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THE GRAPES OF PARNASSOS: IS EUROPE WITHERING ON THE VINE?

Steven Alan Samson

Hopelessness, Homelessness, and the Depopulation of the West

I wish to thank Gaylen Leverett for inviting me last Fall to speak to the faculty today. I did not realize at the time how his invitation would provide an occasion to reflect back through the roughly half century of my active intellectual life.

Periodically I need to cast my net back into familiar waters. The meditation in which I have been engaged lately centers on production and reproduction, generation and regeneration: societal, cultural, spiritual. This last Friday my grandson Joshua was born in Savannah. My wife Sally, a nurse, went down to help with Joshua and his sister Alice while my son Andy prepares to deploy to Iraq. On the other side of our generational relay my mother went to be with her Lord last September. Her 87th birthday would have been Wednesday. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it: "In the midst of life we are in death."

Genesis 1:27-28 tells us that

God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them; And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.

And down through the generations, it has been so. Physically, to be sure, but also culturally and spiritually. Reproduction, renewal, and regeneration are among the central themes that run through Scripture. God called into being a distinct people, not just once but twice: the people of Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. The first was born out of a barren womb. In the words of Paul, it was Abraham **who against hope believed in hope that he might become the father of many nations** (*Rom. 4:18*), and in time Israel became a kingdom of priests. We see another miracle of generation in the birth of Christ, whose Church, the Body of Christ, has been commissioned to teach and baptize the nations, for **we are saved by hope** (*Rom. 8:2*).

Consider how our faith, hope, and love are bound up with who we are, because who we are is based on how God has made us to be. Who Are We? This is the title of the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's latest book, in which he grapples with the politics of identity. The answer does not come so easily today. The older generation among us basked in the afterglow of a Christian culture, but it seems that the light and the warmth have been failing of late.

Here I will pose a pointed question. What would someone do or perhaps neglect to do if he wished to cultivate an anti-Christian culture? Among other things, perhaps, he might simply take the hope in which Abraham believed and pass over it in silence. Perhaps he would be bold enough to attempt to reverse it or even to deliberately distort it. Both Robespierre and Lenin attempted to destroy the Sabbath by introducing a new calendar. One of my undergraduate teachers, Hazel Barnes, published a book in the 1960s entitled The University as the New Church.

Although we Christians place our hope in regeneration rather than in generation, it is also evident that “who we are” has its generic or generational aspect. “Who we are” includes “who are our people,” as Marvin Olasky remarked to some of us last Friday. Moreover, “who we are” is implicated in our every vocation or calling. Consider some more of the words of the Apostle Paul to the Romans:

I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

(Rom. 12:1-2)

We live in revolutionary times: complete with numberless counterfeit faiths and sacraments. So did Fyodor Dostoevsky, who understood what was at stake in the revolution that was. The brilliant centerpiece of Brothers Karamazov that culminated in “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” should remind us of something else that Paul said:

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

(Eph. 6:12)

Yes, the battle is spiritual but its wounds are recorded in the flesh and minds of ordinary people.

So then let us get down to cases: Why has our culture, the fruit of centuries of Christian influence, grown so much coarser than I remember it from once upon a time. Why does it not rather reflect the hope that should be in us?

To pursue this question further let us ask it of a place once known as Christendom: Why, demographically speaking, is Europe, even Poland and Italy with all their devout Catholics, failing to reproduce itself? In lands that were evangelized more than a millennium ago, where are the signs of life that should bubble like a spring out of the rocks? Have the fruits of that faith petrified,

leaving behind in its magnificent cathedrals only a hard outer shell and an increasingly silent testimony?

During my travels two summers ago I picked up a copy of George Weigel's The Cube and the Cathedral, the title of which juxtaposes the modernistic Grand Arch of Defense in Paris with the medieval Cathedral of Notre-Dame, which "would fit comfortably inside the Great Arch." I added the book to the readings for my course on the Politics of Europe and put together a PowerPoint slide presentation that developed some of the book's themes. This project also inspired me to reflect back on decades of reading. I recalled how Henry Adams similarly found himself drawn by the dynamism of a civilization that produced "Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres." Even the title The Cube and the Cathedral suggests some kinship with Adams' essay, "The Virgin and the Dynamo." Unlike Weigel, Adams was pessimistic about the prospect he saw a century ago. Yet, we should ask ourselves: What do we have to offer in response to the concluding challenge of Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1858 poem "The Chambered Nautilus?"

*Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!*

Here, it appears, is a subtle repudiation of the faith of our fathers in favor of what John Dewey later called "a common faith." I could cite countless others from nineteenth-century America, not to mention Europe. Have the faith, hope, and love that once gave our civilization its life force in fact been draining out of it?

The Apostle Paul noted:

Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.

(1 Cor. 3:12-13)

Today, as ever, our very civilization is, like Peter, being "sifted as wheat." Does what we produce reflect the hope that is within us? Do our labors and our talents reproduce a godly legacy?

The great Jewish-Christian historian and speech-thinker [*Sprachdenker*], Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, who was a veteran of the First World War, frequently affirmed the reproductive vocation of a teacher: "We speak our mind. Any

thought about the life and death of our own group compels us to convey it to others. . . . Death cannot be fought in society except through engaging younger men to join the battle-front. . . . Social disintegration compels older men to speak to younger men. Education is not a luxury for the sake of the younger individual; is it not very often their ruin? However, society needs allies in its fight against decline. The true form of social thought is teaching."

But let us also accentuate the positive. My topic is, roughly speaking, the politics of cultural reproduction. One of the first great European novels, Robinson Crusoe, is a meditation on this very thing and is based on the story of a real man, Alexander Selkirk, from early in the eighteenth century, about whom William Cowper much later wrote a well-known poem. Robinson Crusoe addresses the issue of whether (and how) a man can reproduce his civilization even in the wilderness.

Variations on this question abound in the literature of the West. William Golding's Lord of the Flies warns us that a Hobbesian state of nature will also have ample ground in which to flourish. What if we are poor stewards and let the weeds go to seed? Our untended fields and gardens become filled with thorns and thistles that choke out whatever we may wish to produce. Last May many of us in this audience took a bus ride to and through Delphi beneath the summit of Mount Parnassos, the home in Greek mythology of poetry, music, and learning. Grapevines I did not notice, although I could see olive groves all about. But groves and vineyards alike have to be tended, cultivated. This is true, as well, of cultures and civilizations. Parnassos is an important source and symbol of ours.

It is in the French Revolution, another eighteenth century event, that we may find the antitype of cultural reproduction, the most virulent break with our collective past. What James Billington characterized as the "revolutionary faith" is an expression of what can be called the politics of cultural suicide. We first see it at work in the Garden of Eden and in the shame it produced. But it remains ever a clear and present danger for a civilization that at one time pronounced itself Christian. Both the Emperor and the Pope claimed to be the Vicar of Christ. The king of France was once designated the Most Christian King. The queen of England even today holds the title Defender of the Faith. We may draw our own conclusions about the appropriateness of such honorifics. But the very notion of Christendom once embodied, in its own fashion, the work of service to which western civilization was at one time devoted.

This is the inheritance that the drafters of the recently rejected European constitution were ashamed to acknowledge. Call it a sin of omission or worse; it was not an oversight. It was a studied forgetfulness. As J. Budziszewski has put it: "As any sin passes through its stages from temptation, to toleration, to approval, its name is first euphemized, then avoided, then forgotten." Perhaps too many Christians have also forgotten what Paul says:

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs of Christ.

(Rom. 8:16-17)

The hazard against which civilization must continually strive and renew its youth is its own gravitational pull toward forgetfulness and general neglect. Even by itself, the simple task of maintenance, including education, is hard work. But productivity in the sense of innovation and reproduction, including scholarship, requires the further conversion of resources into capital. We Christians are assigned a civilizing mission and it ever must be done in the very face of resistance, even outright opposition and defiance.

Consider for a moment the words of the Psalmist on forgetfulness:

**If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget her cunning.
If I do not remember thee,
let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;
if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.**

(Psalms 137:5-6)

This is a song of the exiles in Babylon. Nevertheless they took thought of the future:

Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.

(Jer. 29:5-6)

This injunction should help bring our subject into sharper focus. As I wrote to Gaylen early in March: "What I have in mind is a focus on the political/cultural/spiritual state of affairs in Europe that has led to the decline of the family, the population implosion (here I have very interesting statistics), the growing dependence of the welfare state on immigration, and the attendant rise of radical Islam. As the expression goes, "nature abhors a vacuum." If Europe fails to convert its guests, it will be converted itself.

Let us first consider what has been called the "birth dearth" in the very heart of western civilization. Here I wish to use statistics published by the United Nations in 2002 and 2006 to examine certain demographic trends.

Statistical Comparisons

United Nations Population Division:

World Population Prospects: the 2006 Revision (Excerpts)

TABLE I:2. DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORLD POPULATION BY DEVELOPMENT GROUP AND MAJOR AREA, 1950, 1975, 2007 and 2050, ACCORDING TO PROJECTION VARIANT (PERCENTAGE)

Major Area	Population		
	1950	1975	2007
More Developed	32.1	25.7	18.3
Less Developed	67.9	74.3	81.7

TABLE I:3. AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF POPULATION CHANGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION IN BROAD AGE GROUPS BY MAJOR AREAS, MEDIUM VARIANT, 2005-2050 (PERCENTAGE)

Age	0-14	15-59	60+	80+	Total Population
World	-0.03	0.65	2.43	3.38	0.76
Europe	-0.41	-0.70	0.93	2.02	-0.21
N. America	0.25	0.38	1.73	2.42	0.65

TABLE II:1. ESTIMATED AND PROJECTED TOTAL FERTILITY FOR THE WORLD, MAJOR DEVELOPMENT GROUPS AND MAJOR AREAS, 1970-1975, 2005-2010 AND 2045-2050, ACCORDING TO VARIANTS

	Total Fertility (average number of children per woman)		
	1970-1975	2005-2010	2045-2050 (low)
World	4.47	2.55	1.54
Europe	2.16	1.45	1.26
Northern America	2.01	2.00	1.35

Diminishing Returns

Whatever any of us might think of the issues raised by immigration, my point has less to do with immigration than with our collective failure to provide for the future. In a chapter entitled "The Cost of Boredom," George Weigel quotes the Orthodox theologian David Hart that "it seemed to him 'fairly obvious that there is some direct, indissoluble bond between faith and the will to a future, or between

the desire for a future and the imagination of eternity.’ No faith, no future. “This is why post-Christian Europe seems to lack not only the moral and imaginative resources for sustaining its civilization, but even any good reason for continuing to reproduce.”

Most of us have encountered anecdotal evidence in our conversations and travels that supports this observation. But what is especially chilling is the statistical evidence. Here I will quote a book entitled Fewer: How the Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future by Ben J. Wattenberg. On page 37 he writes: “Consider Europe according to “Replacement Migration” [a 2001 publication of the UN Population Division]: Today Europe has more than twice as many people as the United States, but the whole continent takes in a net of 376,000 immigrants per year, about a third of the American number. In order to keep a *total constant population*, that European immigration number would have to rise to 1,917,000 per year, an annual increase of more than *500 percent*. To maintain a *constant age group of workers age 15-64*, the number of immigrants would have to rise to 3,227,000 per year, an annual increase of more than *900 percent*. The UNPD also calculated what it would take to keep the *dependency ratio* constant, that is, the proportions of working-age persons to those over age 65 and under 15. That would require an annual immigration of 27,139,000, an increase of more than *7,100 percent*. That is not likely to happen.”

What an understatement! Wattenberg’s statistics merely represent the numbers of people who may be required for the maintenance of an aging, affluent population: that is, the amount of additional workers that is required simply to pass along a real inheritance rather than a deficit to future generations. But even if such high levels of immigration were possible, would they be desirable? How could any society, especially one seeks to preserve its character, begin to assimilate all the nannies, gardeners, nurses, and other workers needed simply to maintain the status quo or to preserve the infrastructure?

Forget about assimilation here. Dissociation comes closer to describing the reality. Hosts and guests alike appear to suffer from a continuing and even intensifying identity crisis: *Who are we? Who are these others? Have we all lost our way?* It should not take the satiric wit of a Jonathan Swift or a Christopher Buckley to see the connection between parlous condition of our welfare state and the generations that have been sacrificed for our present affluence.

Concerning the realities on the ground in Europe today, permit me to quote from a speech the British journalist Melanie Phillips gave in Australia last month. *Melanie Phillips. “Do Not Appease Hatred,” March 2, 2007 (www.melaniephillips.com):*

“Londonistan [the title of her recent book] is a term of abuse coined by the French for a Britain that has allowed itself to become the European hub of

al'Qaida. To me, it's also a state of mind, when people not only seek to appease but come to believe and absorb the ideas and assumptions of the enemy that intends to destroy them."

See: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21309355-7583,00.html?from=news>

But the problem is far larger than this variant form of the Stockholm Syndrome in which captives defend their captors. The English philosopher and conservative Roger Scruton identifies a more subtle partner: what he calls "the culture of repudiation," which repudiates the national ideal and, more to the point, repudiates "inheritance and home." Let us call the culture of repudiation the anti-culture of the West. It is, Scruton says, "a stage through which the adolescent mind passes. But it is a stage in which intellectuals tend to become arrested."

Dostoevsky would recognize the culture of repudiation as his old foe nihilism. Radical Islam is simply the latest ideology to be recruited as an ally of the repudiators in the West's own protracted quarrel with itself. But the presence of a large and growing Muslim immigrant community is turning what began as a domestic quarrel into something even less civil. Yet at bottom Europe's malady has little to do with any specific actor or any specific threat. If you engage in the politics of cultural suicide, then you must, as another expression goes, "choose your poison." We can expect the situation to become even more volatile.

One of my graduate school professors, James Chowning Davies, developed the J-Curve theory of revolution and political violence. According to this theory, political violence is most likely to occur during a prolonged downturn following a period of relative stability or progress, when life seems to be getting better. It is really people's fear of returning to the bad old days, however they may define them, that is apt to provoke turmoil. It is very often the children of the affluent and educated who lead insurrections. In this fallen world of ours, which has been subjected to futility, it is not difficult to imagine the circumstances today, here and in Europe, that may occasion violent eruptions. Yesterday's *New York Times Magazine* has an article entitled "Battle Over the Banlieues" (April 15, 2007, pp. 52-57). In the week before the first round of the general election, David Rieff, who is the son of Philip Rieff and Susan Sontag, has gone straight to the issue, to the fear, that is on everyone's mind: the highly volatile immigrant suburbs outside Paris that have become virtually off-limits to the interior minister.

The problems that arise out of such conditions will be increasingly difficult to correct. They may require a new "social contract." In *The Revenge of Conscience*, J. Budziszewski writes: "The three great practical troubles of public life are all results of the Fall. Politics would have been easy in Eden, but that was a long time ago. One of our problems is plain and practical: we do wrong. The second is intellectual: we not only misbehave but miscalculate, not only do wrong but call it right. The third, of course, is strategic, for the second affects our

efforts to cope with the first. Our toils to rectify sin are themselves twisted by sin, our labors to shed light on iniquity themselves darkened by iniquity.”

Another of Roger Scruton’s essays, “Meaningful Marriage,” cuts right to the historical heart of the cultural challenge of modernity. Everything seems either up for sale or up for negotiation. What is lost is any sense of the reality of “who we are” as people made in the image of God. For instance, says Scruton: “The pressure for gay marriage is . . . in a certain measure self-defeating. It resembles Henry VIII’s move to gain ecclesiastical endorsement for his divorce, by making himself the head of the Church. The Church that endorsed his divorce thereby ceased to be the Church whose endorsement he was seeking.”

To quote Richard Weaver: “Ideas have consequences.” Henry got his divorce and today the bishops of his church are still wrestling with the fruits of his folly, the grapes of his wrath. On this side of the Atlantic the Supreme Court has done nothing to enhance public respect for law and the Constitution through what amounts to judicial legislation in such cases as *Roe v. Wade*. Yet as late as the 1950s even the liberal Justice William O. Douglas could reflect on one of the Court’s recent polygamy decisions and contend that “a ‘religious’ rite which violates standards of Christian ethics and morality is not in the true sense, in the constitutional sense, included within ‘religion,’ the ‘free exercise’ of which is guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.” Somewhere along the way we made a series of wrong turns.

There is a word to describe a culture that fails to reproduce itself: Dead. The dead do not defend themselves. When this failure to reproduce is done with malice aforethought it is a form of suicide. To summarize: The European welfare state requires a steady stream of workers to keep the whole scheme afloat. Failing to reproduce, it must import. Failing to convert, it must adapt. Failing to evangelize, it must submit.

Western civilization is succumbing to the false fruits of cultural revolutions to which it has consented at each stage of their development. Why do revolutions succeed? They succeed in part because the passing of a single generation is all it takes to wipe the slate and in part because the guardians let down their guard. First, the public memory fades or, as is often the case, is subtly reinterpreted. Then, citizens forget to convey the wealth of their experience and tradition to their children through nurturing, teaching, and testing. Finally, they even neglect to produce the heirs they should be preparing to carry on. These sins of omission may in some cases be absent-minded, given modernity’s capacity for producing endless distraction, but they are never less than deadly. If indeed we have sold our birthright, it will take character and courage to repent and return.

In the Revelation to John during his exile on Patmos God sought to recall his people to their original commission:

**Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee,
because thou hast left thy first love.
Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen,
And repent, and do the first works;
or else I will come unto thee quickly,
and will remove thy candlestick out of his place,
except thou repent.**

(Rev. 2:4-5)

The hour is late: "Watchman, what of the night?" Near the end of a book published in 1908, The Servile State, Hilaire Belloc wrote: "There is a complex knot of forces underlying any nation once Christian; a smoldering of the old fires." Let us keep the home fires burning.

-- Given at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, April 16, 2007, at 10:00 AM, the morning of the Virginia Tech massacre.