

# Cardinal Pell on Global Warming, Western Civilization

Posted by [Chris Oppermann](#)  
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His Eminence George Cardinal Pell, the Archbishop of Sydney, who delivered the [keynote address](#) at Acton's 2004 annual dinner ([full text here](#)), has recently produced two notable commentaries: the first on global warming, the second on the Christian foundations of modern Western Civilization.

First, the Cardinal [responds](#) to critics of [his view](#) that the frenzy over the magnitude of man-made climate change is overblown:

## **Vanishing Challenge**

By + Cardinal George Pell  
Archbishop of Sydney  
18 July 2010

Humanly induced climate change was once “the greatest moral challenge of our age”. No longer. The hullabaloo is much less.

A politician referred my February article on global warming to the Bureau of Meteorology for comment. In a roundabout way they conceded the truth of most of my factual statements, but ducked the issue of Roman warming and claimed that “all available hemispheric to global scale analyses” suggest recent decades have been warmer than in the Middle Ages. This is misleading.

Professor Ian Plimer, in [\*Heaven and Earth: Global Warming the Missing Science\*](#) (Connorcourt, 2009) cites the scientific evidence from pollen studies, drill cores and lake sediments to show that temperatures were 2 to 6°C warmer around the world in the period from 250BC to 450AD (the Roman Warming). Records from the time report citrus trees and grapes being grown in England as far north as Hadrian's Wall, and olive groves on the Rhine. It was wetter and warmer, but sea levels were also lower. Areas which are now either forests (because it is cooler) or deserts (because it is drier – for example, the Roman provinces of North Africa) were growing crops.

Professor Plimer also cites scientific evidence from the Middle Ages. Tree rings, boreholes, sediment cores from oceans and flood plains, pollen studies, peat bogs, ice cores, fossils and carbon chemistry show that temperatures were warmer throughout the world during 900-1300AD than they are now, by 1-2.5°C in different places. The amount of land used for agriculture increased. In Greenland, cattle and sheep were run and crops like barley were grown. Grapevines were grown in Newfoundland, and vineyards in Germany were grown 220 metres higher than the maximum altitude today. Roots and stumps in the Polar Urals suggesting the tree line there was 30 metres higher in 1000AD. The North Atlantic was free of ice, allowing the Vikings to travel to North America.

Warmer temperatures and higher rainfall during the Medieval Warming enabled societies

and economic life to flourish. In Europe it saw the growth of cities, the establishment of universities, and a boom in cathedral building. China's population doubled in the course of a century and records from China and Japan also indicate that they experienced warmer temperatures. The Medieval Warming also brought higher levels of water in lakes and rivers.

There was no industry in Roman or Medieval times.

Why were the temperatures higher? What were the causes then and now?

Next are [remarks](#) delivered at a recent program of the [Institute of Public Affairs](#), a prominent Australian think tank. Here, Cardinal Pell reminds us that the heritage of Western Civilization comes from its uniquely Christian character:

### **The Heritage of Western Civilization**

Remarks at the launch of the Institute of Public Affairs'  
Foundations of Western Civilisation Program  
Stonington Mansion, Melbourne

By + Cardinal George Pell  
Archbishop of Sydney

It is a privilege to speak at the launch of the IPA's Foundations of Western Civilisation Program tonight, and I propose to begin my few words on "The Heritage of Western Civilization" by speaking about China. This is not because I believe that China must achieve economic supremacy (twenty years ago we were ascribing that honour to Japan) but because China is a radically different culture, nourished for two thousand years by the teachings of Buddha and Confucius before the destructive barbarism of Mao and the Red Guards; a nation which is now searching for the secrets of Western vitality and for a code or codes to provide decency and social cohesion that is compatible with economic development.

Let me give two examples, admittedly only two straws in an vast cyclone.

In 2002 a group of tourists from the United States visited the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing to hear a talk by a Chinese academic who prefers to remain anonymous. Speaking in the plural for unnamed fellow thinkers, he described their search for what accounted for the pre-eminence, the success of the West all over the world. Their studies ranged widely. Originally they thought the main reason was more powerful guns; then it was Western political systems, before considering the claims of the Western economic system.

Finally, and I quote "in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. . . . The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this."

My second straw in the gale comes from Zhao Xiao, an official Chinese economist, who

wrote also in 2002 a fascinating article titled “Market Economies With Churches and Market Economies Without Churches”. It made the obvious points that market economies promote efficiency, discourage laziness, force competition. They work and produce wealth. But, he pointed out, a market cannot discourage people from lying or causing harm and indeed may encourage people to be industrious in their efforts to harm others and pursue wealth by any means.

Zhao is critical of the corruption, swindles and exploitation in Chinese economic life. His diagnosis of China provides a fascinating comparison not only with Christian idealism and indifferent performance, but with the brave new world of the Western propagandists for radical secularism where the call for common moral standards is rarely heard. Zhao writes: “These days Chinese people do not believe in anything. They don’t believe in God, they don’t believe in the devil, they don’t believe in providence, they don’t believe in the last judgement, to say nothing about heaven. A person who believes in nothing can only believe in himself. And self-belief implies that anything is possible – what do lies, cheating, harm and swindling matter?”

Often an outsider is needed to see what is painfully obvious, especially if the insight or truth is unpalatable and systematically avoided by many in the commentariat.

In the West even the atheists and secularists live on the remains of the Christian moral system, on a Christian overdraft. In China there is no such invisible hand, no powerful if unacknowledged traditions which inhibit the Darwinians among us from being social Darwinians. Even Richard Dawkins and Peter Singer claim to be philanthropists, believers in brotherly and sisterly love.

In order to recognize our strengths it is useful to examine differently constructed societies such as ancient Rome or modern China and the paths they have chosen.

China today is not a democracy, but a militarily supported dictatorship where hundreds of millions do not participate in the increasing prosperity, and where a ruthless one child policy has been imposed for decades. When this policy was implemented in a society which prefers sons to daughters, and where modern technology now enables the sex of babies to be discovered before birth, the end result was the current sex ratio of 130 boys born for every 100 girls (the natural range is 103-06 boys for every 100 girls). By 2020 China will have 30 to 40 million more males than females 19 years or younger.

On top of this, China will also follow Russia, Japan and most of Europe into a demographic implosion, with growing numbers of old people and fewer and fewer young people to support them. But China (and indeed India) will do this long before a decent standard of living extends to all or even most of their populations.

It is this social turmoil as well as the spectacular economic development which is impelling thinkers and government leaders in China to search for agents of social cohesion and impelling some of their thinkers to make these startling claims about Western superiority and the Christian contribution to this.

For me Western civilization derives from Athens, Rome and Jerusalem a wonderful mixture

of reason, law and Judaeo-Christian monotheism.

Two rudimentary qualifications or clarifications are immediately necessary.

The dark side of the Western tradition has to be acknowledged, ranging as it does from the revolutionary violence of the French Revolution through to the tyrannies of the twentieth century, Nazism and Communism. Pol Pot was trained by Parisian Stalinists and even Mao owed more to Stalin than to the example of any Oriental despot.

But neither Nazism nor Communism should be listed as belonging to Western civilization, because they both hated the Judaeo-Christian God and substituted the law of the jungle for natural law. George Steiner has even claimed that the insane Nazi hatred of the Jews derived from the unique Jewish role of introducing monotheism into world history; or, in secularist terms, from their invention of God.

My second and much happier qualification is to acknowledge gratefully the English speaking tradition of Western civilization to which I belong, the thought world of Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens; Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin; Adam Smith and John Henry Newman; Edmund Burke, William Wilberforce and the Westminster system of government; English common-law and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. We all have many reasons for gratitude.

Let me explain the peculiarly Christian contribution to Western civilization by following Pierre Manent, a contemporary French philosopher. For Manent the West was the product of the creative tension, and sometimes fierce conflict, between the “party of nature” – the classical inheritance of Greece and Rome, stressing pride, magnanimity and natural virtues – and the Christian “party of grace”, stressing humility, renunciation and the cultivation of the soul. Manent’s claim is that modern man emerged when the tension between these two ancient traditions became open warfare in the eighteenth century. Modernity and its unhelpfully named sequel post-modernism regard humans as being above and beyond both nature and transcendence. The two traditional lodestars of God and human nature were rejected, with consequences we are still trying to deal with now. These are the major sources of Western discontent today.

Rejecting the idea that human beings share a constant and irreducible core which makes us human has not only produced massive confusion and incoherence in morals, but helped undermine the concept of human dignity; that each individual possesses an innate dignity, simply by virtue of being human, which must not be violated. In other words, attacks on marriage, family and life produce whirlwinds of discontent across the generations.

This rejection of human nature is at the heart of radical versions of autonomy, individualism and secularism. The propaganda is all about freedom: freedom to choose our own values, and to make and remake ourselves as we please. The reality is a moral relativism that makes evil a question of one’s particular perspective or feelings, and a world where human beings become means to others’ ends. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), with its dim-witted brutes bred for slaves, is still some way away. But our willingness to entertain breeding humans for spare parts (only up to a certain stage for the moment) shows how cheap life has become, and how we threaten to lose our bearings.

Melbourne was visited in recent days by a plague of atheists (I think that's the right collective noun) angrily rejecting an absence. While some have violently rejected him, for many more God has simply been forgotten. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed in his Templeton Lecture in 1983: "if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century . . . I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: Men have forgotten God."

The consequences of forgetting God have been significant for morality, human dignity, and society in the West. Human beings are no longer made in God's image, but are simply the highest form of animal, whose DNA is 99 per cent identical with that of chimpanzees. With no eternal destiny there is no danger of judgement in the after-life for our wrong-doings. An enormous effort has gone into pursuing this particular "liberation". As Czeslaw Milosz has pointed out, "a true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death-the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders, we are not going to be judged."

Calls by some to reject all religions have been amplified in the wake of Islamist terrorism. But not all religions are the same. Different faiths produce very different societies, as the Chinese specialists with whom we began are now teaching us. The English historian Christopher Dawson argued that "it is impossible to separate culture from religion", or culture from cult. The biggest mistake that radical secularists and others have made over the last two centuries is to believe that religion is merely "a secondary phenomenon, which has arisen from the exploitation of human credulity." It is impossible to understand the history of the West, or why the West became what it is, without Christianity.

We need to introduce our children to Western civilisation through the teaching of philosophy, history and English literature, in solid rather than debased forms; and edge them towards considering the big questions: is there truth? what is goodness? can we believe in beauty? Knowledge is indispensable but it is never enough by itself. We need to re-present God and the insights about how we should live, which come from recognising our shared human nature. Christians need to challenge intellectually the many agnostics of good will to face up to the absence of alternatives. Teaching the foundations of Western civilisation is not an intellectual or aesthetic luxury. It is essential to building strong communities and to ensuring that places like Australia remain just and decent societies.

So there is plenty of work to be done, and I have no doubt that John Roskam and the Institute for Public Affairs, together with the distinguished team they have assembled to lead the Foundations of Western Civilization Program, are well and truly up to the task. It is an important project, and a very timely one, and I am delighted to lend it my wholehearted support.