

Fr. Perozich comments —

This article may be a bit “heady” from a lot of what is on the internet these days regarding the Catholic faith. Highlights are noted here to try to cut through it.

Today we have prelates not only neglecting to speak of the salvation of man by God’s Son Jesus Christ, but rather substituting their novel morality concerning only this world of climate change, income redistribution, population redistribution through immigration, equality of all religions as willed by God, fairness used to advance women to sacred orders, listening session for youth who have no foundation in Christianity so that they can direct the church’s mission, new “created” sexual identities, and on and on.

Enough priests and laity are also on this bandwagon, seduced by their own predilections.

The revival presented here may help us to move away from regressive policies presented falsely as “progress” toward the truth of God rather than the false directional of “returning to the past” as if it were bad and outdated.

*The rejection of the truth to unite with worldly movements is not **progress**. The acceptance of truth is not **regression**, rather it is unity with God in faith.*

- ***Through the seductions of the prosperity gospel and the therapeutic mentality that places self-esteem at the center of all ethical questions, Christianity had betrayed its ancient and authentic truths.***

- ***an international Catholic revival has begun***

- ***... Protestantism ... had, over generations, surrendered its dogmatic, theological, and metaphysical substance in favor of mere morality.***

- ***liberalism in religion. By this, he [Newman] meant an understanding of religion as private truth, or opinion, rather than public dogma.***

- ***Protestants had come to think of religion as private because they had first reduced it to mere “moral sentiment.”***

- *It was fit only to pronounce on questions of goodness or morality, not truth or reality.*
- *Newman insists, adamantly so, on what he calls the “dogmatic principle.” **Religion is fundamentally a revelation of dogmatic truths to which we must assent, or it is nothing at all.***
- *the Christ that liberal Protestants proposed came to instruct us to “love our neighbor” and not to initiate us into such arcane mysteries as the inner life of the Trinity or analogy of created being to God as uncreated Being. The injunction to be good was all that was left.*
- *our view of what kinds of actions are good for us can only be known if we have first determined to what purpose or end we – as a specific kind of being – are ordered.*
- *We must know then what man is: which is the office of metaphysics and even of theology*
- *Ethics cannot be constituted unless its author is first able to answer the questions: What is man? Why is he made? What is the end of human life?*
- *What counts as a moral action for me follows from the kind of being I am – in Aquinas’s language, the kind of form I have. And form, in turn, follows from function, from purpose or proper end.*
- *Maritain did not hesitate to answer these metaphysical questions: “Man is a metaphysical being, an animal that nourishes its life on transcendentals.” We are by nature born for the contemplation of truth, goodness, and beauty, and by way of these three “transcendentals” we are summoned to our fulfillment in the contemplation of God.*

- *Christianity proposes that man finds his true end only in the contemplative enjoyment, the everlasting friendship, of God.*
- *If Christians lose sight of the metaphysics, ...it reaches the level of merely the present hour and declares the feelings and sentiments of this world all that we may know of heaven.*
- *Untethered from dogma, goodness itself was set adrift. "Love thy neighbor" literally does not mean, for many Christians now, what it did for their ancestors.*
- *By treating as superfluous dogma what was, in reality, the essential truth of Christianity, Christianity lost first the purpose of its moral dimension and then it fundamentally altered the content of its morality*

A LIBERAL CHRISTIAN FEAST OF SENTIMENTS

James Matthew Wilson
Thursday, December 12, 2019

In 2013, Ross Douthat published *Bad Religion*, a book that argued American Christianity lost its way in the last six decades. **Through the seductions of the prosperity gospel and the therapeutic mentality that places self-esteem at the center of all ethical questions, Christianity had betrayed its ancient and authentic truths.** These are real heresies, as Douthat calls them, to be sure. But, my first reflex was to ask, "You think religion just got bad *then*?"

The English philosophical historian and Catholic convert Christopher Dawson launched a series of short books called



Newman

Essays in Order ^[1] in 1931. He began by noting that Western civilization was already on its last legs. Indeed, had already collapsed. His series was premised on the belief that it was time for us to begin thinking about rebuilding civilization from its foundations.

In introducing the series, he not only acknowledges the decline of the West, but also points out that **an international Catholic revival has begun** – is, in fact, already several decades old. Its leading minds were publishing essays about the reestablishment of order. Among those he published were Jacques Maritain, Carl Schmitt, and Theodore Haecker.

It's very interesting how Dawson describes the collapse and why he believed Catholics could plant seeds of a new social order. As a convert, Dawson understood from experience the decline into "bad religion." **The Protestantism he knew had, over**

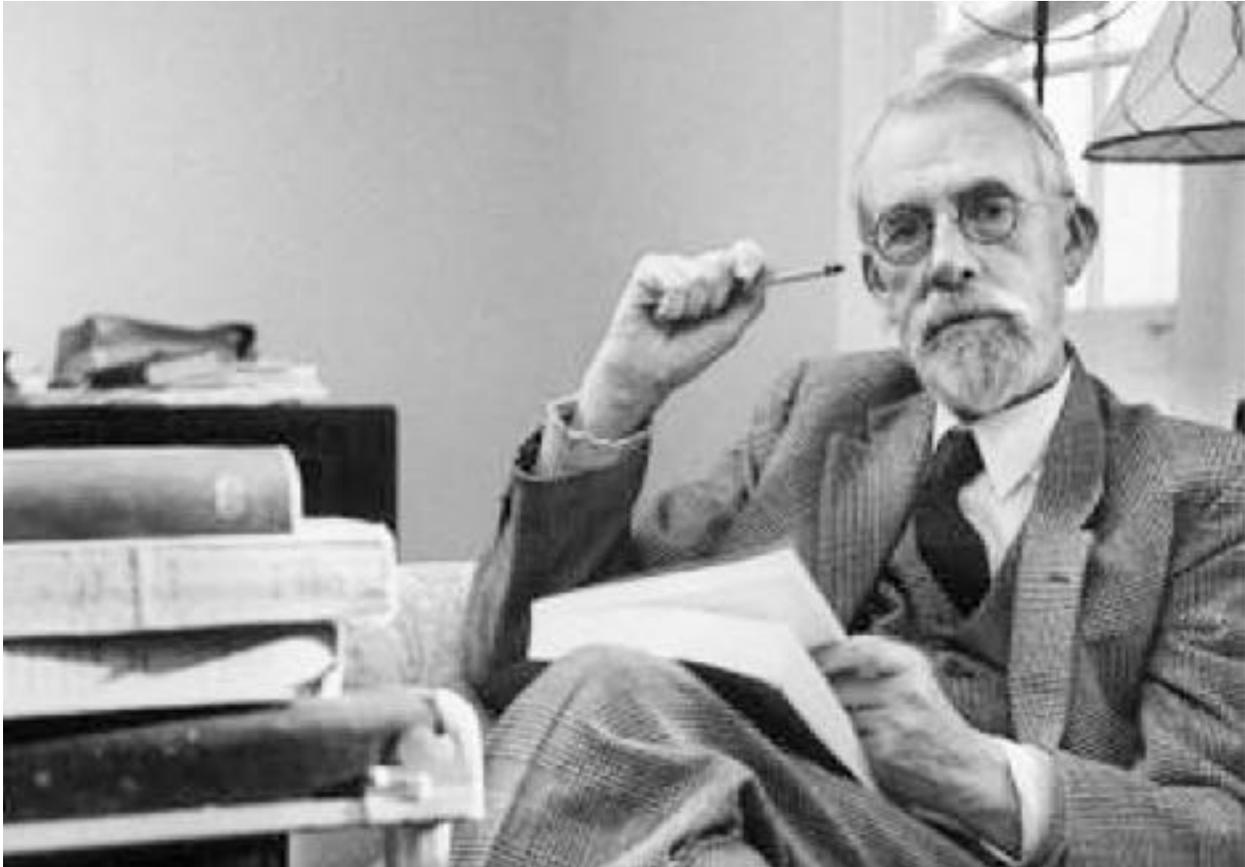
generations, surrendered its dogmatic, theological, and metaphysical substance in favor of mere morality.

He was correct. Saint John Henry Newman spoke, in old age, of his whole life as a combat against **liberalism in religion. By this, he meant an understanding of religion as private truth, or opinion, rather than public dogma.** Newman and Dawson both saw with clarity that many modern **Protestants had come to think of religion as private because they had first reduced it to mere “moral sentiment.”** Religious faith was now considered to be rooted in sentiments rather than in the intellect. **It was fit only to pronounce on questions of goodness or morality, not truth or reality.**

Newman insists, adamantly so, on what he calls the “dogmatic principle.” **Religion is fundamentally a revelation of dogmatic truths to which we must assent, or it is nothing at all.** And yet the vocabulary of much of Newman’s writing shows that his own natural idiom was to speak of religion in terms of feelings and sentiments, as if it were chiefly a department of the moral life. He saw well enough the nets, but he could not always escape them.

By 1931, Dawson benefited from Newman’s experiences, as well as the work of those many others who, as he claims, already constituted a mature Catholic intellectual revival. Not least among these was Jacques Maritain and his wide-ranging expositions of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which did much to shape the minds of two generations.

In Dawson’s view, **the Christ that liberal Protestants proposed came to instruct us to “love our neighbor” and not to initiate us into such arcane mysteries as the inner life of the Trinity or analogy of created being to God as uncreated Being. The injunction to be good was all that was left.**



Dawson

In Dawson's view, religion could not survive as mere morality; **our view of what kinds of actions are good for us can only be known if we have first determined to what purpose or end we – as a specific kind of being – are ordered.** In the 1930s, Maritain argued:

We must know then what man is: which is the office of metaphysics and even of theology. Ethics, which we may consider as the rationalization of the use of Freedom, presupposes metaphysics as its necessary prerequisite. **Ethics cannot be constituted unless its author is first able to answer the questions: *What is man? Why is he made? What is the end of human life?* – (*Freedom in the Modern World*) [3]**

What counts as a moral action for me follows from the kind of being I am – in Aquinas's language, the kind

of *form* I have. And form, in turn, follows from function, from purpose or proper end.

Maritain did not hesitate to answer these metaphysical questions: **“Man is a metaphysical being, an animal that nourishes its life on transcendentals.”** We are by nature born for the contemplation of truth, goodness, and beauty, and by way of these three “transcendentals” we are summoned to our fulfillment in the contemplation of God.



Maritain

In another book, *Essay on Christian Philosophy* ^[4], Maritain explains the ethical implications of this metaphysics. **Christianity proposes that man finds his true end only in the contemplative enjoyment, the everlasting friendship,**

of God. Every last bit of our morality depends upon this conclusion about our purpose and destiny.

If Christians lose sight of the metaphysics, the morality may well stay in place for a while. But, then again, it might not. Our vision of what we are for may shift or alter, entirely unnoticed. Slipping off that transcendent height where, like Moses, we may hope to converse with God, it might gradually slide down ever further until **it reaches the level of merely the present hour and declares the feelings and sentiments of this world all that we may know of heaven.**

These are precisely Douthat's examples of bad religion. Long before the 1950s, much of Christendom had lost sight of our proper end and concerned itself only with maintaining "good behavior." **Untethered from dogma, goodness itself was set adrift. "Love thy neighbor" literally does not mean, for many Christians now, what it did for their ancestors.**

By treating as superfluous dogma what was, in reality, the essential truth of Christianity, Christianity lost first the purpose of its moral dimension and then it fundamentally altered the content of its morality. Alas, there are times when the Catholic religion seems less the source of a renewal of the moral order, as Dawson expected, and more a belated guest at the liberal Christian feast of mere sentiments.

James Matthew Wilson has published eight books, including, most recently, [The Hanging God \(Angelico\)](#) and [The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition \(CUA\)](#). An associate professor of religion and literature in the Department of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions, at Villanova University, he also serves as poetry editor for [Modern Age](#) magazine and as series editor for [Colosseum Books](#), from the Franciscan University at Steubenville Press. [His Amazon page is here.](#)

Article printed from The Catholic Thing: [https://
www.thecatholicthing.org](https://www.thecatholicthing.org)