

Was there a pre-Christian “Golden Age”? Hitler and many of his followers believed so. The Nazi “Thousand Year Reich” was to be in opposition to The Holy Roman Empire’s thousand year reign of Christian influence in Europe. But what was that pre-Christian era really like?

The following essay is excerpted from Chapter 4 of *War Comes To God’s House*:

To many Christians, Rome is remembered most vividly for her brutality, with scenes springing to mind of gladiator’s hacking one another to death, and starved lions turned loose on helpless Christian families - all to the approving roar of the crowd. These are barbarisms that can’t be understood from a Christian cultural perspective, yet they are very much in the nature of man. We tend to think of those blood-drenched spectacles of the Roman Circus as merely the perverse diversions of a depraved society – but they had purposes larger than simple entertainment. Those purposes, the purposes of the Roman state, were to harden the public, to make them worthy of their destiny as conquerors; and to warn the discontented of the great weight and cruelty of Rome. Conquest was a bloody and cruel business, but it was the right of the strong to prey upon the weak. That was the way of nature, and of the gods men had built upon that nature.

The Roman system was built on that principle, from the martial elite down to the slaves. It was not a philosophy that began with Rome, nor even Rome’s cultural mentor Greece; but perhaps it was the Greek, Hybrias, when the Roman wolf was a mere cub, who most clearly and unabashedly boasted it:

The Warrior

My wealth’s a burly spear and brand,
And a right good shield of hides untanned,
Which on my arm I buckle:
With these I plough, I reap, I sow,
With these I make sweet vintage flow,
And all around me truckle.

But your wights that take no pride to wield
A massy spear and well made shield:
Nor joy to draw the sword:
O, I bring those heartless, hapless drones,
Down in a thrice on their marrow-bones,
To call me king and lord.
-translated by Thomas Campbell.

Hybrias' drinking song expresses a philosophy that has never gone out of style, even if swords and spears have given way to more modern methods of exploiting human weakness. In the Christian era, men often danced to Hybrias' ever-popular hit, though they had to hum the lyrics quietly to themselves. Now, in the post-Christian era, Hybrias is set to noise by rappers and paraded before revelers in the streets, while he becomes partner to respectable businessmen without a plastic fig leaf or blush of shame. But we are looking at history, not current events.

Our encounter with Hybrias warns us that, even though we've hardly begun our journey through history, we are forced to halt and clear away a major roadblock. It seems that some decaying ruins of the "Age of Enlightenment" have crumbled and fallen across our path. For years now, I have watched unwary pilgrims detour around this rubble and find themselves on the wrong path. The would-be "values givers" of recent generations, desperately searching for some substitute for the western Christian culture laboriously built up over the past two millennia, constantly refer back to the supposed "Golden Age" of the Greco-Roman world as a model, or even the legitimate source of western civilization hijacked by Christianity.

When Norman Cousins makes the "good inheritance" from the Greek democratic experiment the basis of American "democracy", or when Will Shirer laments that the Germans didn't follow the "Golden Mean of the Greeks", or Will Durant lauds the ancients' "intellectual conscience...and the search for truth", or H. G. Wells promotes a return to the "...

civilization of enquiry, of experimental knowledge, creative and progressive civilization” initiated in the Golden Age of old, recognize then for what they are - evocations of a myth that began centuries ago with the Enlightenment’s discovery of the “Classical World”. These glassy eyed boosters of “classical” culture see only the reflection of a myth created in their own minds. This is no pointless tirade, no gratuitous attack, my dear reader; bear with me. We will be bumping into this pernicious myth all along our trail, and we will discover that the ones who best modeled the ancient Greco-Roman culture were the Nazis.

Let’s briefly consider the two most prominent aspects of the “Golden Age” myth – the claim for the intellectual and moral superiority of the pre-Christian era, and secondly, the far more momentous, if less recognized, corollaries of the philosophy of eternal searching for truth and cultural experimentation. Those corollaries are that we do not have truth now; universal, absolute truth probably does not exist, and we probably would not recognize absolute truth even if it exists. Each generation, even each person, must discover his own truth. Those ideas have led to moral and social chaos on countless dead end paths, and a level of violence, cruelty, and despair unknown in the west since pre-Christian days.

Christians, on the other hand, believe they have found the universal, absolute truth; actually, we believe it has been revealed to us. The church has sought to enforce that confidence in revealed truth and men and nations have sought to partake of the stability that confidence brought. Western culture – humanism, art, literature, politics, and science - developed in the milieu of Christian confidence and stability. God knows there has always been dissension about matters of doctrine and ritual, and personalities, and all the worst traits of mankind have found their ways into church history, but those matters were argued within the contexts of Christian Holy Scriptures and traditions up until recently. In the following chapters, we will be delving deeply into the recent departure from Christian based cultural assumptions, so we will leave

that subject for now and return briefly to the first aspect of the Golden Age myth – the intellectual and moral superiority of the pre-Christian world.

What of the great contributions of the classical Greeks to science and philosophy? They certainly had great thinkers among them. From Thales to Ptolemy, the ancients laid important sections of the foundation of modern science, though much of their foundation was unsound, hampering scientific progress for centuries, and embarrassing and damaging the Church that had adopted Greek science as gospel. Neither was their world ruled by science; their great works had to be excavated from ruins by Christians centuries later.

What of the innovations of the Athenian trio of philosophical superheroes, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, for example? Let us take a look at where their philosophy led them. Socrates is revered today (in some circles) as an innovator who questioned the association of one's own cultural biases with the abstract conception of "the good", a basic tenet of liberalism (although modern liberalism goes so far as to deny that there is any such universal as "the good"). It should be remembered that Socrates was condemned to death by his beloved Athens for ridiculing Athens' gods and "corrupting the morals of Athenian youth". The good citizens of Athens knew that their customs and their stone idols (of which there were thousands) were the ideal, and not to be questioned by eccentric troublemakers. That doesn't make Socrates wrong, but it does illustrate the isolation of philosophers from the broader culture. The philosophical innovators of the "classical world" were little more than curiosities in societies that were insular, superstitious, carnal, and brutal.

What of the Greeks as inventors of the democratic political system? The eminent Victorian historian Lord Acton, in his *History of Freedom in Antiquity*, presents quite a different picture of Greek democracy than is usually seen today, and he reminds us that democracy and freedom are not the same.

Pericles gave Athens a relatively (for the times) broad based democratic government. They lost it in a couple of generations from the twin scourges of unfettered democracy and human nature. The Greeks gave us the root word for democracy, and they also gave us the root words for anarchy and tyranny, and the adjective “Draconian”. So disastrous was the Greek experiment that it gave democracy a bad name for a thousand years.

The term “democracy”, of course, is used in two distinct ways – social democracy, and political democracy. In the former usage, it is best rendered “egalitarianism”. It is egalitarianism that is the wellspring both of freedom and modern political democracy, and Christianity is the all too often ignored and abused aquifer that feeds the spring. America’s Founding Fathers gave their new republic, “... dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights”, a complex Constitution full of checks and balances not to protect political democracy, but to protect the individual’s God given “natural rights” from the threat of political democracy. Man’s natural rights were summed up rather succinctly as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. None of those rights, or freedoms, are possible without a basis in egalitarianism. Note the distinction to be made here however; all egalitarianism is not equal. In Christian based cultural assumptions, all human life has equally high value, not equally low value as in Godless socialist totalitarianism.

The other use of the word ‘democracy’ is political democracy, or majoritarian rule. Whether that is good or bad depends entirely upon the collective character of the “demos”, the public, and that is a very chancy proposition. Athenian democracy consistently voted for more war, looting, and enslavement of their neighbors until they became a scourge and sealed their own doom. At home, they were always “making war from the market place” against each other – class against class, clique against clique, party against party – eager to use the power of rhetoric to wield the deadly weapon of

democratic government. Lord Acton notes, “It is bad to be oppressed by a minority, but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority.”(Acton)

At its best, the common classical Greek conception of democracy in either sense, political or social, was narrow. The great minds of the Golden Age conceived of a world ruled by an all male intellectual elite served by slaves with a warrior class interposed between the two to protect the former and oppress the latter. They had no quarrel with Hybrias. The ideal of the strong preying upon the weak is the way of nature, the way of the world. When we look to Socrates, we see his view of an ideal “Republic” (at least as Plato glowingly recounts it) consisting mostly of slaves, where the family is abolished and unwanted children are killed, and with a sexual abandon that would embarrass even most of the “X generation” of our own overly tolerant society. Plato’s star pupil Aristotle, for all his great intellect, was only a man of his time who favored raiding neighboring communities for slaves.

Aristotle had no moral basis, then, for objecting when the Macedonians overran Athens and he became the slave/tutor of the bi-sexual, megalomaniac warmonger Alexander “the Great”. The Macedonians (first cousins, at least, to the Greeks) were a warrior society much in the mold of the Spartans, who, you may recall, had already conquered Athens in the day of Socrates. The Spartan cultural model was much cited by the Nazis, who, unlike most people today, understood it well. The Spartans were a totalitarian society ruled by a bi-sexual warrior elite who paired with bi-sexual females only for the necessary purpose of procreation. Young males were turned over to mature warriors for martial training and pederasty (another term of classical Greek origin, which I don’t care to explain).

The Spartans sowed and reaped, like Hybrias, with sword and spear through subjugation of the Helot people. One rite of passage for a young Spartan male of the warrior class was to slip up on an unsuspecting Helot and murder him, or her. The

“courage” of cold-blooded cruelty, if it can be called courage, was equally as important to the Spartans as their undoubted courage in battle. This ritual, along with periodic cullings, kept the Helots servile and their population at manageable levels. That was an especially important precaution as the number of Spartan warriors was also strictly limited to a rather static level by their feudal system, the weak and unwanted of their own also being killed in infancy. These gruesome and unheroic facts of Spartan life don’t fit the Hollywood image, but the modern age sees Greek history through a distorted lens – that of animosity to Christian culture. The Spartans, victims of their own cruel system, fell into a well-deserved decline and extinction.

The Macedonians too, declined and were submerged under the Romans; but in their heyday under Alexander “the Great”, they cut an ugly gash across the old world that has hardly been equaled since. From Athens to deep into India, Alexander annihilated all who refused to fall on their marrow bones to call him king and lord. Whole civilizations were lost to history, but even now stories survive in remote villages of a brutal conqueror whose remarkably disciplined army systematically shattered all opposition, then were turned loose to vent all their ferocity and depravity on the unfortunate men, women and children unlucky enough to have survived the battle. The greatest man of ancient Rome, Julius Caesar, is said to have wept at the realization he would never leave the mark Alexander left.

What of the philosophers’ kingdom in the sky? The philosophers needed the warriors, but, alas, the warriors didn’t need the philosophers. Their philosophical speculations have enjoyed far more standing in the protected confines of the western Christian world. Since the Enlightenment period there has been a resurgence of the concept of philosopher kings, with “science” taking the role of philosophy. Hitler is the very embodiment of the philosopher king model. Although we may think of him as a lunatic, millions of well-educated people regarded him as a man of science and wisdom unparalleled in

history whose dictates could (and did) overwhelm any other source of authority – law, tradition, revealed wisdom, divine right.

The Greek philosophical school, Stoicism, is often credited with development of the concept of “natural law”, the precursor of “natural rights” in our heritage. But if so, where did this good idea lead in their world? I see little sign of any good thing that came from Greek and Roman Stoics. The leading Roman Stoic of his day, Cicero, quickly gave up his principles to join in the praise of the assassin of the Republic, Julius Caesar. The greatest of the Stoics, as far as later influence is concerned, is Philo of Alexandria, a Jew. Did his concept of natural law derive from Greek philosophy, or the Law and the Prophets of his own people? It was certainly the opinion of the early Church Fathers who adopted Philo’s “natural law” philosophy that it stemmed from Biblical Revelation.

The early Romans had their virtues - strong families, patriotism, a work ethic, and high morals, such as they were - or they would not have been successful. Their virtues could not be considered “Christian virtues” however. The early Romans, like the Greeks and most of their neighbors, were pantheists living a precarious existence in a universe of virtually limitless numbers of often capricious, often vicious gods, demigods, and assorted spirits ranging from Jupiter and Mars to family household deities. Everything from good luck (the goddess Fortune) to fertilizer, humble manure, had its god to appease.

When Hannibal threatened Rome, and the old gods did not come to their rescue, the populace was panic stricken – which god should we appease to avert this disaster? Finally, the Roman Senate consulted their official soothsayers and made the decision to borrow a renowned stone idol from an allied city-state. The idol was received with great pomp and ceremony by the leading citizens of the Republic, brought ashore by “virgin” priestesses of the goddess Vesta. Even

though the idol had to be carried about and served by self-made eunuch priests, it was credited with doing the trick – Hannibal backed out of Italy. Probably he was as superstitious as the Romans.

In addition to the gods, however, the Romans had the spirits of their ancestors to worry about. It was those ancestors who protected the family from the vicissitudes of a cosmos in which every stick and stone potentially harbored some evil spirit. But it would not do to offend the ancestors by disgracing the family. Duty, honor, and courage in battle were standards enforced by both the living and the dead, but it was the father's duty first to avenge disgrace, and many Roman fathers had the blood of their children on their hands.

Such a rigid code made the Romans warlike, and successful in war. As their success grew, they became more and more dependent on war, on conquest, loot, and slavery. Empire and imperium were “the good” and to make sweet vintage flow with sword and spear was better than with plow and scythe. One of the heroes of early Rome was Cincinnatus, who left his plow to go to war and save the Republic. When the threat was passed, he returned to his plowing. But his ethic became outdated.

St. Augustine dealt with the decline of Rome in his *City of God* at the close of the Roman era. He traced the rise of Rome as a nation built by men obsessed with glory, but who sought glory through virtue. Later Romans sought glory by cowardly, corrupt, and deceitful means. Later Rome's history is one of war and assassination in the struggle for the illusive joys of power and glory. Ambitious men rose by conquest, for the glory of Rome; then they wanted the glory of Rome for themselves. Every great man was a threat to some other. Roman sons killed fathers and brothers for crowns, and fathers killed sons to hold crowns; often driven by wives, mothers, and daughters in the stuff of Greek tragedy.

The “Golden Age” of Rome, the age of Horace and Cicero, and Julius Caesar at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire produced some of the best known examples of the mad quest for power and glory, but not the most appalling by any means. It’s a well-known story, but for the sake of illustration, let’s take another look at that time. After years of strife, the great generals Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar ended the Republic and ruled jointly for a time – the great Triumvirate. Crassus is best remembered for finally suppressing the Spartacus slave revolt and crucifying thousands of rebellious slaves along Rome’s major highway, leaving their bodies hanging to rot as a warning to other would-be rebels. Yet, needing additional victories (i.e. slaves and booty for Rome’s insatiable appetite) to match his rivals, Crassus went off to battle the Parthians (ne Persians), one of Rome’s perennial enemies. Crassus detoured along the way to loot the Temple at Jerusalem, then went on to ignominious defeat at the hands of the Parthians. His head achieved some measure of acclaim, however, as a stage prop in a Greek drama at the Parthian court.

Rome was not large enough for the two survivors of the ill fated Triumvirate, however, even engorged as it was by their conquests – Iberia by Pompey, and Gaul by Caesar. After a long and destructive civil war, Pompey was forced to flee to Egypt. As he stepped ashore, a eunuch minion of the Egyptian co-ruler had him killed, and Pompey’s head was ceremoniously presented to Caesar. Despite this gesture of good faith, Caesar had the young king disposed of in favor of his sister, Cleopatra.

Caesar was now undisputed master of Rome, elected Dictator for Life by the Senate, at his demand. Famed orator, historian, and Stoic philosopher Cicero heaped ovations on him and declared Caesar to be Rome’s greatest defense against the German barbarians and other enemies threatening Rome. Yet, Great Caesar was murdered in the Senate by some of Pompey’s supporters whom he had foolishly spared. Marc Anthony, right hand man of the late “dictator for life” tracked

down and destroyed the assassins, then set himself in Caesar's place (including, of course, with Cleo). In more bloody civil war Anthony, in his turn, was destroyed by Caesar's grandnephew Octavian, who became the first emperor, Caesar Augustus, emperor when Christ came into this world. Such was the history of Rome in its heyday – violent and brutal, heedless both of caution and compassion.

As their power and wealth grew, so inevitably, did their weaknesses. Romans began to rely on the power of the state, on hired soldiers, and slaves. In its decline, the Roman Empire's population was fully one-third slave, as many as fifty million slaves according to one estimate. Slaves in the Roman world might be Greek or Roman, Egyptian or Ethiopian, Semitic or Celtic, even German; but so many were Slavic that we derive our word "slave" from their unhappy history. Whatever their race or nationality, slaves had no rights and very little value. Slaves could be worked to death, or sent to battle men or beasts in the arena. On a whim, one wealthy Roman had a hundred young men emasculated to present his daughter the gift of a small army of eunuchs. Neither marriage nor paternity was recognized among slaves; for them, family did not exist.

The noble Roman families of the later days produced fewer and fewer men of war, but more men of leisure, and the ancestors be damned. Mercenary soldiers were almost as cheap as slaves. Noble Roman women more and more disdained the hardships of childbirth for the pleasures of luxurious decadence. It seems the Greeks had influenced the Romans in more ways than art, literature and philosophy. A century after Great Caesar, the Roman historian Tacitus made a revealing comparison between Romans and the threatening Germans. He wrote of the Germans that they consider it a crime "...to set limits to population by rearing up only a certain number of children and destroying the rest." It has been rightly said that only a truly great civilization can become a truly decadent civilization. Lesser ones do not survive the downward spiral long enough to become truly

decadent. That observation was made with Rome in mind but it's a universal truth.

As the Roman domain spread and became more and more dependent on foreign manpower, the already crowded Roman pantheon had to make room for Greek and other alien deities flooding in with returning soldiers, merchants, and slaves. The old Roman gods assumed more and more of a figurehead role in the new Roman world. It was not necessary to believe that Jupiter, Juno, Mars and the rest actually existed, beyond their graven images, only to make public obeisance to them. To publicly worship the official gods of Rome, sometimes including the Emperor, was to swear loyalty to Rome. Loyalty was the highest civic virtue, and conversely, disloyalty to the Roman state or Emperor, was the most heinous crime. When conquering generals received their "triumphs", the public celebrations of their victories, the heroic Legions paraded through the streets of Rome, along with the legions of newly made slaves and their kings. At the feet of Rome's official idols, sacrificial bulls and broken kings were slaughtered and only lip service was given to the "gods", the real god to whom these sacrifices were made was the Roman state – giver of all good things.

Many Christians, most of them loyal to Rome, died for refusing to make public declarations of loyalty to the state because they involved burning incense and making sacrifices to idols and eating food offered to idols. They held that there was a God higher than Rome and Rome's Emperor, and a law higher even than Rome's law. Here we have the beginning of the long confrontation between church and state that has marked western history and shaped its intellectual development for these many centuries since.

Lord Acton, again in his *History of Freedom in Antiquity*, observed of Rome that, "It provided admirable securities for the rights of citizens; it treated with savage disregard the rights of men..." But wait... what "rights of men"? Rome knew of no such rights, only the law of the jungle, nature's law. It was

an alien influence that brought such a concept as the “rights of men” to Rome.

Christianity had a worldview vastly different from Rome’s, and it offered a vastly different solution to a basic problem of society and governance. One difficulty facing all efforts to organize a society is how to handle the inherent differences between human beings; in the sense of conflict or competition - their differences in strength. Rome solved it in one way – the strong devour the weak. Oh, to be sure, for the sake of creating a large, complex society, Rome modified this law of nature into a somewhat more “civilized” approach, which we may call utilitarianism. Utilitarianism values the individual according to his usefulness to the society (at least the *hoi poloi*, the elite didn’t have to be useful). Christianity rejected that conception in favor of a radically different one. In the Christian model, an individual is not valued according to his strength or usefulness to society, or by any virtue that can be seen by the eyes of man. His value is determined by an outside observer - his Creator. In His eyes all men have equal value – Roman Senator or Roman slave, or for that matter, foreigners. That changed view of man, a Christian tenet, though never fully realized, precipitated huge changes in law and government that have been the basis of modern western civilization; you might call it the “pivot of civilization”.

Perhaps the exact location of the pivot point around which civilization began to shift towards recognition of the God given value of everyman is to be found in Jesus’ parable of the “Good Samaritan”. This parable, found in the 10th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, was an astonishing departure from the expectations of Jesus’ hearers, and it remains so to this day. Though, again, most of us have some familiarity with the story, let’s refresh our memories with a brief paraphrase. Jesus and a young lawyer were discussing what God wanted of us – to love God with all of our being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, ok. But, “Who is my neighbor?”, asked the lawyer, apparently wishing to cut his love liability to the bare minimum – perhaps just to his own people, upper class

observant Jews. Jesus didn't stumble into that loophole, instead he turned history on its head with the answer, in effect: 'You are the neighbor'. The responsibility for being "neighbor" doesn't rest on the injured or sick, the poor, the stranger, the unlovely and unlikable, even the enemy. In the eyes of God, the responsibility for being a neighbor rests with...me.

I didn't invent the term "pivot of civilization", by the way. That is the title of a 1922 book by the founder of the all-American holocaust factory Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger. Sanger's proto-Nazi screed, that we will take up in a later chapter, advocates the slaughter of the "inferior" and unwanted as "serving the pivotal interest of civilization". Yes, we do hear the creak and groan of our ponderous civilization as it changes direction, not from Sanger's efforts though. Sanger was just another pawn in a carefully laid and patiently executed plan to separate the western Christian world from its Creator. As the light of Jesus fades in our world and darkness begins to cloak us, we begin shifting the burden of being neighbor back onto the other fellow – and we find we can cut out this one and that one, and those; exactly as happened in Nazi Germany. Father Bodelschwingh was right when he told the liberal professor "without the old faith I could not nurse one single epileptic – neither could you".

Whatever the intellectual "Golden Age" of the Greco-Roman world had been, it was long ago swallowed up by the carnality of the Athenians, the Spartans, the Macedonians, and the Romans by the time St. Peter's dusty feet strode Rome's cobblestone streets. The triumph of Christianity testifies to the inability of the Greco-Roman ethic to satisfy the longings of the human soul. Noble Roman Horace lamented, "Me, neither maid nor boy, neither wine nor garland (i.e. trophies of victory), longer delights...." He sought such solace as was to be found in poetry and emperor worship. It seems that spiritual emptiness often leads to worship of the all-powerful state. If someone wishes to find the wellsprings of individual rights and freedom, he must look to the west's Christian heritage, not

the Greek. Hitler, an enemy of individual rights and freedom, realized that, even if most modern “values makers” don’t. Well, I’ve gotten that off my chest. Now we can continue without undue delay when we stumble across those absurd references to pre-Christian golden ages.