

Living in the New Dark Ages

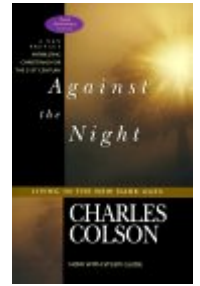
Former Probe staffer Lou Whitworth reviews Charles Colson's important book, Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages. Colson argues that "new barbarians" are destroying our culture with individualism, relativism, and the new tolerance.

Is the Sun Setting On the West?

It was 146 B.C. In the waning hours of the day a Roman general, Scipio Africanus, climbed a hill overlooking the north African city of Carthage. For three years he had led his troops in a fierce siege against the city and its 700,000 inhabitants. He had lost legions to their cunning and endurance. With the Carthaginian army reduced to a handful of soldiers huddled inside the temple of their god Eshmun, the city was conquered. And with the enemy defeated, Scipio ordered his men to burn the city.(1)

Now, as the final day of his campaign drew to a close, Scipio Africanus stood on a hillside watching Carthage burn. His face, streaked with the sweat and dirt of battle, glowed with the fire of the setting sun and the flames of the city, but no smile of triumph crossed his lips. No gleam of victory shone from his eyes. Instead, as the Greek historian Polybius would later record, the Roman general "burst into tears, and stood long reflecting on the inevitable change which awaits cities, nations, and dynasties, one and all, as it does every one of us men."

In the fading light of that dying city, Scipio saw the end of Rome itself. Just as Rome had destroyed others, so it would one day be destroyed. Scipio Africanus, the great conqueror and extender of empires, saw the inexorable truth: no matter how mighty it may be, no nation, no empire, no culture is immortal.



Thus begins Chuck Colson's book, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*, a sober yet inspirational book on facing the future as involved Christians. He returns to this scene frequently in the book as a reminder of the transitory nature of nations and cultures. The author, chairman of Prison Fellowship and ex-Watergate figure turned Christian evangelist, sets forth a warning for the church and for individual believers.

Just as the Roman general Scipio Africanus saw in the flames of the city of Carthage the future fall of Rome and its empire, Colson believes that we are likely witnessing in the crumbling of our society the demise of the American experiment and perhaps even the dissolution of Western civilization.

And just as the fall of Rome led into the Dark Ages, the United States and the West are staggering and reeling from powerful destructive forces and trends that may lead us into a New Dark Ages. The imminent slide of the West is not inevitable, but likely unless current, destructive trends are corrected. The step-by-step dismantling of our Judeo-Christian heritage has led us to a slippery slope situation in which destructive tendencies unchecked lead to other unhealthy tendencies. For example, as expectations of common concern for others evaporates, even those who wish to retain that value become more cautious, reserved, and secretive out of self-defense, further unraveling the social fabric. Thus rampant individualism crushes to earth our more generous impulses and promotes more of the same. Other examples could be enumerated, but this illustrates the way one destructive, negative impulse can father a host of others. Soon the social fabric is in

tatters, and impossible to mend peaceably. At this point the society is vulnerable both from within and from without.

The New Barbarism and Its Roots

We face a crisis in Western culture, and it presents the greatest threat to civilization since the barbarians invaded Rome. Today in the West, and particularly in America, a new type of barbarian is present among us. They are not hairy Goths and Vandals, swilling fermented brew and ravishing maidens; they are not Huns and Visigoths storming our borders or scaling our city walls. No, this time the invaders have come from within.

We have bred them in our families and trained them in our classrooms. They inhabit our legislatures, our courts, our film studios, and our churches. Most of them are attractive and pleasant; their ideas are persuasive and subtle. Yet these men and women threaten our most cherished institutions and our very character as a people. They are the new barbarians.

How did this situation come to pass? The seeds of our possible destruction began in a seemingly harmless way. It began not in sinister conspiracies in dark rooms but in the paneled libraries of philosophers, the study alcoves of the British museums, and the cafs of the world's universities. Powerful movements and turning points are rooted in the realm of ideas.

One such turning point occurred when Rene Descartes, looking for the one thing he could not doubt, came up with the statement *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." This postulate eventually led to a new premise for philosophical thought: man, rather than God, became the fixed point around which everything else revolved. Human reason became the foundation upon which a structure of knowledge could be built; and doubt became the highest intellectual virtue.

Two other men, John Stuart Mill (1806-73) and Jean Jacques

Rousseau (1712-78) contributed to this trend of man-based philosophy. Mill created a code of morality based on self-interest. He believed that only individuals and their particular interests were important, and those interests could be determined by whatever maximized their pleasure and minimized their pain. Thus the moral judgments are based on calculating what will multiply pleasure and minimize pain for the greatest number. This philosophy is called utilitarianism, one form of extreme individualism.

Another form of individualism was expressed by Rousseau who argued that the problems of the world were not caused by human nature but by civilization. If humanity could only be free, he believed, our natural virtues would be cultivated by nature. Human passions superseded the dictates of reason or God's commands. This philosophy could be called experimental individualism.

Mill and Rousseau were very different. Mill championed reason, success, and material gain; and Rousseau passion, experiences, and feelings. Yet their philosophies have *self* as a common denominator, and they have now melded together into radical individualism, the dominant philosophy of the new barbarians.

According to sociologist Robert Bellah, pervasive individualism is destroying the subtle ties that bind people together. This, in turn, is threatening the very stability of our social order as it strips away any sense of individual responsibility for the common good. When people care only for themselves, they are not easily motivated to care about their neighbors, community life devolves into the survival of the fittest, and the weak become prey for the strong.

The Darkness Increases and the New Barbarians Grow Stronger

Today the prevailing attitude is one of relativism, i.e., the belief that there is no morally binding objective source of

authority or truth above the individual. The fact that this view tosses aside 2,500 years of accumulated moral wisdom in the West, a rationally defensible natural law, and the moral law revealed by God in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures seems to bother very few.

Relativism and individualism need each other to survive. Rampant individualism promotes a competitive society in which conflicting claims rather than consensus is the norm because everyone is his or her own standard of "right" and "wrong" and of "rights" and "obligations." The marriage of extreme individualism and relativism, however, has produced a new conception of "tolerance."

The word *tolerance* sounds great, but this is really tolerance with a twist; it demands that everyone has a right to express his or her own views as long as those views do not contain any suggestion of absolutes that would compete with the prevailing standard of relativism.

Usually those who promote tolerance the loudest also proclaim that the motives of religious people are suspect and that, therefore, their views on any matter must be disqualified. Strangely, socialists, Nazis, sadomasochists, pedophiles, spiritualists, or worshipers of Mother earth would not be excluded. Their right to free expression would be vigorously defended by the same cultural elite who are so easily offended when Christians or other religious people express their views.

But this paradoxical intolerance produces an even deeper consequence than silencing an unpopular point of view, for it completely transforms the nature of debate, public discussion, and consensus in society. Without root in some transcendent standard, ethical judgments become merely expressions of feelings or preference. "Murder is wrong" must be translated "I hate murder" or "I prefer that you not murder." Thus, moral claims are reduced to the level of opinion.

Opponents grow further and further apart, differing on a level so fundamental that they are unable even to communicate. When moral judgments are based on feelings alone, compromise becomes impossible. Politics can no longer be based on consensus, for consensus presupposes that competing moral claims can be evaluated according to some common standard. Politics is transformed into civil war, further evidence that the barbarians are winning.

Proponents of a public square sanitized of moral judgments purport that it assures neutrality among contending moral factions and guarantees certain basic civil rights. This sounds enlightened and eminently fair. In reality, however, it assures victory for one side of the debate and assures defeat of those with a moral structure based on a transcendent standard.

Historically, moral restraints deeply ingrained in the public consciousness provided the protective shield for individual rights and liberties. But in today's relativistic environment that shield can be easily penetrated. Whenever some previously unthinkable innovation is both technically possible and desirable to some segment of the population, it can be, and usually will be, adopted. The process is simple. First some practice so offensive it can hardly be discussed is advocated by some expert. Shock gives way to outrage, then to debate, and when what was once a crime becomes a debate, that debate usually ushers the act into common practice. Thus decadence becomes accepted. History has proven it over and over.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Questions arise in our minds: How bad is the situation? Is it too late to stop or reverse the downward trend? If it's too late, do we wait, preserve, and endure until the winds of history and God's purpose are at our backs?

When a culture is beset by both a loss of public and private

values, the overall decline undermines society's primary institutional supports. God has ordained three institutions for the ordering of society: the family for the propagation of life, the state for the preservation of life, and the church for the proclamation of the gospel. These are not just voluntary associations that people can join or not as they see fit; they are organic sources of authority for restraining evil and humanizing society. They, and the closely related institution of education, have all been assaulted and penetrated by the new barbarians. The consequences are frightening.

The Family

The family is under massive assault from many directions, and its devastation is obvious. Yet the family and the church are the only two institutions that can cultivate moral virtue, and of these the family is primary and foremost because "our very nature is acquired within families." (2) Unfortunately when radical individualism enters the family, it disrupts the transmission of manners and morals from one generation to the next. Once this happens it is nearly impossible to catch up later, and the result is generation after generation of rude, lawless, culturally retarded children.

The Church

The new barbarians have penetrated our churches and tried to turn them into everything except what God intended them to be. Even strong biblical churches have not been immune to their influence. Yet only as the church maintains its distinctiveness from the culture is it able to affect culture. The church dare not look for "success" as portrayed in our culture; instead its watchword must be "faithfulness"; only then will the church be successful. The survival of the Western culture is inextricably linked to the dynamic of reform arising from the independent and pure exercise of religion from the moral impulse. That impulse can only come

from our families and from our churches. The church must be free to be the church.

The Classroom

The classroom has also been invaded by radical individualism and the secular ideas of the new barbarians. We must resist putting our young people under unbridled secularistic teaching, especially if it isn't balanced by adequate exposure to Christian principles and a Christian worldview.

The State/Politics

Government has a worthy task to do, i.e., to protect life and to keep the peace, but it cannot develop character. To believe that it can do so is to invite tyranny. First, most people's needs and problems are far beyond the reach of government. Second, it is impossible to effect genuine political reform, much less moral reform, solely by legislation. Government, by its very nature, is limited in what it can accomplish. We need to be involved in politics, but we must do so with realistic expectations and without illusions.

Our culture is indeed threatened, but the situation is not irreversible if we model the family before the world and let the church be the church.

A Flame in the Night

This is an important work, one that every Christian would benefit from reading. Though Colson's subject—the ethical, moral, and spiritual decline that many observers forecast for our immediate future—is bleak, the work isn't morose or gloomy. His focus is on opportunities and possibilities before us regardless of what the future holds. In the book's last section, he calls for the church and for individual Christians to be lights in the darkness by cultivating the moral imagination and presenting to the world a compelling vision of the good. He outlines three steps in that process.

First, we must reassert a sense of shared destiny as an antidote to radical individualism. We are born, live, and die in the context of communities. Rich, meaningful life is found in communities of worship, self-government, and shared values. We are not ennobled by relentless competition, endless self-promotion, and maximum autonomy, nor are these tendencies ultimately rewarding. On the other hand, commitment, friendship, and civic cooperation are both personally and corporately satisfying.

Second, we must adopt a strong, balanced view of the inherent dignity of human life. All the traditional restraints on inhumanity seem to be crumbling at once in our courts, in our laboratories, in our operating rooms, in our legislatures. The very idea of an essential dignity of human life seems a quaint anachronism today. As Christians we must be unequivocally and unapologetically pro-life. We cannot disdain the unborn, the young, the infirm, the handicapped, or the elderly. We cannot concede any ground here.

Third, we must recover respect for tradition and history. We must reject the faddish movements of the moment and look to the established lessons from the past. The moral imagination (our power to perceive ethical truth^[3]) values reason and recognizes truth. It asserts that the world can be both understood and transformed through the carefully constructed restraints of civilized behavior and institutions. It assumes that to approach the world without consideration of the ideas of earlier times is an act of hubris in essence, claiming the ability to create the world anew, dependent on nothing but our own pitiful intelligence.

In contrast to such an attitude, the moral imagination begins with awe, reverence, and appreciation for order within creation. It sees the value of tradition, revelation, family, and community and responds with duty, commitment, and obligation. But the moral imagination is more than rational. It is poetic, stirring long atrophied faculties for nobility,

compassion, and virtue.

Imagination is expressed through symbols, allegories, fables, and literary illustrations. Winston Churchill revived the moral imagination of the dispirited British people in his speeches when he depicted the threat from Hitler not as just another war, but as a sacrificial, moral campaign against a force so evil that compromise or defeat would bring about a New Dark Ages. British backbones were stiffened and British hearts were ennobled because Churchill was able to unite rational, emotional, and artistic ideas into a common vision.

Western civilization and the church are currently engaged in a war of ideas with new barbarians. Whether we have the will to be victorious will depend in large measure on the strength and power of our moral imagination. Charles Colson's book, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*, can give us guidance in this crucial task.

Notes

1. This essay is in large measure a condensation of several chapters of the author's work; consequently, quotations and paraphrase may exist side by side unmarked. Therefore, for accuracy in quoting, please consult the book: Charles Colson, with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant, 1989).

2. Russell Kirk, *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky* (Washington:Regnery Gateway, 1987), 24.

3. For fuller discussion see Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 119.

For Further Reading

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