

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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Occasional Essays  
and Other Stuff  
for Christian Students

Presented by the  
President of

Central Baptist  
Theological Seminary  
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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July 22, 2005

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## Christian Culture Yet Again:

### The Erosion of Faith

Medieval people looked at the world through the lens of theocentrism. They believed in God as the Creator of the universe. Consequently, they thought that the order of the world reflected a preexisting idea in the mind of the Creator. The best way of knowing this order was to know the mind of God. Therefore, revelation was crucial and faith was the organ through which true knowledge of the world was appropriated. To coin a phrase, in the medieval mind “the Truth is up there,” or transcendent. Truth had to be received by revelation and appropriated through faith. Individual facts had to be interpreted in view of the Truth.

This medieval perspective began to break apart with the maturing of nominalism during the later Middle Ages. Nominalism denied the existence of universals and redirected attention to the particulars. This inevitably shifted the emphasis from the transcendent to the immanent, and consequently from a theocentric universe toward an anthropocentric one. As Western thought moved from nominalism through Baconianism and into the Enlightenment, the implications of this anthropocentric universe became increasingly clear.

While people did not immediately deny the existence of God or revelation, they did begin to demand evidence for those beliefs. Simultaneously, they began to revise their notion of God: where they once thought of Him in terms of His enduring nature, they now thought of God in terms of His acts or even His will (which was no longer fettered by a nature). Eventually this shift led them to define God as absent, or impersonal, or even non-existent.

Even when God was recognized as Creator, He was relegated to a smaller and smaller role in the government of the universe. Where the medieval saw God working in all sorts of events, the modern came to believe that the universe was ruled by scientific laws. God's influence was relegated to the "gaps" for which no laws had been discovered. As these gaps grew narrower and narrower, the God of modernity continued to shrink.

Not only did secularization remove God's involvement from the natural world, it also attacked God's sovereignty in the moral and social spheres. Morality and politics were reduced to naturalistic phenomenon, usually explained through some version of convention or contract theory. As Harvey Cox observed in *The Secular City*, secularization consists of three elements: the disenchantment of nature, the desacralization of politics, and the deconsecration of values. These elements were not characteristic of the medieval world view, but they became major themes of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment also changed Western anthropology. During the Middle Ages, humans were viewed as finite, contingent, sinful beings. With the advent of modernity, however, came an emphasis upon human autonomy, rationality, sufficiency, and goodness. Sin was dismissed as mere ignorance or else viewed as a temporary inadequacy that would be overcome in the face of the inevitable march of human progress. Given equality and freedom, humans were in the position to make the world into a utopia.

Of course, such humans required no savior. Therefore, Jesus Christ had to be reinvented. At best He was viewed as a good man or a big brother whose example would enrich human progress. At worst He was viewed as a pious fraud, completely dispensable.

The optimistic anthropology of the age led to demands for a political order that would take account of human rationality, goodness, and brotherhood. If humans were as decent as moderns thought, then the oppressive mechanisms of authority should be dismantled. The vast majority of people was virtuous enough and wise enough to govern, and each was bound to the others by the ties of brotherhood. The ideal political order would therefore be one of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The most significant difference between the medieval mind and the modern mind concerns the role of faith and reason. Medievals were far from devaluing reason, but they understood its inadequacies and willingly subjected it to faith (as in the mottos *credo ut intelligam* and *fides quaerens intellectum*). Faith was the primary category. With modernity, however, the final appeal was always to Reason (now with a capital R), which was regarded as sufficient. Since nothing could be affirmed without adequate reason, doubt displaced faith as the primary category, and moderns became biased toward unbelief. Mystery, majesty, miracle, tradition, and authority were called into question or else rejected outright.

This was an enormously different way of perceiving reality. To the medieval, Truth was anterior to facts. Truth was transcendent. If one did not begin with Truth, the facts themselves would be nonsensical or even deceptive. To the modern, however, truth was equated with fact, and facts were transparent. If one could gather a sufficient number of facts and observe them long enough, the truth was sure to emerge. The element of transcendence was completely surrendered. To the medieval mind, "the Truth is up there," but to the modern, "the truth is out there."

This shift began with the philosophers, but it gradually captured all of Western high culture. Eventually literature, art, music, political theory, and jurisprudence all came under the domination of the Enlightenment. So did theology. People like Ritschl and Schleiermacher consciously adapted Christian categories to fit the spirit of their age.

The intellectual transition from the medieval to the modern world was profound. Few people grasped what had been lost. One who did was the British poet, Matthew Arnold. A child of the Enlightenment, Arnold was a true modern. He objected to Christianity and even regarded Spurgeon as something of a nemesis. But he also understood where modernity would lead. He viewed the future with foreboding. The closing lines of his poem "Dover Beach" are worth pondering.

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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