

MICHAEL GIFFIN

THE GOD THAT DID NOT FAIL



ROBERT ROYAL'S ACCESSIBLE book *The God That Did Not Fail* is a take on *The God That Failed* (1949), a well-known collection of essays in which six famous men, including Arthur Koestler, tell of how they changed their minds about Marxism, one of the gods that failed during the twentieth century, the others being the gods we made of Darwinism, Nietzscheism and Freudianism. Royal's book is more than a take, though. It also complements the intellectual character of the papacy under Benedict XVI. Anyone interested in understanding the historical relationship between faith and reason—and wanting respite from the way Christianity is portrayed by the media, perceived by popular culture, anathematised by the intelligentsia, and criticised by many Christians themselves—should read it. There are lots of cartoons floating about and many people, including those who fancy themselves deep thinkers, only look at cartoons.

Instead of another cartoon, Royal gives us a readable history of Western ideas from a Christian perspective. Why is this important? Because the cartoons promote the cliché that religion is static while politics is dynamic; as one British commentator puts it: "Whereas religion demands unquestioning submission, the political process offers participation, discussion and lawmaking founded in consent." In idealising democracy, such cartoons tell us religion is a refuge for extremists—not to mention paedophiles—which is why it should be excluded from the public sphere. Many intellectuals would like to dismiss the whole of Christian history as an unfortunate interregnum between the supposed greatness of the classical world and the triumph of modernity. No serious historian today, however, would deny the importance of

Christianity in preserving and developing what survived the collapse of the classical world. Today we are more aware of the roots of the new West in the old West and of the intellectual losses which have occurred in separating the two.

RELIGION

CHAPTER ONE, "GREEK Gifts", notices that many if not most contemporary accounts of Western civilisation give the Greeks a central role as originators of everything we assume distinctive about the West: representational democracy, philosophical speculation, economic efficiency and physical science. This is misleading, since the West didn't begin in Greece even if some aspects of it did. To admire the Greeks because we see in them an earlier version of what we admire about ourselves is simply wrong. Ancient Greece was different from a modern West that thinks of itself as rational, and, over the last two centuries, Greek reason has been overemphasised while Greek religion has been underemphasised. At the same time, there's been a tendency to pit Greek reason against Jewish revelation, but this dichotomy is false, as is the fashionable scholarship that sees ancient Greece as a prototype of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The notion that the Greeks pursued reason to the exclusion of religion is a myopia bequeathed by generations of classicists who weren't interested in religion and therefore assumed the Greeks weren't either. Royal describes how religion permeated Greek life not only in personal devotion to the gods but in a comprehensive set of social, civic and cultural practices, from life in the family, through local and regional groups, to the *polis* as a whole. Greek drama treated religious themes, combining elements of a modern play, grand opera and solemn high mass. Greek temples weren't anything like the pristine white monuments to democracy we see in Washington; they were places of worship, decorated with masses of bright colour, and there was lots of blood, burning fat, smoke and ashes. Greek athletics honoured

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the gods, not with our notions of good sportsmanship or honourable competition, though, since the ancient Olympics were darker, rougher and more brutal than their modern counterpart, centring on individual glory—victory or death—in the absence of an afterlife. Royal provides descriptions of Greek religion and culture in the Homeric age, the time of the farmer-poet Hesiod, the Ionian scientific revolution, the age of the dramatists, and the philosophical flowering.

What lessons does Royal want us to draw from his brief reflections on the religious dimension of ancient Greece? Perhaps the most important is balance and comprehensiveness. We rightly prize the unique rational developments within Greek culture, even though these don't have the direct connection to modern rationality that's often suggested. But we also need to learn the lesson our ancestors once learned. As different as Greek culture was from the world figured in the Bible, they had similarities and there were significant gains in their dynamic interaction.

CHAPTER TWO, "ROMA Aeterna", reminds us that the Romans didn't claim to be great artists, or skilled in philosophy or courtroom oratory, and they added little to the development of science. They were pre-eminent in one area, though: they knew how to rule over human beings. But the model of rule the West has inherited from the Romans was far from totalitarian or Eurocentric. The model was unique in its need to look outside itself for its multiple cultural roots. Aspects of this uniqueness can be seen in the *Aeneid* where Virgil allows Jupiter, the Roman Zeus, to promise Augustus an "*imperium* without end", the permanence of which was a radical departure from the traditional cyclical view of virtue-vice-virtue or birth-death-rebirth. This new Roman vision of linear progress heading in a providential direction was profoundly religious, although it would only be with the coming of Christianity—and its Jewish notion of history having a beginning and an end—that this passage of linear time would take on a cosmic meaning.

Large philosophical and religious developments lay behind Rome in Virgil's time. The Romans went to school among the Greek philosophers and absorbed various religious currents within their new empire. They were exposed to Stoicism, Neo-Platonism and Epicureanism. They were exposed to Judaism, Mithraism and, a little later, Christianity. While the Romans had grown great worshipping their traditional gods and emphasising practical virtues like courage and patriotism, they accommodated other beliefs as long as these had a practical dimension, not unrelated to political affairs, and a salvific quality. The principal threat came from Epicureanism, which didn't allow its pupils to argue dialectically or raise objections. As the pupil became more

dependent on the text and doctrines of his Epicurean master, he became less adept at reasoning for himself. Even in antiquity, it was noticed that individuals who fell into this system spent a long time at it, much like modern individuals in psychoanalysis, with which Epicureanism has more than a few points of similarity.

What lesson does Royal want us to draw from his brief reading of Roman religious history? We are encouraged to think more deeply about the religious aspect of Rome's contribution to the shape of the West. Most histories repeat the truism that the Roman empire provided models of law and administration for subsequent ages. This is true, as far as it goes, which isn't far. We have yet to make a true measure of the empire's theoretical aspirations and practical benefits, admittedly paid for by the sufferings of the peoples Rome conquered.

CHAPTER THREE, "THE Bible and Its Worlds", suggests that most people, including many monotheists, fail to appreciate how unusual and radical the large claims the Bible makes about salvation history were in their time; so much so that we should approach the Bible as if it were the sacred text of a strange and foreign group of tribes rather than the central and familiar spiritual influence of our civilisation. Other ancient peoples, including Greeks and Romans, scoffed at the absurd assertion that Abraham, an unknown man from a backwater, was chosen to fulfil a divine purpose which led to monotheism. Virgil made large claims for Rome but he at least could point to several centuries of continuous growth in Roman power and influence. His large claims may have been influenced by the Bible, too, as a man like him—curious about religions, intuitive about the possibility of true meaning and direction in history—is likely to have read the Septuagint, the earliest Greek version of the Bible, translated by seventy Jewish scholars at the command of Ptolemy II in the third century BC.

The Jewish account of creation used to be classified with the creation stories of other cultures around the world. Only recently have we begun to see its uniqueness and how it supports modern science. The first thirty-five verses of Genesis represent hundreds of years of sophisticated reflection. They simply bypass all other creation stories and posit a very different kind of being at the beginning of all things; and, although creation is good—because its creator is good and can only do good—it isn't to be worshipped above its creator. Where the Greeks introduced the concept of "nature" the Jews spoke of "heaven and earth". The difference seems small but reflects two kinds of genius: the Greeks with their stunning ability for abstract conceptualisation; the Jews with their capacity to express the most breathtaking notions in concrete terms. Radically different, also, was the idea that the creator loved what he created, and the

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idea that what he created could love him back. Aristotle, on the other hand, offered the considered opinion that love between humankind and Zeus was impossible.

Jewish and Greek notions eventually flowed into one another; centuries of exposure meant Judaism could use Greek philosophical ideas for its own purpose. Jewish groups of various kinds made use of ideas such as body and soul but for different ends than the philosophers intended. Philo of Alexandria made use of the Greek tendency to treat stories of the gods as allegories, when interpreting certain biblical stories, but in ways that retained the Jewish notion of history and what we now refer to as the literal meaning of the text. Where Jews remained unique was in choosing to die for their theological principles, something few ancient peoples ever did. While some thought, and still think, this kind of fidelity is fanatical, something new was entering the Western orbit: the principle that religious truths are important in a way not thought previously in the relatively low-key and non-theological devotions of the Greeks and Romans. Socrates may have been a martyr for truth but he wasn't a martyr for faith. That distinction is important.

CHAPTER FOUR, "CHRISTIAN Paradoxes", describes how Western attitudes about Christianity tend to focus on one of two storylines. In the first, dominant among elites, Christianity is viewed as a series of problems, outrages against reason, and outright evils, which need to be contained within secular political forms, like an antihuman cancer to be excised for human health. In the second—less familiar and poorly argued—Christianity is viewed as a force for good. It became the only counterforce to the state during in the breakup of the Roman empire. It preserved what it could from the wreck of the classical order and the chaos of the new barbarian kingdoms. It rebuilt and conserved, farmed and developed early industries, taught and healed, contributed to intellectual life, and, above all, practised and idealised the kind of charity absent in the classical world. From the latter perspective, the inevitable problems that arose over time weren't the central element of Christianity but were sinful deviations from a remarkable historical achievement.

Judaism's vigorous dialogue with Greek thought diminished after Philo's death, as the destruction of Palestine drove the Jews into a more defensive position. Paul was familiar with Greek philosophy but didn't engage with the metaphysical systems of the various philosophical schools. That process began with John who, in the Fourth Gospel, identified Christ with the Logos of Neo-Platonism; an even bolder move than Philo made when allegorising and reconceptualising Jewish tradition. So, by the time the Jewish dialogue with the Greek world was handed on to the Church Fathers, Christians

were already in a position to argue with pagan philosophers if they could avoid being murdered. Persecutions were sporadic but real and depended on the character of whichever emperor ruled at the time. Early Roman reactions scorned Christian beliefs but didn't seek to stamp them out; however, as Christianity spread and started to rival the cults of the gods, later Romans saw it as a danger to social cohesion and public order.

Christians were criticised for their foolish beliefs but were still admired for their capacity for charity, even towards pagans, and for instilling virtue. The Romans eventually fostered Christianity once its explosive growth rendered old pagan ways impractical and Christian populations became too large to eliminate. Also, contrary to what some feminists assert, Christianity improved the status of women in the ancient world. While Roman women weren't as sequestered as Greek women had been, they didn't enjoy anything like the respect they gained with the arrival of Christianity. To begin with, their biological survival increased, since the practice of exposing infants at birth hit girls harder than boys, and abortions in antiquity killed a percentage of adult women. Apart from biological survival, there were other reasons women preferred Christianity to other systems. Women in classical society had difficulty exercising any influence. By contrast, women were numbered among the prominent followers of Jesus and exercised important pastoral and administrative responsibilities in the churches founded around the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER FIVE, "MEDIEVAL Highs and Lows", argues that the central values of Western civilisation came together for the first time during the Middle Ages. Had churchmen and monarchs not fostered the beginning of a common Christian culture, it would probably not have been possible to stop the advance of Islam. Muslim armies crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 and conquered most of the Iberian peninsula. Charles Martel, Charlemagne's grandfather, halted their advance in the Battle of Tours in 732, and was even able to push Islamic forces back from southern France for good. The West exists today only because of the drama of secular and religious developments that made the victory at Tours possible.

It's wrong to idealise or romanticise this drama, or to deny that part of its legacy is a troubling and recurring problem. Charlemagne was the first leader to use Christianity for conquest and control, and his military campaigns could be brutal. But there was a positive aspect too. He was counselled, if not constrained, by the learned Christians he brought together to achieve his goal of an *imperium christianum* similar to the Roman ideal of a combined regime of earthly justice and divine approval. One result was a renewed interest in literacy

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for the clergy, so they could provide free schooling for children, and a kind of universal primary education. The empire that began with him never attained stable jurisdiction over Western Europe, which was providential in several ways, otherwise the West might have settled into a static sacred order of the Oriental or Byzantine type. Instead, the instability of the West forced church and state into constant and dynamic negotiations.

The most common charge against the Middle Ages is that it ignored or suppressed science for religious reasons. Since we identify Western culture so strongly with science and technology, the charge is essentially a statement that the Medieval period wasn't really Western. But it would be fairer to say Christian thinkers welcomed and pursued learning as well as they could under the circumstances, and for good theological reasons. Aquinas said: "Mistakes about creatures lead to mistaken knowledge about God." Berengar said: "It is part of courage to have recourse to dialectic in all things, for recourse to dialectic is recourse to reason, and he who does not avail himself of reason abandons his chief honour, since by virtue of reason he was made in the image of God." Lanfranc said: "Dialectic is no enemy to the mysteries of God, rather it confirms them, if rightly used; when the matter demands it." Western Christians started at a double disadvantage, though, since the Romans weren't skilled in the sciences and, after Rome fell, the Latins lost the few opportunities they had for direct study of Greek science. They had to wait until the relatively stable period after 1000 AD and circumstances that allowed them to take advantage of the superior scientific learning of the Muslims, which would within a short time so deeply influence the medieval universities.

CHAPTER SIX, "RENAISSANCES and Reforms", reaffirms an important development in twentieth-century studies of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: the discovery of the continuities between the two periods in an attempt to better formulate their true differences. To begin with, the earlier notion that the former was an anti-humanist period of faith and the latter was a humanist age of reason is simply wrong, since there was a strong dialectic of faith and reason in both periods. It needs to be repeated, over and over again, that humanism began within Christianity and isn't antithetical to Christianity. To see this dialectic within Christian humanism, it's worth looking closely at four frescoes by Raphael—*The School of Athens*, *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*, *The Cardinal and Theological Virtues* and *The Parnassus*—in dialogue within their Vatican apartment. The prominent thinkers of the Middle Ages were inclined to rely on strict logic and reason, though, and to a greater degree than most people can bear, which is why both Catholics of the

Renaissance and Protestants of the Reformation felt a need to emphasise the practical and the personal in their work and in their efforts at educational reform.

The Renaissance was also a period of global discovery. In recent years, critics have reversed the old secular admiration for explorers such as Columbus and, with equal inaccuracy, portrayed them and the cultures they represent as responsible for the modern cultural dominance of Europe and every subsequent world evil: colonialism, slavery, imperialism, environmental damage and religious bigotry. While there's some truth in these charges, to equate single individuals, or a complex entity like a culture, with what are currently judged to be the negative dimensions of an interconnected human world is to do an injustice to individuals, peoples and ideas. Europeans didn't have a uniformly negative view towards the new peoples they encountered. The myth of the "noble savage" predates Rousseau and had a rich career in the hands of Thomas More, Montaigne and Shakespeare, and still flourishes in intellectual backwaters. Actual contact with new cultures introduced complexity into the initial situation, since the noble savages often displayed much savagery and little nobility.

The motto *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (A church always in need of reform) is an old Catholic notion which some Protestants now apply to themselves as *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (The reformed church always needs reforming). It's worth noticing, especially now when Westerners often say—without much reflection—that the Islamic world needs reformation, how the Reformation wasn't a movement for religious tolerance, a licence for private interpretation of the Bible, an assertion of individualism or conscience, or a promotion of free markets and religious or political liberty. Some of these things eventuated but only after martyrdom, warfare and massacres perpetrated by Catholic against Protestant, Protestant against Catholic, Catholic against Catholic, and Protestant against Protestant. Similarly, the Counter-Reformation is misunderstood. It's generally assumed Catholicism retreated into a reactionary stance, in response to the challenges of the Reformation—and Protestant countries flourished while Catholic countries declined—but this isn't true since there were already potent intellectual, spiritual and reform movements in Catholic nations prior to the Reformation.

CHAPTER SEVEN, "ENLIGHTENMENTS, Revolutions, Reactions", points out that historians have tended to idealise the French Revolution, and either downplayed its atrocities against religious believers or separated them from the initial revolutionary impulse by locating them within the Reign of Terror. But the idealisation, downplaying and separation were all morally culpable. As one recent

historian notes, the Terror was merely the Revolution with a higher body count. While many elements went into the massacres of the innocents, what happened was essentially the cult of reason gone insane. It's not easy to form a balanced or fair judgment of the Enlightenment, though, since it took several forms during the eighteenth century: revolutionary and radical (France), moderate and sceptical (Britain), and, for want of a better word, organic (United States). Social context was important. The Anglosphere obviously absorbed new influences of science and new forms of reason with more calm and less anti-religious furore than the Continent.

But this also oversimplifies. Recent historians have argued that the period we call the Enlightenment was richer and more diverse than once thought. On the religious question in particular, there has been too much emphasis on intellectuals, rationalists and deists as the driving force behind practices much valued by the contemporary world such as tolerance. Yet it seems tolerance emerged in many places from common practice, and intellectuals reflected rather than inspired more pluralistic social arrangements. The tolerant practices that began in the eighteenth century, where they occurred, may best be described as arising from the day-to-day behaviour of various Christians—often acting to thwart one another in political groups competing for power within states still committed to an official religion, but occasionally recognising the general benefits of mutual toleration—rather than from an abstract intellectual program.

After their respective revolutions, the English and the Americans went on to a relatively tranquil existence in which religion and politics found a reasonable mutual tolerance. France didn't because its Enlightenment was driven by an anti-Semitic contempt for revelation and it went through several more decades of turmoil as it tried to solve the problem of religion and social order. Its final solution begs many questions to this day, not least whether it's possible to simply sterilise the public square of religious influence while congratulating oneself on tolerance for private religious observance. The French experience reminds us of the question asked by Thomas Jefferson: Can the liberties of a nation survive if they are not rooted in God?

CHAPTER EIGHT, "CIVILIZATION, Culture, and Their Discontents", lists the ways in which, since the French Revolution, the West has embraced a religion of liberty, which has sometimes clashed with revealed religion, and sometimes persecuted the church. Yet the religion of liberty

has also drawn on renewed energies within revealed religion, some of which are an integral part of the populism and nationalism that emerged in the nineteenth century. The well-known and unprecedented progress of the nineteenth century—which included the emergence of popular governments, economic growth, industrialisation, the extension of transport, global trade and urbanisation—ushered in a new West, different from the old West, promising a boundless future. With the benefit of hindsight, the narrative of unbounded progress proved to be an illusion.

In historical writing about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, movements like socialism, capitalism, liberalism, rationalism, scientism, Marxism, Nazism and other -isms bulk large. These all deserve attention

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because their secularising faith occupies spaces formerly reserved for revealed religions. Even when revealed religions have offered plausible explanations for their beliefs in modern conditions, there's still no getting away from the fact that they now operate in a matrix of other truths which are sometimes neutral and aggressive towards the spiritual. Yet revealed religion has purified itself by its separation from fields in which it has no special competence and focused on some fundamental problems. Material progress and political reform may satisfy human nature, as significant numbers of people in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries came to believe, but quintessential human things are in danger, or are simply lost, without some revealed religious beliefs that go beyond material progress and political reform.

The institution that appeared most wedded to the *anciens régimes*, Catholicism, has undergone a transformation. The church had been in a vulnerable position *vis-à-vis* secular rulers at least since Constantine. Over the centuries, it was at times allied with and at other times opposed to secular power, in an attempt to preserve spiritual independence, to the annoyance of kings and democrats alike. The shake-up of the secular order in the nineteenth century forced the church into a fuller understanding of itself as a different kind of power: as the purely moral influence it was to become in the twentieth century. While popes such as Gregory XVI and Pius IX abhorred modernity, other popes such as Leo XIII sought a renewal of Catholic thought and prepared the way for further developments towards a theory of Christian democracy. By the end of his pontificate, the old antagonism between faith and freedom seemed to be shifting into something different even in Catholicism. But this was occurring alongside a darker *fin-de-siècle* mood about the direction civilisation was heading, most

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pessimistically expressed in Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.

CHAPTER NINE, "The God That Did Not Fail", reminds us that the god we made of Marxism failed, although Marx expected that as communism spread it would be the church which withered like a plant when its roots were cut. And communism did hack at its roots. By most credible estimates, communist countries killed about 100 million people during the twentieth century, several million of whom died during religious persecutions. The big mystery remains why, at the time, most people in the West didn't know—or didn't want to know—about these anti-religious persecutions. Even *The Black Book of Communism* (1999)—an attempt by French scholars to right historical wrongs by chronicling the human rights abuses of communists—is virtually blind to communist violations of religious rights. This blindness has a lot to do with the prevailing leftist sympathy among non-believing Western intellectuals.

The god we made of Freudianism failed. Social conditions have changed; people are now less exposed to authoritarian father figures and strict sexual mores than they were. There are also scientific reasons. Drugs and cognitive therapies have been more successful in eliminating suffering. Freudianism hasn't fared any better than other theories of personality in curing neuroses—a clinical fact that undermines its scientific status—even when the "talking cure" goes on for years. More seriously, Freud is charged with prompting false recovered memories of early sexual experiences. In the end, though, it may simply be that we have come to see Freud's materialist theory of the person and the world as too narrow an approach to the fullness of human existence.

The god we made of Nietzscheism failed. In his book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche declared God to be dead, but, because of the ways of men, his shadow will be shown in caves for thousands of years, so we still have to vanquish his shadow. Although his work is self-contradictory, Nietzsche remains curiously influential in the West, not least because of his energetic efforts to provide an alternative to the "irresistible decline of faith in the Christian God". But the decline of Christianity hasn't occurred and faith is increasing. Although church attendance in Western Europe has declined, there's a tendency there towards "believing without belonging", and the materialists of Eastern Europe have failed in their attempt to destroy revealed religion. The United States will continue to be Christian, and more traditionally so, whether Protestant or Catholic, in spite of some American churches promoting the Western secular liberal agenda. Of which, all over the West, there's an urgent need to understand the new global reality of non-

Western Christians, who are now the majority of believers. They've never been exposed to the Enlightenment and don't think like those who have.

It seems fitting to end this review of Royal's book with a welcome speech given by the Anglican Bishop Robert Forsyth to mark Benedict XVI's first visit to Australia in July 2008. He was representing the Primate of Australia and the Archbishop of Sydney:

Your Holiness,

It is a great honour, as Anglican Bishop of South Sydney, to speak to you on behalf of all these gathered Christian leaders. In approaching this meeting, I cannot but be aware that there are and remain very great and significant differences between us; differences which still matter today: including, if I may say so, even your very office. However, this should not be the first word that we say together: or the last. I have been helped by a recent authoritative interpretation of your theological thought which summarised your approach to ecumenism in the following words: "it does not mean concealing truth so as not to displease others; full truth is part of full love; rather it must mean that Catholics cease to see other Christians as mere adversaries against whom they must defend themselves; they must recognise fellow Christians as brothers." And therefore, Sir, following your own example, I gladly greet you as a fellow Christian brother. I would like to go much further than that and say that we welcome in many areas the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. On many issues I have described the Roman Church as a rock in the rapids that has actually helped the rest. Were it not for Rome's strong insistence upon Christ as the only Saviour of the world, upon the Catholic faith, the nature of the Triune God, the divinity of Christ, the importance of sacred Scripture, and of the objectivity of Christian morality, then the life of other Christian churches would have been so much more difficult, certainly for us here in the West. Now, your Holiness has expressed a desire, in what you have declared to be this Pauline Year, for progress towards Christian unity. I pray that there might be progress as we grow together in truth and love. It may turn out that full Christian unity will only occur on that day when we will know fully even as we have been fully known, when we no longer see dimly as in a mirror but face to face. As you know, on that day, of the three things that will survive, the greatest is love, and so it is with love, Sir, that we welcome you today.

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