

BOOK REVIEW

of

Carl F.H. Henry,

Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism,
Crossway Books, 1988.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

While it is true that the United States of America, and Western civilization in general, owes much to its Christian heritage, it cannot be denied that the influence of Christianity has significantly declined from what it used to be. John Blanchard (*Does God Believe in Atheists?*), based on his definition of what a true theist is, concludes that atheism in the West prevails. Phillip Johnson (*Reason in the Balance, The Wedge of Truth*, etc.) claims that Christianity has been excluded from all serious intellectual discussion in the universities: it is relegated to the level of superstition. Carl F.H. Henry also, in the book under review, claims that our civilization is well past its peak and has lost much of what it had in former days. Carl F.H. Henry is one of the most well-known and respected theologians alive today, in conservative, orthodox circles at least. He was the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, the Chairman of the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, has the *Carl F.H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement* at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky named after him, and is the author of many books, the most note-worthy of which is the monumental six-volume work *God, Revelation and Authority*. The current work, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, is a collection of essays, either previously published or orally presented, and collected together because of the common theme.

In the Preface, Lane Dennis, President of Crossway Books, says “Half a generation ago, Dr. Carl F.H. Henry made an arresting claim: ‘The Barbarians Are Coming’ and they threaten to undermine the foundations of Western civilization. To many in 1970 this must have seemed extreme; today, with the distintegration (sic) of morality and culture evident on every hand, it rings prophetically true. . . . The opening chapter of this book presents this original essay - with its penetrating assessment of our cultural malaise, its resounding affirmation of our Savior’s ultimate victory, and its uncompromising call to proclaim and demonstrate the Good News of Jesus Christ in every area of culture. . . . The new barbarianism, Dr. Henry shows, grows out of a thoroughgoing humanistic rejection of God and the Judeo-Christian foundation of Western culture; but more than simply rejecting the legacy of the West, the new barbarianism has embraced a new pagan mentality.”

The book consists of six parts, each part containing one to four chapters. Each chapter is short, with the entire book being about 190 pages in length. Although the essays are connected by a common theme, they were not written to form a systematic development as a book normally does. The table of contents is as follows: PART I: The Rise of Neo-Paganism. 1. The Barbarians are Coming. 2. Diagnosis of a Troubled Time. 3. Toward a Prescription for Recovery. PART II: Essentials in the Battle for Truth. 4. The Fight of the Day. 5. Beggars and Benefactors. 6. Are Theologians an Endangered Species? 7. The Creator and the Neo-Pagan Mind. PART III: Illusion, Idealism and Biblical Truth. 8. Feed Them on Fantasies. 9. Perspectives on Capital Punishment. 10. Where Will Evangelicals Cast Their Lot? PART IV: Education and the Quest for Truth. 11. Facing the Crisis in Education. 12. Educating for Intellectual Excellence. 13. Christian Fund-Raising Heresies. PART V: Confronting Neo-Paganism. 14. The Christian Worldview Imperative. 15. The Christian Scholar’s Task in a Stricken World. 16. The Judeo-Christian Heritage and Human Rights. PART VI: Before Hell Breaks Out. 17. The Uneasy Conscience Revisited.

To adequately summarize this book is not easy. It is a call of concern primarily to the Christian intellectual and spiritual leaders of today. At the end of the book Henry says the following, which pretty much says it all: “We must choose to cast our lot either with a society that admits only private faiths, and then simply add another idol to modernity’s expanding God-shelf, or we must hoist a banner to a higher Sovereign, the Lord of lords and King of kings. Just as the Christian witness to ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ invited unrelenting persecution by Roman authorities, so also Christianity’s reiteration of a universal validity-claim still invites and will continue to invite the entrenched hostility of modern intellectual authority. But our awesome imperative as Christian scholars is to address the divided mind and civilizational turmoil of modernity. The loss of Biblical theism takes its steady toll as world-wisdom declines from theism to humanism and then from humanism to animalism, the neo-paganism of our time.

“If evangelicals believe that the enduring corrective of modernity’s badly-skewed ethical and epistemic compass is the self-disclosed God and His moral agenda, they had better say so and live so in this crucial turning-time in America.”