

# Barbarians At Our Door

*Our culture is collapsing but are Christians aware of what is happening?*

by Johan D. Tangelder

"The barbarians are coming!" The list of rough, uncivilized, and uncultured barbarians who have come and gone is a long one. Wherever they went, they instilled fear and left a path of destruction. A well-known example from history is the sacking of Rome by the Goths and Vandals in the fifth century of the Christian era. Why did mighty Rome fall into the hands of those barbarians? Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), one of the great historians of the twentieth century, argued that internal rather than external factors were cause for its downfall. The decline and fall of Rome did not come overnight. Of course, we think of Nero, the sensational and pathological emperor and music artist, who fiddled while his city was burning. But he was only a symptom of the long process of the vulgarization of the Roman governing class. In his book *City of God*, Augustine responded to the widely asked question: why have things gone so disastrously wrong with the empire ever since it became Christian? Augustine pointed out that the earlier paganism, too, had failed to provide a defense against catastrophe. Even though paganism had failed Rome, an enormous stress was placed on reviving paganism, the faith it was said, that had made Rome great. But Rome fell to its external enemies because of the corruption of its morals, the manifold internal conflicts, the many civil wars disputing the imperial succession, the resentment at the ever increasing tax load and compulsory labor.

But barbarians are not merely factors in ancient history. It is commonly said that the modern world is reverting to paganism. It is not necessary to chronicle in detail the twentieth century's horrendous record of evil, committed on a scale that is beyond human capacity to fully comprehend it. Germany's Nazi regime was an embodiment of barbarism and a revival of raw paganism. Hitler's crude and debased system of state propaganda, the mass enslavement of minds, the exaltation of the state, people's courts composed of ardent Nazis making mockery of justice, and concentration camps which dotted Germany's landscape coerced and cowed millions of Germans into submission to the power of his totalitarian and anti-Christ rule. Even many Catholic priests and Protestant pastors fell under the ban of this new pagan religion, the worship of Germany under the symbols of the old gods of Nordic paganism.

## **Blind to barbarism**

But if the twentieth century witnessed the revival of paganism, why do some claim that the twenty-first century may become even more pagan? Paganism seems even more entrenched today, holding a firm grip on society. In the 1970s, Dr. Carl F.H. Henry made the arresting claim: "The Barbarians Are Coming" and they threaten to undermine the foundations of civilization. Barbarians, argued Henry, had already begun to invade the beleaguered civilization of the West. The philosopher Alasdair C. MacIntyre records the advent of a "new dark ages" – the collapse of the high traditions of Western civilization. He claims: "The Barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have

been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament."

Who are these modern barbarians? They are atheistic secularists and they are in the driver's seat of our Western culture. Solzhenitsyn pointed to the core cause of paganization. "If I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the *entire* twentieth century, here too, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: 'Men have forgotten God.'" In the 1980s the epitome of self-sufficiency was Bart Simpson praying at his network-created cartoon dinner table, "Dear God, we pay for all this ourselves, so thanks for nothing." No movement in the twentieth century has reflected greater numerical growth than secularism. It has choked the life of the church in Western Europe while atheistic Marxism has strangled the church in Eastern Europe. Most Europeans have a family history form of Christianity but now, like the prodigal son, have turned away. Although in the United States evangelical Christianity is vibrant, secularism has captured education and politics. Lesslie Newbigin said of Western society that "the most obvious fact that distinguishes our culture from all that have preceded is that it is – in its public philosophy – atheist." The great majority of decision makers in the Western world live, talk, and act as though God does not exist. God is sometimes useful as a political ally, but when the chips are down you do not find the leaders of the West – with a few exceptions – resorting to Him for advice and help. An example of such leadership is Canada's Prime Minister Jean Chretien. It has been reported that he boasted that it was his personal decision to exclude "priests" and all mention of faith from the memorial service on Parliament Hill in Ottawa for the September 11 attack on America and its victims. He usually regards churches as little more than lobby groups. But secularist atheism makes spiritual death unavoidable in this life and in the next. My concern is this: Do we, as Christians, clearly understand the tragic drift of our culture?

## **THE PROBLEM**

### **1. Man on the throne**

"Man is the measure of all things," we are told reassuringly by the secular humanists. He declares himself independent of God on the basis of reason and his faith in the sciences. He kneels before himself and his own reason. He says, "I cannot know, hence I cannot trust in, anything that is beyond what I can think." The little "I" has now become the arbiter of all that is but also of what ought to be. No prophet, or tradition, or religion knows better than the individual what the individual's good is.

In other words the individual is now on the throne, replacing God. He says, "No deity will save me, I must save myself." He has replaced the Ten Commandments with the single command: "Be good to yourself." In other words, the source of salvation and the object of worship are one. Here then is the root cause of all our modern troubles. Man has liberated himself from God and all moral absolutes. He relies on his own personal experience instead of God's law when weighing issues of right and wrong. He does what is right in his own eyes. His pursuit of happiness and quest for self-fulfillment become substitutes for virtue. But when God is declared dead, pagan idols are revived. Man cannot live in a spiritual vacuum. In his plight he seeks refuge in his own idolized image. John Calvin, the great Reformer, said of people of his time that they were nothing other

than factories of idols. Today the factories of idols are working overtime. Basic to idolatry then is the glorification of man. This idolatry of self makes him feel taller than he really is. And this self-inflation needs to be fed continually. He does not want to be the image bearer of God (Gen.1:27). He desires to be sovereign, his own lawgiver, and the creator of his own future. But there is nothing new under the sun. Satan already seduced Adam and Eve in paradise to idolatry (Gen. 3:4). Their deepest motif was their pride, doing their own will instead of obeying their Creator. The human inclination for self-worship is behind the biblical injunctions against pride. Tyre was struck down "Because your heart is proud, and you have said, 'I am a god'" (Ezek. 28:2).

In this brave new world moral relativism has become the last "moral" absolute and the liberty of self-expression the essence of progress. As a video storeowner in the US who was prosecuted for violating pornography laws stated, "I feel like I'm fighting for America. I feel like I'm fighting for our rights as Americans. That's what I feel like." But idols cannot save. They are deaf and dumb. They are unable to offer a lamp to our feet and a guide upon our path (cf. Ps.119: 105). A society which cuts itself off from God and is morally adrift loses its sense of security and safety. In 1994, the Jewish medical educator David C. Stolinsky lamented the loss of the Christian values that dominated America in the 1950s. "The reason we fear to go out after dark is not that we may be set upon by bands of evangelicals and forced to read the New Testament," he said, "but that we may be set upon by gangs of feral (wild and savage) young people who have been taught that nothing is superior to their own needs or feelings."

## **2. The loss of shame**

Another evidence of the deepening secular inroads is the loss of shame. In the past people would have a sense of shame if they did not take seriously questions of life and death, or responsibility and judgment, heaven and hell. They had a Christian heritage and believed that God would hold them accountable for their actions.

In paradise Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony with one another and with God. They lived in an atmosphere of trust and truth. They were "both naked, and they felt no shame"(Gen. 2:25). Their nakedness and vulnerability posed no threat. When they disobeyed God, the trust was broken. They lost their innocence. They saw their nakedness, looked for cover and protection. In Adam's words, "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (Gen. 3:10). Centuries later the psalmist wrote, "Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees! Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands" (Ps. 119:5,6).

The essence of paganism is unchastity. In Leviticus 18 unchastity is forbidden to Israel. Paganism does more than tolerate unchastity, it demands unchastity. "The irony of shame," writes Rodney Clapp, "is that hiding and covering our vulnerability only increases it. The higher our lies are stacked, the more likely they are to topple. The games we play grow so complex that we are bound to slip up. Life for ashamed people who cannot admit shame is a complicated and tense affair."

The repaganization of the Western world is accompanied by a frightening reappearance of pagan sexuality. The ancient Greek goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, has made a big comeback in the last generation or two. She used to be worshipped openly in the ancient world, either under that name or under her Latin name,

Venus. Sexuality as such is not sinful, of course. It gives joy and delight, sustains the bond of husband and wife, and propagates the human race. But worship sexuality and one becomes its slave, unable to resist its demands, even when they impinge on the freedom and happiness of others. Our "liberal" culture has even made sexuality a commercial commodity. Television and the print media pander to the lower instincts and emotions. They make erotic relations dramatically attractive. TV features R-rated programs with all their gore and foul language. Taboos continue to be broken in pursuit of audiences. "Permissive morality" and "sexual revolution" are now more than a slogan from the 1960s, they are now manifestos of liberation from Christian morality. But Christians should not be surprised. When there is no longer a fixed moral reference point by which to judge behavior, everything become permissible, norms a delusion, and self-discipline without purpose. As Raymond Aron said: "That God is dead means not just 'Everything is permitted' but also, and especially, 'Everything is possible.'"

The idolatrous worship of sex is costly. The consequences of this revival of paganism are seen in the increasing rejection of monogamous marriage, the ready accommodation of divorce, the breakup of families, kids who have kids, the vanishing father, abortion, child abuse, the drug culture, high-pressured hard-nosed materialism, the legitimization of homosexuality and of lesbianism as alternative lifestyles. This pagan immorality has room for a great variety of lifestyles, but it is intolerant of Christian standards. Some years ago radical feminists and homosexuals united to interrupt the celebration of the Roman Catholic mass inside St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York in order to assert their right to abort their unborn children and to follow their sexual orientation. In Canada a growing anti-Christian movement makes it difficult for Christians who believe in absolute standards of morality and are not quiet about their convictions. Mrs. Janet Epp Buckingham, a lawyer and chair of the Social Action Committee for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada notes that current Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission policies have more than once been used to block Christian programs because of comments on homosexuality. "Christians can no longer be complacent," she warns. "There is an ongoing attempt to silence everyone who believes in an absolute morality."

### **OUR REPOSE: A light in the darkness**

How should Christians react to the revival of paganism? We should not succumb to egocentric despair. On the one hand, for the modern pagan the world is meaningless; where death ends all. It offers no hope for a better future. On the other hand, the Bible gives substance to hope. Christians are children of the Light, Jesus Christ. Our hope is in the Lord, Who bore our shame on the cross. As Bach's hymn puts it so well:

O sacred head, now wounded, with grief and *shame* weighed down, now scornfully surrounded with thorns your only crown. O sacred head, what glory and blessing you have known! Yet, though despised and gory, I claim you as my own.

This Jesus is the only way to God the Father (John 14:6). He broke the power of evil (Col. 2:15). He is at once the Lord of the future and the Sovereign of the present. And He will return in triumph over His foes. The Bible reminds us that idols are merely a projection of the mind of man. They are worthless things (1 Cor. 10:19,20). But we cannot be indifferent. We are warned to flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14) and to be "on watch against false gods" (1 John 5:21).

The Lord mandated the Church to call the world back to God, to repentance, conversion, and a radical change. The Western world does not need a "make us feel good" gospel. The call for repentance is desperately needed. Why? Because repentance includes the repudiation of idolatry and the recognition of God. It is a "turn-about" of the entire human being. "We have so bedeviled the world," says Solzhenitzyn, "brought it so close to self-destruction, that repentance is now a matter of life and death – not for the sake of a life beyond the grave...but for the sake of our life here and now and our very survival on this earth...We can say without suspicion of overstatement that without *repentance* it is any case doubtful if we can survive."

The real arena in which we are to work and witness and win others for the Lord and His Church is this dark world. Consequently, if we don't obey the Great Commission in word and deed we have ceased to be light and salt. This calls for earnest prayer, spiritual vitality, and a burden for the lost. Jesus said that if we are not shamed of Him before man, He will not be ashamed of us before the Father (Mark 8:38). The early Christians were subversives, refusing to conform to the norms of their surroundings. Their practical demonstration of the Gospel was probably the single greatest cause of the rapid spread of Christianity. "See how these Christians love one another" was not irony. Their love expressed itself in care for the poor, for widows and orphans, in visits to persecuted Christians in prisons or condemned to the living death of labor in the mines, and in social action in time of calamity, famine, earthquakes, pestilence, or war. The distribution of alms was not confined to believers. Christians taught the sanctity of marriage. The Christian sex ethic differed from the conventional standards of pagan society in that it regarded unchastity in a husband as no less a serious breach of loyalty and trust than unfaithfulness in a wife. The early Christians lived out the Gospel in their pagan society. May we, 21st century Christians, do likewise in our repaganized Western world.