that the churches offer an alternative to our failing regime. Will people who are sick and tired of the Rainbow Reich begin to say, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend”?

It’s a hard time to be a pastor or priest, but it’s a good time. Dissent is growing. Few young people trust educational institutions, and for good reason. They’re aware that they have grown up in a cesspool of pornography, have been poisoned by social media, and were sacrificed on the altar of COVID lockdowns. Some, maybe more than a few, will turn to Christ as an anchor in the dissolving, disintegrating culture of the post-Christian West. When a house is collapsing, it’s a great advantage to be on the outside.

R.R. Reno is editor of *First Things* magazine.

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