

Decadence and Christian Pessimism

By Mark Tooley on March 13, 2020

This week I attended an as always stimulating Trinity Forum [talk](#) ^[1], this time to hear *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat discussing his new book *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success*. He describes our own times and culture as decadent, meaning not uniquely debauched but characterized by “economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development.”

Douthat is a rare conservative Catholic columnist for a major liberal newspaper. He is unfailingly sensible and level, in contrast to contemporary hysteria and hyperbole. I don’t know if he would accept the term, which typically applies to a subset of modern Protestants, but he exudes Christian Realism. His sensibility about public affairs is dour but not despairing. *The Decadent Society* is not apocalyptic so much as mildly pessimistic. Our civilization has reached a complacent and uncreative plateau, neither collapsing or advancing, perhaps coasting indefinitely.

Respondent Christine Emba, a young *Washington Post* writer who’s also Catholic, echoed Douthat’s prognosis, recalling brunches with her friends in which they smilingly debated whether society is decadent or merely declining. Escaping the societal malaise, several of her friends later entered Catholic orders. Adding to the evening’s irenic atmospheric gloom, Douthat bemusedly pronounced that the forum may be Washington’s last public forum before the city recedes into coronavirus lockdown, which seems to be true.

Perhaps endemic to this contemporary decadence is its self-induced pessimism, which eschews greatness and glory for comfortable complacency. Douthat cites the 1969 moon landing as the pinnacle of American and Western post-World War II ambition. Now Americans, and Westerners, focus on their gadgetry and narcotics.

In an important sense, Douthat’s thesis is a welcome if soft counter to extreme cultural doomsday thinking. But in another sense, it confirms and validates, if indirectly, the morose Protestant evangelical premillennial perspective, informed by Dispensationalist theology, that insists the world is unavoidably sliding downward until the end of time.

Many and perhaps most Americans are captive to this spiritually inspired social pessimism, including many non-Christians, who often dread equally grim secular apocalypses typically centered around environmental alarmism. They also often assume increasing crime (contrary to reality), economic meltdown (despite relative prosperity), racial strife (despite improved racial attitudes), and perhaps especially now enhanced fear of pandemics (even as people generally live healthier and longer).

America, very much including its secularists, is now arguably a premillennial Dispensationalist nation, constantly expecting the next round of bad news, which potentially is only one more step

toward apocalypse. We are being judged and condemned, by Jehovah, or by Gaia the earth goddess. Social optimists seemingly are in short supply. It wasn't always the case.

Theological Dispensationalism prevailed in the early and mid-twentieth century through America's churches and overall spiritual mindset. Before then, Protestant America, with its Catholic and Jewish fellow travelers, was largely postmillennial. It assumed humanity, especially America, was on an upward progression, as God prepared his creation for the triumphant consummation of his kingdom on earth.

Postmillennialism dominated most of America's major churches until the twentieth century, and consequently shaped its wider culture. It molded America's self-image as an almost-chosen people marching ever forward. It sometimes inspired delusions, hubris, and arrogance. But it also inspired hope, confidence, and a dynamic interpretation of history that precluded inertia, self-satisfaction, and decadence as defined by Douthat.

Protestant postmillennialism helped spawn the Social Gospel, which theorized God's kingdom of peace and justice could be completed on earth without the literal necessity of Christ's return. This theological heterodoxy in turn helped spawn a fundamentalist and evangelical reaction that, in its horror over liberalism's humanistic overconfidence, insisted that humanity would only degenerate until the End Times and Divine Judgement. There was only hope in Christ's ultimate physical return.

Sunny postmillennialism morphed into secular versions, often progressive, that found hope and validation in the New Deal, Great Society, the Civil Rights Movement, and other social reforms, amid rising prosperity and American global dominance after WWII. Meanwhile, liberal Protestantism, which lost both its orthodoxy and its own providential optimism, began its long spiral, as it was replaced by more conservative and pessimistic religion. Hal Lindsey's best-selling Dispensationalist polemic *The Late Great Planet Earth* of 1970 became the new narrative for much of US Christianity, connecting contemporary events to impending biblically prophesied Armageddon. *Left Behind* literature expanded this genre. In contrast, postmillennialists deployed biblical prophecy to anticipate increasing global justice and righteousness, as God reclaimed his creation.

Speaking then for much of Protestantism, with all of its postmillennial energy, the northern Methodist bishops in 1904 recited the "evils and perils" of their age, including political corruption, "permanent war" in labor relations, "gigantic swindles" by the wealthy, "despotic" labor unions, increasing crime, lynchings, the "pitiable condition of the negro race," the proliferation of divorce and "popular amusements," and intemperance. Yet they were robustly hopeful:

Our faith takes wing and says the resources are so great; the wealth within the Christian Church is now so large... Christian people are now so vast a multitude... the resources of intellectual culture through the schools and colleges are so ample; the whole ecclesiastical machinery for the world's salvation is now so very abundant and magnificent, that often faith takes wing and declares, if only these appliances could have a new baptism of the Pentecost, the millennium might come in a decade.

Maybe these bishops and much of America, religious and secular, were overly buoyant in those postmillennial times. But their society, though more troubled than our own by many measures, was not decadent by Douthat's standard. It was confident and dynamic.

Douthat suggests that religious revival could be one remedy for our complacent decadence. But the tone and temper of that revival would need to be hopeful, not fatalistic. Without specifically endorsing the theological details of postmillennialism, America and the West need a Christian renewal that is confident, assertive, providentially optimistic, and committed to civilization, not just personal piety. The over-exuberance of postmillennialism, however flawed, would almost be a welcome corrective to today's spiritual torpor.

Chronic social pessimism is safe, cynical, lazy, and sometimes self-fulfilling. It fosters decadence, if not itself decadent, as Douthat defines it. Its rejection of wider providential hope is unchristian. If our faith is true, then God is sovereign, and he is renewing and reclaiming all creation. He's judging and redeeming universally, at the same time, persons and societies. In our fidelity to him, there's no room for fatalism, despair, or complacency. Instead, we are called to discern where he is heading and to align with his purpose.

In this divine alignment, there is no room for sedentary decadence. There is instead energy, movement, and hope, with uplift for all fallen humanity, even the most decadent. What was once called Christendom, if it aspires to sustain and promote the best of our ethical traditions for humane societies, needs to recover confidence about the future and about who we are.

Article printed from Providence: <https://providencemag.com>

URL to article: <https://providencemag.com/2020/03/decadence-and-christian-pessimism/>

URLs in this post:

[1] talk: <https://www.facebook.com/trinityforum/videos/229755778162447/>

Copyright © 2020 Providence. All rights reserved.