



INTEGRITAS

Wyoming Catholic College

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“RESURRECTING THE IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY”

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It is a great honor to be back here at Wyoming Catholic College once again. The last time I was in Lander was in 2013, as I returned from a climbing trip to the Tetons. I stopped in town to try and identify some college buildings, and let’s just say that they weren’t obvious. As you surely know, your college’s footprint is small, but the spiritual significance of what you’re doing is enormous—not just for the future of the Church, but for the future of our society.

That’s the topic I want to talk about today: What we must confront in public life in America today, and what we, as Catholics—and special places like Wyoming Catholic College—can contribute to the future of our culture.

Public life is about much more than just politics. The term refers to our common culture more broadly, and it is based on the shared vocabulary we use to talk about important issues, as well as on our sense of what we should seek after as a nation and on our understanding of what life is all about. These shared sentiments stem from a common educational experience and the general stock of ideas that people use to interpret their lives and their social experiences.

I was born in 1959—a time when the Bible and Christianity provided the material for much of what animated the public imagination. Martin Luther King Jr. galvanized the nation with speeches that were saturated with scriptural quotations, and a vital part of his genius as an orator was his ability to combine a Biblical vision with patriotic themes, interweaving Scripture with quotations from the Declaration of Independence and other founding documents. This dual piety presumed the interplay of Protestant Christianity and Enlightenment ideals, and was characteristic of our country up to and through my childhood.

My parents read books by theologians: Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Protestant theologian who flourished after World War II; Paul Tillich, another figure who was widely read at that time; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a latter-day martyr of conscience whose *Letters and Papers from Prison* was read by many in the early 1960s. I myself attended a small liberal arts college, larger than Wyoming Catholic. It was an elite school in the Quaker tradition, and while largely secular, it continued to sustain a tradition of religious reflection. In my undergraduate years, the Department of Religion had a professor who taught theology, so I read Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Soren Kierkegaard, and many other great modern Christian thinkers. These readings and classes reoriented my mediocre Christian faith—which was vague and “spiritual”—toward something more serious.

That has all changed now—not only at my *alma mater*, which no longer has professors who teach theological books *theologically*, but in society at large. If you look at the website for Black Lives Matter, there is no Biblical element in their rhetoric (unlike King’s witness). Nowadays, well-educated folks look to psychology, brain science, and social biology for guidance about how to live well, not to theology. Malcolm Gladwell is the equivalent of Paul Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr, mediating brain science, social psychology, and social biology to those who wish to think about the meaning of life.

Each Thanksgiving, *The Wall Street Journal* publishes an editorial that combines patriotic piety with Christian piety. It was written in the early 1960s, yet it is repeated verbatim, year after year—in all likelihood because those currently serving on the editorial board of *The Journal* have little knowledge, capacity, or inclination to write something that fuses the American experience with the Christian experience in a way that was once second nature for our educated classes. We are all aware of this change: Christianity no longer plays the role of a backdrop for our self-understanding. Why did this happen? And how?

I intend to answer these questions, but first, I would like to say a bit more about this recession of Christianity. In 1957, the United States government launched the General Survey of Social Attitudes, a broad-based study of what Americans thought on a wide range of topics, including religion. In the late

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1950s, this survey showed that 3% of the population considered themselves without a religious affiliation. When asked the question, “Are you Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.,” these responders would check the last box on the list, the one that said “None.” So they came to be known as the “Nones”—not nuns of the habit, but N-O-N-E-S; people of no religious affiliation. In 2008, the same survey questions indicated that 17% of the population now considered themselves “Nones.” More recent surveys suggest that this segment now exceeds 20%, and that 30% of all Millennials identify themselves as “Nones.”

It is important to recognize that this increase in the number of people who have no religious affiliation does not correspond to a decline in churchgoing. The initial survey from the 1950s shows that 25%–35% of the American population was going to church on any given Sunday, and the rate of churchgoing has remained remarkably constant through the subsequent decades. In fact, I asked a sociologist of religion what he thinks was the case at the turn of the last century. He thought that, for the last 100 or more years, the rate of churchgoing has been about 25%–35% of the population. The committed core of believers has remained remarkably constant. The changes have come about as a result of the increasing numbers of “Nones.” This rising, unaffiliated demographic has collided with the persistent, committed core of believers, leading us all into a struggle over our shared public culture.

The “Nones” are frustrated by Christianity’s historic influence over the United States, and many of them want to push Christian influence out of and to the margins of our society. But it’s about more than just demographics; the “Nones” are also well-represented among our cultural elite.

In order to talk about the role of the “Nones,” I have developed the notion of the post-Protestant WASP. The term “WASP” itself refers to a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and it has always been a misnomer. As a graduate student, I remember sitting at lunch with John Macquarrie, an eminent Anglican theologian. I mentioned something about WASPs and he queried me: “WASP? What do you mean by that term? What is a WASP?” I replied that it referred to a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and that it was usually used derisively, to refer to a now-displaced ruling class. He replied, “I’m neither an Anglo-Saxon nor a Protestant,” which was true, since Macquarrie was a High-Church Anglican Scotsman.

This story reminds us that the term WASP always refers to more than simply a narrow ethnic group. Roosevelt is not an Anglo-Saxon name; it’s Dutch.

Carnegie is not an Anglo-Saxon name, but Scottish. What WASP meant when used to describe the ruling class was well-to-do people of Northern European descent who went to mainline Protestant churches. That was the WASP culture.

The narrative of post-1960s America that we hear most frequently says that the WASP ascendancy has been displaced by a multicultural meritocracy. But I've grown increasingly suspicious of this account, since a closer examination shows that the old WASP institutions are now more powerful than ever before.

When I was growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, the sons of the Baltimore gentry frequently chose to attend the University of Virginia rather than Princeton, because their fathers and their grandfathers had gone there. Today, that's no longer the case. Everybody rushes to the Ivy Leagues or to Stanford or to other prestigious liberal arts colleges—the so-called “Little Ivy”—in order to get the best possible credentials. In this way, old WASP institutions are more influential than ever, serving as the ultimate gatekeepers of elite society.

The big change, you see, is that our elites have become post-Protestant, not post-WASP. We know, of course, that people in the current ruling class come to us from many different ethnic backgrounds, yet all are socialized into the post-Protestant WASP culture. They inherit its arrogance, its hauteur, and its belief that the moral views it espouses are self-evidently progressive and correct. Hillary Clinton is a post-Protestant WASP, raised in the Methodist tradition. Barack Obama is a post-Protestant WASP, a product of Columbia University and Harvard Law School. His White House is dominated by post-Protestant WASPs, and while many of them are black, all are products of elite education at WASP institutions.

Sociologists do not acknowledge the existence of the post-Protestant WASP. And I use the term as an intentional provocation—Obama as post-Protestant WASP—because it is part of the carefully-controlled narrative of our rulers that they do not exist as a class but are the result of an inclusive, progressive meritocracy. Today's sociologists have embraced this self-image of our ruling class, so they do not study the post-Protestant WASP culture. But they *do* study the “Nones,” and it is through the “Nones”—the foot-soldiers of the secular Left—that we have a window into the beliefs of the post-Protestant WASP.

A Pew study conducted in 2012 showed that 73% of “Nones” supported legalized abortion, compared to 53% of the general population. That same study showed that 73% were in favor of gay marriage, as compared to 48% of

the general population (before the Supreme Court settled the question). Doctor-assisted suicide, surrogate motherhood, legalized marijuana—there is no data on these issues, but I’m confident that the results would be similar, because the “Nones” support the progressive cultural agenda formulated and advanced by post-Protestant WASPs.

WCC FAQ

WHAT ARE THE LIBERAL ARTS?

Traditionally, the liberal arts are the seven main disciplines—grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—the study of which perfects the mind’s powers of reading, writing, reckoning, and speaking. The liberal arts are *intransitive* arts, for the actions of the liberal artist begin and end in the agent. They are *intrinsically* valuable studies, and are studied for their own sake.

This ideological homogeneity has significant political consequences. In the 2012 election, 75% of “Nones” voted for Barack Obama. These days, political scientists recognize that the largest identifiable constituency of the Democratic party is that of the “Nones”; estimates place them somewhere in excess of 20% of those who voted for Democratic candidates.

In sum, the post-Protestant WASPs provide leadership to a large (and growing) number of supporters who are defined by their religion—or in this case, by its rejection. The culture wars we are currently experiencing are a collision between a Christian element that has inherited the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr.—the intermarriage of biblical faith and constitutional piety—and an increasingly aggressive effort by the post-Protestant WASPs to establish a different view of America, one in which there is no religious component.

We all feel the effects of this aggression, because we stand in the way of policies and practices that are desired by many powerful people. We stand in the way of abortion-on-demand and of doctor-assisted suicide; in the way of radical reproductive technology and of the latest, most absurd efforts to forcefully impose such radical notions as transgender rights.

All of these matters are wrapped up in the Sexual Revolution, which is best understood as a revolution against Nature, a rejection of the notion that our created, embodied existence has intrinsic moral meaning. This rejection of Nature’s moral claims—“Nature and Nature’s God,” as the Declaration puts it—is a radical project. The crusade for transgender rights tells Nature, “You have no say in what a person is.” This effort to place Nature under house arrest requires policing how we act, how we talk, and even what we think. And so, people like ourselves—Catholics who believe in the goodness and moral

integrity of Creation—are facing ever-increasing hostility in the public square. I fear that I have done little but illuminate our predicament, rather than explain it. Now, let me speculate: Why has it come to this? Why are post-Protestant WASPs warring against the authority of Nature itself, even going so far as to try to redefine what it means to be male and female? How did it come to this?

The answer lies, at least in part, in the history of the last century. We must not underestimate the civilizational crisis that took place between 1914 and 1945. Americans are often insensitive to this (because we won World War II), but Europeans have long (and correctly) identified those decades as disastrous. They were years of self-wrought destruction in Europe, and the continent has never truly recovered from their effects.

In the aftermath of this disaster, the consensus analysis (which we Americans embraced sometime in the 1950s) was that the civilizational crisis that occurred between 1914 and 1945 was caused by intense and destructive loyalties. There were strong gods active in European culture, and those gods—whether blood, soil, folk, race, or the international ideology of Communism—aroused a deadly conviction in countless people.

Since 1945, it has been the project of our culture to drive these strong gods out of public life. In one of the best books on 1950s America, *The Twilight of American Liberalism*, author George Marsden lays out the ways in which liberal consensus moved toward a more pragmatic, problem-solving outlook. Many are now convinced that we are incapable of engaging in a public debate about the first and most fundamental things. Public life has been tamed and limited to questions of efficiency and efficacy.

Something similar happened in Europe. The European Union was founded to tame the strong gods—especially the strong gods of nationalism—and things really took off in the 1960s. The consensus that strong loyalties are destructive was generalized, and a view that civilization’s demands of loyalty are in fact harmful to human flourishing took root.

“It is forbidden to forbid.” This paradoxical slogan, scribbled on the walls of Paris in 1968, was an early expression of what Joseph Ratzinger would come to call “the dictatorship of relativism.” Its mission? The post-war project of weakening the strong gods. Its gravest manifestation? The idea that truth itself must be weakened, so that it will no longer exercise such domination and control over our lives.

Freed from this god’s obligations—from the demands of truth—the world would usher in an era of peace. If nothing is worth fighting for, then nobody will fight; we can relax, confident in the realization that we can live for ourselves. If nothing is worth sacrificing for, no one will sacrifice: wouldn’t it be a better world if we had peace, and no need to make sacrifices? By the 1960s, what had begun as an effort to weaken the strong gods of nationalism had metastasized into a weakening of truth itself.

An important method in this process of weakening has been to critique and to unmask: the standard pedagogy if you attend schools other than Wyoming Catholic College. The spirit of our age teaches us that the truth of things is underneath; that it is down below us rather than up above. As a result, our thinking tends to go downward, not upward.

Seniors at Wyoming Catholic College read Nietzsche, and they study his argument that truth is nothing more than an expression of the will to power. In other words, our lofty ideals are nothing but our basest instincts dressed up in fancy concepts. This is postmodern education in its purest form, and while few are genuine Nietzscheans, most students are educated to think in this downward way. Social biology, evolutionary theory, brain science, and social psychology are our touchstones, and popular writers such as Malcolm Gladwell teach us that the driving forces of our lives are in some way *below*. They are material, physical, instinctual, and biological.

This way of thinking is so pervasive that it is rarely noticed for what it is: a form of anti-contemplation. Economics is the queen of the sciences in public life today, and it seeks the truth in the interplay of self-interests. Thus, in our present age, the strategy of weakening truth and seeking it always from the things below has led us to an empire of utility—an empire with its own “theology” organized around the gods of the hearth: health, wealth, and pleasure. These are the gods of our time, weak gods who have replaced the strong gods of the past.

As a result of these changes, our political culture is now organized around wealth, health, and pleasure. Political candidates compete against one another, promising, “My economic policies are going to make us all richer,” or “My policies are going to make people live longer and be healthier,” or “My policies are going to free us to pursue our desires for pleasure to the utmost.”

And now let us return to the culture wars that plague us. Catholic public witness inevitably runs counter to the project of weakening; natural law makes strong claims rather than weak ones, and God has plenary authority. There is no god stronger than the high God of the Old Testament. Moreover, although Catholic intellectuals are aware of the interplay of power, desire, instinct, and self-interest—we know that human beings are fallen—our habit of mind is to seek truth above, not below. The Catholic intellectual life is contemplative rather than critical in the negative, downward-looking postmodern sense.

Pope Saint John Paul II's theology of the body offers a good example of this difference. He draws our thinking about sex upwards through the logic of self-gift, which orients us toward the Divine. In this understanding, our sexual instincts draw us toward something higher, in direct opposition to the direction suggested by Freud, who reduces higher things to mere sexual instincts. A providential understanding of history also looks upward for truth. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks of the "arc" of history that "bends towards justice." The deepest truths of history are *above* us—again, in the opposite direction of that suggested by thinkers such as Karl Marx, or by any other economic or material explanation of history.

Yes, we are in the midst of a culture war, and there are moral and political skirmishes all around us. But it is also a metaphysical clash, as Pope Benedict saw so clearly. The Catholic tradition follows Plato—a great thinker, and one well known to students at Wyoming Catholic—who says that we are in a cave, yet we imagine that the play of shadows upon the wall is reality. This is a deception, but Plato does not say, "Ah, behind the shadows or below the shadows is the dark truth of the human condition." On the contrary, he says, "It is the sun that is casting those shadows. If we seek the truth about reality, we must turn to the sun. Look upward to see the true meaning of life!"

WCC FAQ

WHAT WILL WYOMING CATHOLIC ADD TO THE CLASSICAL HIGH-SCHOOL EDUCATION I HAVE ALREADY RECEIVED?

The liberal arts are complex crafts, and to learn a craft well, one needs a guild: a community devoted to excellence, with masters and apprentices and tools. There are some very fine high-schools that produce excellent neophyte liberal artists. But why remain a neophyte when you can become a journeyman? To gain a full liberal education—one that forms the body, mind, imagination, and spirit at an advanced level—takes many years; more than four years of high school, and even more than four years of college. But if the education is done right, it will have rendered you an independent inquirer and learner, and will enable you to go on to complete your education on your own.

The scriptural witness adds a twist. The sun—or the Son—comes down to aid us in this ascent. The Church Fathers often pictured fallen humanity as bent over, looking always downward toward the things of the world. Unable to get us to look up, God comes down in a humble, incarnate form so that He might be found in our field of vision.

People do not look exclusively down or up, however. As St. Augustine reminds us in the *City of God*, our lives are ordered both by that which is above and by that which is below, and the line that separates the city of God from the city of man runs through every person’s heart. Even those formed by an educational system that relentlessly forces them to search below for truth will look up at times. This is why we can always find points of compromise and solidarity in our pluralistic society.

It is nevertheless important to remember the deeper and metaphysical dimension of today’s culture wars: the conflict between weakening and strengthening, and the vital difference between looking below and looking above. If we keep this in mind we can more clearly see what we are facing.

It is not the case that our post-Protestant WASPs are seeking to make the world worse. They strive to make it better and believe that the strategy of weakening—even to the point of a dictatorship of relativism—is the very thing that will make it so. But we need to do more than merely understand the post-Protestant WASPs and the dead-ends to which their ways of thinking have brought us. We must think clearly about how to best move forward in pursuit of a better and brighter future.

The first thing we should note is that the era of weakening is ending. There is a widespread dissatisfaction with the leadership of the post-Protestant WASPs and the weakening they promote. It seems to me that Trump voters are an obvious example of this dissatisfaction, as are those who voted for Bernie Sanders. The Trump voters are no more “Moral Majority” types than he is. But they seek something solid—in this case, our nation.

The same rejection of weakening characterizes Europe, whose recent rebellion against the establishment centers around the crisis of immigration. This crisis forces us to address the question of whether the nation is a sacred project that must be protected, or whether we must move toward a multicultural future in which national identity is a weak feature of life rather than a strong one.

There are also strange things happening in the aftermath of the Sexual Revolution, whose tenets sought to weaken the norms that governed the ways in which we interact with one another as embodied, sexual beings. A recent study shows that Millennials have fewer sexual partners than Baby Boomers or Generation Xers of the same age. Weakening promises us a fuller life, a life free from the burdens of strong norms. But it fails to deliver on this promise, giving us a world of anxious loneliness instead.

Another study caused a great stir when it showed that life expectancy for working class white men and women has declined precipitously in the last twenty years—a rate not unlike that experienced by Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The strategy of weakening seems to have some very bad consequences, especially if you are poor.

These signs of the times are difficult to interpret. But they (and others) suggest an end to the consensus in favor of weakening. People want the strong gods to return. Nationalism is the most obvious example, as a rising number of voters in the West want a firm place on which to stand; they desire a re-enchantment of life.

If I am right about the end of the time of weakening, there are real opportunities before us. As the postmodern West looks for re-enchantment, the resources it seeks will not be found at Harvard University. Rather, it will be places like Wyoming Catholic College, for at this small, out-of-the-way college, you are taught to look *upward* for truth. Your graduates are trained to lead others toward something more noble, to pursue a life spent in service to a far greater God than those of health, wealth, and pleasure.

Going forward, our mission must be to restore, as best we can, the noble truths that provide people with a firm place on which to stand, and the family is the obvious place to start. Most people are not philosophers; for them, marriage is their most powerful metaphysical participation, their only Parmenidean experience. In the exchange of vows they seek permanence—“That which is and cannot not be,” as the goddess Justice whispers in Parmenides’ ear. These vows anticipate the natural flux of life: for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health. Marriage vows are a protest against our vulnerability to change, an attempt to take a strong stand against the weakening of things. Nor is this unique to Catholics. I have yet to meet a young person who has entered into marriage without desiring its permanence. It is a perennial human desire.

The decline in marriage and the rise of divorce is central to the social dysfunction in America today, which means that it must be at the center of our renewal efforts. In our marriages, we will bear witness to the permanence of things.

Community building is vital as well. We need stable places—places that people will honor and that will encourage them to loyalty. Again, we have a Parmenidean desire to be rooted. And I’m willing to bet that Wyoming Catholic College and the town of Lander will build just this kind of loyalty. A significant number of you will fall in love with this place, and some will return here to live and raise your families. This will create a supportive environment of Catholic faithfulness, adding a spiritual beauty to the natural beauty. In a world of flux, a growing community of strong Catholic families will be a leaven, making Lander attractive to a wide variety of others—many non-Catholic—who also seek stable, healthy communities for their families.

A sense of community has a larger frame of reference, as well, which we see expressed in a proper patriotic love of country. And it is precisely this kind of love that people are seeking in our current political moment, both in Europe and in the United States.

The pattern of strengthening—marriage, community, and nation—needs to be guided and perfected by the mission of Wyoming Catholic College, where the cultivation of imagination, reason, and will are all ordered toward service and obedience to God. A life of faithfulness is the most powerful witness that we can provide in our dissolving age.

The strong gods of the past—especially those of nationalism—have brought death and destruction. We need to guide people toward the strong God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, brings life and life abundant.

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