

FROM THE MAGAZINE

## Can We Believe?

A personal reflection on why we shouldn't abandon the faith that has nourished Western civilization

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The West is falling. Quietly, politically, without a violent upheaval, the Islamists are taking control of France. A dissolute literature professor named François retires to a monastery near Poitiers, the place where Charles Martel stopped the last advance of Islam in 732. A man at once mesmerized and dejected by the sensual pleasures of cultural decadence, François is seeking to reconnect with the Christian religion that formed the great French culture of the past.

But faith in that religion will not come to him. "I no longer knew the meaning of my presence in this place," he says of the monastery. "For a moment, it would appear to me, weakly, then just as soon it would disappear." He leaves the monastery, ready to convert to Islam and submit to the new order.

"I'd be given another chance; and it would be the chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one," he says. "I would have nothing to mourn."

This sequence from Michel Houellebecq's controversial 2015 novel *Submission* is a near-perfect fictional representation of a phenomenon I've

noticed in many intellectuals since the latest rise of radical Islam. These thinkers see the great days of the West ending, while a violent, intolerant form of Islam infests its ruins. They believe that Europe has lost the will to live and that the loss is linked to a loss of faith in Christianity. But while they yearn to see the West revived—and while they may even support Christianity as a social good or a metaphorical vehicle for truth—they cannot themselves believe.

By chance, Houellebecq's novel was published on the very day of the Islamist massacre of workers at the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, as this essay is being published shortly after the slaughter of peaceful Muslims by a white supremacist in New Zealand. But such upsurges of hateful violence should not be allowed to silence the underlying debate among people of goodwill.

**W**hy *We Should Call Ourselves Christians*, a 2008 book by Italian philosopher and politician Marcello Pera, is the clearest example of the phenomenon I'm describing. Written in response to 9/11, it depicts a Europe paralyzed by self-hating lassitude, willing to pay homage to any culture but its own. "The West today is undergoing a profound moral and spiritual crisis, due to a loss of faith in its own worth, exacerbated by the apostasy of Christianity now rife within Western culture," Pera writes. He makes clear that by Christianity, he means the entire Judeo-Christian tradition, and he goes on to say, "Without faith in the equality, dignity, liberty, and responsibility of all men—that is to say, without a religion of man as the son and image of God—liberalism cannot defend the fundamental and universal rights of human beings or hope that human beings can coexist in a liberal society. Basic human rights must be seen as a gift of God . . . and hence pre-political and non-negotiable."

This sounds like the *cri de coeur* of a passionate believer, the sort of thing we used to hear from Europhile Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote the essay's introduction. But not so. The book's title gives the game away. Pera could have called it *Why We Should Be Christians*. But he is an atheist. He accepts Immanuel Kant's famous argument that God is necessary to the existence of morality. But from this, he reasons not that we must have faith but that

“we must live . . . as if God existed.”

Urgently needed as Christianity may be, he cannot believe.

In 2017's *The Strange Death of Europe*, Douglas Murray finds the death spiral of Islamist aggression and Western self-hatred still more advanced.

Witness, just for one example, the “grooming” gangs of men of Pakistani, Iranian, Turkish, and other Muslim-immigrant backgrounds, which abused thousands of local girls in Rotherham and elsewhere while authorities turned a blind eye, for fear of being called racist. Like Pera, Murray understands that the loss of Christian faith is a powerful contributor to “the problem in Europe of an existential tiredness and a feeling that perhaps for Europe the story has run out and a new story must be allowed to begin.”

“Unless the non-religious are able to work with, rather than against, the source from which their culture came, it is hard to see any way through,” Murray writes. “After all, though people may try, it is unlikely that anyone is going to be able to invent an entirely new set of beliefs.” But Murray, too, is a nonbeliever, as he told me explicitly during a conversation on my podcast. Again, he knows that faith is needed, but he cannot believe.

Psychologist Jordan Peterson has become a popular sensation by riding the horns of this dilemma. His videos, speeches, and best-selling self-help book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* all argue for imbuing life with the meaning and morality that Kant maintained must be logically attached to the existence of God. But when it comes to declaring his actual beliefs, he is evasive. “I act as if God exists,” he says in one video, echoing Pera. “Now you can decide for yourself whether that means that I believe in Him.”

If I must decide for myself, I think that Peterson is a Jungian. Beneath his abstruse verbiage, the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung essentially reimaged spirituality as an emanation of the deepest truths of human experience. “We cannot tell,” he wrote, “whether God and the unconscious are two different entities.” In practice, this means that the Jungian god is ultimately

a metaphor, a means of externalizing our collective unconscious and its “archetype of wholeness.” No amount of evasive verbalization can disguise the weakness of a metaphorical god. He is the signifier of human meaning as opposed to a living objective Presence who is the source of that meaning.

So even while attempting to address the Western crisis of will brought on by our loss of faith, Peterson, too, I suspect, cannot truly believe.

**W**hat stands between these minds and faith? Peterson, for one, rebels against the question “Do you believe in God?” because, he says, “It’s an attempt to box me in. . . . The question is asked so that I can be firmly placed on one side of a binary argument.”

But this strikes me as unsound. All statements of belief box a thinker in. If the world is round, it cannot also be flat. And if there is objective morality and meaning in that world, it must have an ultimate objective source. To live “as if there were a God” is essentially to insist on the conclusions of a syllogism the premises of which you reject. Pera and Peterson notwithstanding, this makes no sense, and arguments that make no sense eventually collapse.

Murray’s objection to faith, however, is more coherent. He believes that science and historical criticism have done “most likely irreversible damage . . . to the literal-truth claims of religion.” If he is right, it makes no difference whether faith is required; faith is impossible. You can’t ask a society to pretend to believe in what isn’t so.

But is Murray right? Have science and criticism truly undermined Christianity? Or is it simply that disbelief has become the intellectual’s default conviction? It seems highly possible that faith is being thwarted by a powerful social narrative that insists that Christianity can’t thrive in the modern world as we know it.

This narrative—let’s call it the Enlightenment Narrative—has been with us

now for centuries. It goes something like this: the fall of Rome in the fifth century plunged the West from Classical civilization into cultural darkness. For the next 1,000 years, the Church encouraged superstition, stifled intellectual freedom, and repressed scientific inquiry. With the Renaissance of Classical learning, reason was set free, science was discovered, and faith was left behind as we marched into a world of wonders.

The Enlightenment Narrative had its beginnings as a sort of humanist propaganda campaign. Terms like Dark Ages and Middle Ages were created at the dawn of the Renaissance (a loaded term in itself). They were meant to solidify the new generation's self-congratulatory idea that they had relit the fire of knowledge after a dark "middle" period.

The campaign worked. The Enlightenment Narrative has dominated the Western mind. It is the context in which Don Quixote went mad trying to imitate old chivalric values out of keeping with the new reality. It is why Shakespeare imagined a Hamlet stranded without certainty in the sudden absence of clear moral truth. It is why Hegel declared that "trust in the eternal laws . . . has vanished" and Nietzsche proclaimed that "God is dead." And while many mighty minds—such as Coleridge, Dostoyevsky, C. S. Lewis, and Pope Benedict XVI—have protested that no, even in the enlightened world, God still lives, the prevailing sense among thinking elites was expressed by Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach": the Sea of Faith, once at full tide, is inexorably receding with a "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar."

The latest proclaimers of this narrative reject even the melancholy. Their vision stands in direct opposition to the morbid predictions of observers like Houellebecq, Pera, and Murray. For them, the West and the world are doing great—better than ever—and the death of Christianity is a big part of the reason.

Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* makes this case with gusto. These are the best of times, he says. We live, quite suddenly, in a world of "newborns

who will live more than eight decades, markets overflowing with food, clean water that appears with a flick of a finger and waste that disappears with another, pills that erase a painful infection, sons who are not sent off to war, daughters who can walk the streets in safety, critics of the powerful who are not jailed or shot, the world's knowledge and culture available in a shirt pocket." Reason and science—which "led most of the Enlightenment thinkers to repudiate a belief in an anthropomorphic God who took an interest in human affairs"—are not the cause of our dissolution but the founders of our feast.

Indeed, Pinker believes that reports of the death of Western civilization are greatly exaggerated. He dismisses such pessimism as a fashionable intellectual pose fueled by negative biases in human cognition. "The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being," he argues, and that progress is likely to continue as long as we live out the Enlightenment Narrative and leave religion behind.



**Rembrandt's 1659 rendering of Moses with the Ten Commandments (GRANGER / GRANGER – ALL RIGHTS RESERVED)**

**Rembrandt's 1659 rendering of Moses with the Ten Commandments (GRANGER / GRANGER – ALL RIGHTS RESERVED)**

Pinker's optimism is appealing but not entirely convincing. I have questions about his assessment of the present. Is increasingly atheistic Europe—especially Scandinavia—really the “gold standard” of happiness, peace, and human rights, as he maintains? Or is it, rather, a moribund client culture, wholly dependent on the military might, scientific inventiveness, and financial strength of the far more religious United States? Without the Bible-thumping U.S., wouldn't enlightened Europe quickly find itself overrun, at least geopolitically, by Russian or Chinese authoritarians? The way pessimists like Murray see it, it is being overrun right now in a more literal sense, by a slow-motion Islamist invasion, which could end with our enlightened optimists silenced mid-hurrah.

As for the future: all throughout the triumphant strains of *Enlightenment Now*, I kept thinking of Rudyard Kipling's poem “Recessional,” written for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. At that moment in 1897, England specifically, and Europe in general, were, like the West today, celebrating cultural and scientific achievements unmatched in the history of humankind. And yet Kipling, no devout believer himself, marked the occasion by warning his countrymen against atheistic pride, praying:

Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

Lest we forget that not all intellectual misgivings are as baseless as Pinker says, just 17 years after the poem was penned, Europe was engulfed in the three-decade cataclysm of world war that brought its cultural dominance to an end—war brought on by the anti-Christian philosophy of Nazism and followed by an era of unimaginable mass murders in the name of the atheistic philosophy of Communism.

Pinker comes across as liberal in the best sense of the word. But there are hints in his philosophy that Pera is correct and that human rights need something more than Pinker's hyper-rationalism to sustain them. *Enlightenment Now's* materialistic defense of democracy is weak. Overall and over time, freedom can make us happy and rich, it's true. But what if,

for a while, it doesn't? What if it needs to be defended through war or economic collapse? Once the sacred status of liberty is lost, will mothers send their sons to die for a generally upward trend on a statistical graph?

Then there's Pinker's frequent praise for "moral realist" philosopher Peter Singer, whose utilitarian defense of infanticidal euthanasia is both poorly reasoned and morally barbaric. The ugly truth is that we can live quite happily in a world of scientific miracles even as we transform ourselves into moral monsters.

**B**ut for a glimpse of how the Enlightenment Narrative's embrace of pure reason can undermine the very foundations of the Western civilization that created it, you have to turn to Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari's bestseller *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Though full of quirky insights and fascinating information, it is a textbook example of how materialistic logic can lead to philosophical pathology.

Harari's central contention is that the "ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature of Sapiens language." He goes on to say that "fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively," by creating what he calls an "inter-subjective reality," or "inter-subjective order existing in the shared imagination of . . . millions of people" and thus allowing them to work together in ways other animals can't. "Inter-subjective phenomena are neither malevolent frauds nor insignificant charades," he writes. "They exist in a different way from physical phenomena such as radioactivity, but their impact on the world may still be enormous."

Among the fictions that create these intersubjective phenomena are religion, nationhood, money, law, and human rights. "None of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings."

Here is an area where I can speak with some expertise. I am a lifelong

maker of fiction, and I am here to tell you that this is not what fiction is; this is not how fiction works. Good fiction does not create phenomena; it describes them. Like all art, fiction is a language for communicating a type of reality that can't be communicated in any other way: the interplay of human consciousness with itself and the world. That experience can be delusional, as when we hear voices, mistake infatuation for love, or convince ourselves that slavery is moral. But the very fact that it can be delusional points to the fact that it can be healthy and accurate as well. When it is healthy, the "common imagination of human beings" can be regarded as an organ of perception, like the eye. Fiction merely describes the world of morality and meaning that that organ perceives.

Because Harari does not believe that this world of moral meaning exists, he thinks that it is created by the fiction, rather than the other way around. For example, he refers to women as sapiens "possessing wombs" and declares that only "the myths of her society assign her unique feminine roles," such as raising children. No one who has ever met a woman outside the planet Vulcan can imagine this to be the actual case. Harari himself speaks quite tenderly of the maternal feelings of sheep. What myths have the rams been telling the ewes? Different male and female roles are a human universal because womanhood is a complete inner reality. Myths describe it truly or falsely; they don't make it what it is.

Harari can imagine the "complex emotional worlds" of cows. He believes that the existence of these worlds creates an obligation in us to treat cows more kindly than we currently do. Fair enough. But why, then, can he not deduce the reality of human rights, natural law, economic value, and femininity from the far more complex inner experience of humans? "Human rights are a fictional story just like God and heaven," he told an interviewer. "They are not a biological reality. Biologically speaking, humans don't have rights."

This language may not necessarily be malign. It may not suggest that Harari has no visceral respect for human rights. But it does not inspire confidence in his ultimate commitment to those rights, either. It is not exactly "Give me liberty or give me death!" In fact, Harari has argued that

increasing information may require increasing centralization of power, the old progressive canard that the world has become too complex for individual freedom and must now be run by experts. This sort of thing makes one suspicious that Harari and other reason-worshipping thinkers are living justifications for Marcello Pera's fears that freedom cannot defend itself without specifically Judeo-Christian faith.

It is the Enlightenment Narrative that creates this worship of reason, not reason itself. In fact, most of the scientific arguments against the existence of God are circular and self-proving. They pit advanced scientific thinkers against simple, literalist religious believers. They dismiss error and mischief committed in the name of science—the Holocaust, atom bombs, climate change—but amberize error and mischief committed in the name of faith—"the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch hunts, the European wars of religion," as Pinker has it.

By assuming that the spiritual realm is a fantasy, they irrationally dismiss our experience of it. Our brains perceive the smell of coffee, yet no one argues that coffee isn't real. But when the same brain perceives the immaterial—morality, the self, or God—it is presumed to be spinning fantasies. Coming from those who worship reason, this is lousy reasoning.

**T**he point of this essay is not to argue the truth of Christianity. I argue only this: the modern intellectual's difficulty in believing is largely an effect created by the overwhelming dominance of the Enlightenment Narrative, and that narrative is simplistic and incomplete.

Did we, for example, escape Christianity into science? From Roger Bacon to Galileo to Newton, the men who sparked the scientific revolution were all believing Christians. Doesn't this make it seem plausible that—despite the church's occasional interference—modern science was actually an outgrowth of Christian thought?

And is science still moving away from that Christian outlook, or has its trajectory begun to change? It may have once seemed reasonable to assume

that the clockwork world uncovered by Isaac Newton would inexorably lead us to atheism, but those clockwork certainties have themselves dissolved as science advanced. Quantum physics has raised mind-boggling questions about the role of consciousness in the creation of reality. And the virtual impossibility of an accidental universe precisely fine-tuned to the maintenance of life has scientists scrambling for “reasonable” explanations.

Like Pinker, some try to explain these mysteries away. For example, they’ve concocted a wholly unprovable theory that we are in a multiverse. There are infinite universes, they say, and this one just happens to be the one that acts as if it were spoken into being by a gigantic invisible Jew! Others bruit about the idea that we live in a computer simulation—a tacit admission of faith, though it may be faith in a god who looks like the nerd you beat up in high school.

In any case, scientists used to accuse religious people of inventing a “God of the Gaps”—that is, using religion to explain away what science had not yet uncovered. But multiverses and simulations seem very much like a Science of the Gaps, jerry-rigged nothings designed to circumvent the simplest explanation for the reality we know.

**P**inker credits Kant with naming the Enlightenment Age, but ironically, it is Kant who provided a plausible foundation for the faith that he believed was the only guarantor of morality. His *Critique of Pure Reason* proposed an update of Plato’s form theory, suggesting that the phenomenal world we see and understand is but the emanation of a noumenal world of things-as-they-are, an immaterial plane we cannot fully know.

In this scenario, we can think of all material being as a sort of language that imperfectly expresses an idea. Every aspect of language is physical: the brain sparks, the tongue speaks, the air is stirred, the ear hears. But the idea expressed by that language has no physical existence whatsoever. It simply is. And whether the idea is “two plus two equal four” or “I love you” or “slavery is wrong,” it is true or false, regardless of whether we perceive the truth or falsehood of it.

This, as I see it, is the very essence of Christianity. It is the religion of the Word. For Christians, the model, of course, is Jesus, the perfect Word that is the thing itself. But each of us is made in that image, continually expressing in flesh some aspect of the maker's mind. This is why Jesus speaks in parables—not just to communicate their meaning but also to assert the validity of their mechanism. In the act of understanding a parable, we are forced to acknowledge that physical interactions—the welcoming home of a prodigal son, say—speak to us about immaterial things like love and forgiveness.

To acknowledge that our lives are parables for spiritual truths may entail a belief in the extraordinary, but it is how we all live, whether we confess that belief or not. We all know that the words “two plus two” express the human version of a truth both immaterial and universal. We likewise know that we are not just flesh-bags of chemicals but that our bodies imperfectly express the idea of ourselves. We know that whether we strangle a child or give a beggar bread, we take physical actions that convey moral meaning. We know that this morality does not change when we don't perceive it. In ancient civilizations, where everyone, including slaves, considered slavery moral, it was immoral still. They simply hadn't discovered that truth yet, just as they hadn't figured out how to make an automobile, though all the materials and principles were there.

We live in this world of morality and meaning—right up until the moment it causes us pain or guilt or shame or gets in the way of our ambitions or happiness. Then, suddenly, we look at the only logical source of the meaning we perceive and say, “I do not know Him.”

Understood in this way, there is no barrier of ignorance between Christian faith and science. Rather, the faith that made the West can still defend it from the dual threat of regressive religion and barbaric scientism. In fact, it may be the only thing that can.

**A** West whose ethicists coolly contemplate infantile euthanasia, whose nations roll back their magnificent jurisprudence to make room for the

atrocities of sharia, whose historians argue themselves out of the objective reality of human rights because they have lost faith in the numinous basis of those rights—such a West may not be heading for disaster as much as it is living in the midst of one, a comfortable and prosperous disaster to which our default atheism makes us blind, a dystopia in which we are increasingly happy and increasingly savage at the same time.

It need not be so. Outside the Enlightenment Narrative, there is absolutely no reason to abandon the faith that created our civilization. The flowering of the Western mind took place under the Christian sun. The light that led us here can lead us on.

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*Andrew Klavan is a novelist and City Journal contributing editor. His podcast is featured Monday through Thursday at the [DailyWire.com](https://www.dailywire.com).*

Top Photo: Notre Dame Cathedral, a soaring achievement of Western architecture, here painted by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in 1841  
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