



How the West Lost Its Soul



A PORTRAIT OF JESUS CHRIST IN A CHURCH DESTROYED BY RUSSIAN SHELLING IN SOUTHERN UKRAINE ON JULY 11, 2022. (MYKHAYLO PALINCHAK/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES)

We've abandoned the founding religious story that has sustained us for 1,500 years. The result is the greatest age of abundance we've ever known—and a complete lack of meaning.

By Paul Kingsnorth

09.13.25 —Faith

Faith



The new religious revival, faith and community, are ...

FOLLOW TOPIC



212



154



LISTEN TO ARTICLE

21 MINS

Conventional wisdom insists that technology has made life better. We are more connected, more comfortable, and certainly wealthier than ever before.

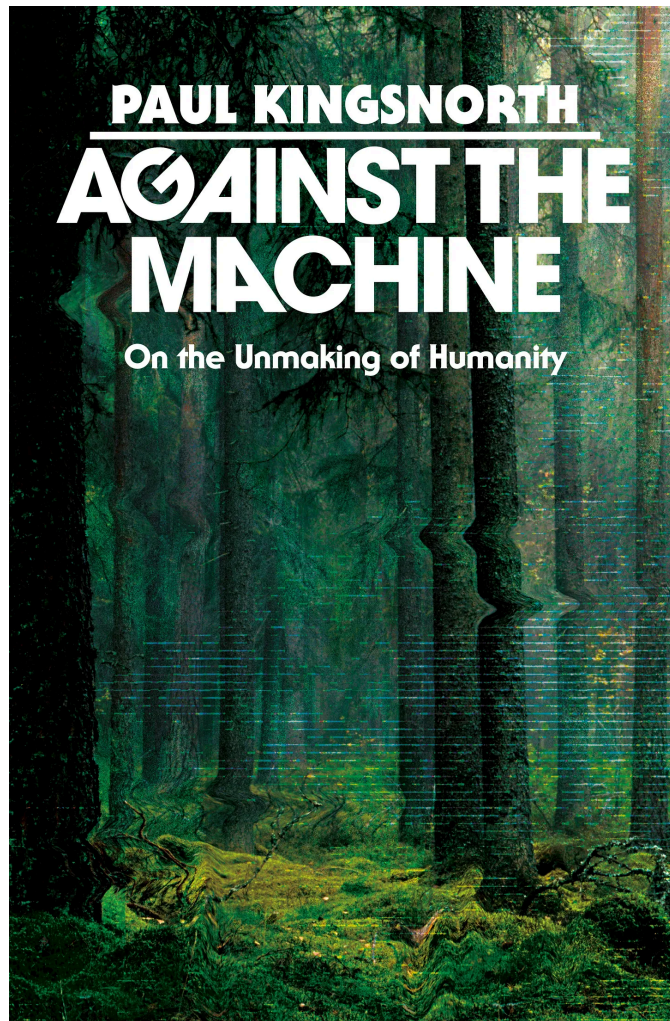
But at what cost? That's the subject of Paul Kingsnorth's forthcoming book, [Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity](#), out September 23. We're delighted to be publishing an exclusive excerpt today.

Every culture, Kingsnorth writes, is built around a sacred order. For 1,500 years, the West's sacred order has been its founding biblical story, which shaped the working week, our understanding of the universe, and the very notion of individuals with God-given rights.

But over the past several decades, we've abandoned that sacred order in favor of the breakneck pursuit of wealth, innovation, and power. In the process, we've become spiritually bankrupt, grasping for meaning and roots even as we build skyscrapers to the heavens.

This is one of the most urgent and provocative topics of the technological age. And on Monday, September 29, at 6:30 p.m., Kingsnorth will be joining Bari Weiss live in New York at Redeemer Presbyterian Church East Side for a conversation about the book. Tickets are available now—[get yours here](#).

Until then, we leave you with a question at the heart of his work: When the West's sacred order falls, what takes its place? —The Editors



(VIA PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE)



Let me tell you a story.

This story begins in a garden, at the very beginning of all things. All life can be found in this garden: every living being, every bird and animal, every tree and plant. Humans live here too, and so does the creator of all of it, the source of everything, and he is so close that he can be seen and heard and spoken to. Everything walks in the garden together. Everything is in communion.

At the center of this garden grows a tree, the fruit of which imparts hidden knowledge. The humans—the last creatures to be formed by the

creator—will be ready to eat this fruit one day, and when they do they will gain its knowledge and be able to use that knowledge wisely for the benefit of themselves and of all other things that live in the garden. But they are not ready yet. The humans are still young, and unlike the rest of creation they are only partially formed.

Do not eat that fruit, the creator tells them. *Eat anything else you like, but not that.*

We know the next part of the story because it is still happening to us all the time. “Why should you not eat the fruit?” says the voice of the tempting serpent, the voice from the undergrowth of our minds. “Why should you not have the power that you are worthy of? Why should this creator keep it all for himself? Why should you listen to him? He just wants to keep you down. Eat the fruit. It’s your right. You’re worth it!”

So we eat the fruit, and we see that we are naked, and we become ashamed. Our mind is filled with questions; the gears inside it begin to whir and turn and suddenly now here is *us* and *them*, here is *humanity* and *nature*, here is *people* and *God*. We can never go home again. We fall into disintegration and out of the garden forever. Armed angels are set at the gates. The state of questless ease that was our birthright is gone. We chose knowledge over communion; we chose power over humility.

The earth is our home now.

READ

I Found Freedom Along the Alaska Highway

This earth is a broken version of the garden, of our original integration with creator and creation. On Earth we must toil to break the soil, to plant seeds, to fight off predators. We will sicken and die. Everything is eating everything else. There is war and dominion and misery.

There is beauty and love and friendship too, but all of it ends in death. These are the consequences of our pursuit of knowledge and power, but we keep pursuing them because we know no other means to escape from our exile. We keep building towers and cities and forgetting where we came from. We forget the creator and worship ourselves.

After so many centuries of this, after so many years of humans missing the mark, of wandering from the path, of civilizations rising and falling and warring and dying, of eating the fruit again and again, the creator stages an intervention. He comes to Earth in human form to show us the way back home. Most people don't listen, naturally, and we all know how the story ends. God himself walks on Earth and what does humanity do? We torture and kill him.

But the joke is on us, because it turns out that this was the point all along. The way of this creator is not the way of power but of humility, not of conquest but of sacrifice. When he comes to Earth he comes not as warlord, king, or high priest, but as a barefoot artisan in an obscure desert province.

He walks with the downtrodden and the rejected, he scorns wealth and power, and through his death he conquers death itself, releasing us from our bondage. He gives us a way out, a way back home. But we have to work at it. The path back to the garden can only be found by giving up the vainglory, the search for power and the unearned knowledge which got us exiled in the first place. The path is the path of renunciation, of love,

and of sacrifice. To get back to the garden, we have to go through the cross.



Now imagine that a whole culture is built around this story. Imagine that this culture survives for over a thousand years, building layer upon layer of meaning, tradition, innovation, and creation, however imperfectly, on these foundations.

Then imagine that this culture dies, leaving only ruins.

If you live in the West, you do not have to imagine any of this. You are living among those ruins, and you have been all your life. Many of them are still beautiful—intact cathedrals, Bach concertos—but they are ruins nonetheless. They are the remains of something called “Christendom,” a 1,500-year civilization into which this particular sacred story seeped, informing every aspect of life, bending and changing and transforming everything in its image.



A SIGN HANGS ABOVE A SOUVENIR STAND AT THE COLOSSEUM IN ROME. (SHEPARD SHERBELL/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES)

No aspect of daily life was unaffected by this story: the organization of the working week; the cycle of annual feast days and rest days; the payment of taxes; the moral duties of individuals; the very notion of individuals, with “God-given” rights and duties; the attitude to neighbors and strangers; the obligations of charity; the structure of families; and most of all, the wide picture of the universe—its structure and meaning, and our human place within it.

Current arguments about the state of “the West” usually begin with disputes about what it actually is. For liberals, the West is the “Enlightenment” and everything that followed—parliamentary democracy, human rights, individualism, freedom of speech. For conservatives, it might signal a set of cultural values such as traditional attitudes to family life, religion, and national identity, and probably broad support for capitalist economics. For the kinds of postmodern leftists who have dominated the culture for some time now, the West—assuming they will concede that it even exists—is largely a front for colonization, empire, racism, and various other historical horrors.

All of these things could be true at the same time, but each is also a fairly recent development. The West is a lot older than liberalism, conservatism, or Marxism. The West, in fact, is at the same time a simpler, more ancient, and immensely more complex concoction than any of these could offer. It is the result of the binding together of people and peoples across a continent, over centuries of time, by a sacred order constructed around this particular religious story.

In his book [*Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*](#), written shortly after World War II, the medieval historian Christopher Dawson explained it like this:

There has never been any unitary organization of Western culture apart from that of the Christian Church, which provided an effective principle of social unity. . . . Behind the ever-changing pattern of Western culture there was a living faith which gave Europe a certain sense of spiritual community, in spite of all the conflicts and divisions and social schisms that marked its history.

Your personal attitude to that “living faith” is beside the point here. So, come to that, is the entirely legitimate question of whether “Christendom” was even Christian much of the time. The point to focus on is this: that when a culture built around such a sacred order dies then there will be upheaval at every level of society, from the level of politics right down to the level of the soul. The very notion of an individual life will shift dramatically. The family structure, the meaning of work, moral attitudes, the very existence of morals at all, notions of good and evil, sexual mores, perspectives on everything from money to rest to work to nature to kin to responsibility to duty: Everything will be up for grabs.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argued in his classic work, [*After Virtue*](#), that the very notion of virtue itself would eventually become inconceivable once the source it sprung from was removed. If human life is regarded as having no [*telos, or higher meaning*](#), he said, it will ultimately be impossible to agree on what “virtue” means, or why it should mean anything. MacIntyre’s favored teacher was Aristotle, not Jesus, but his critique of the Enlightenment and his prediction of its ultimate failure were based on a clear-sighted understanding of the mythic vision of medieval Christendom, and of the partial, empty, and over-rational humanism with which Enlightenment philosophers attempted to replace it.

MacIntyre, writing four decades ago, believed that the failure of the Enlightenment was already clearly evident but that society did not see it,

because the monuments to the old sacred order were still standing, like Roman statues after the Empire's fall. To illustrate his thesis, MacIntyre used the example of the *taboo*.

This word was first recorded by Europeans in [the journals](#) of [Captain James Cook](#), in which he recorded his visits to Polynesia. “The English seamen had been astonished at what they took to be the lax sexual habits of the Polynesians,” MacIntyre explains, “and were even more astonished to discover the sharp contrast with the rigorous prohibition placed on such conduct as men and women eating together. When they enquired why men and women were prohibited from eating together, they were told that the practice was taboo. But when they enquired further what *taboo* meant, they could get little further information.”

The modern experiment has been the act of dethroning both literal human sovereigns and the representatives of the sacred order, and replacing them with purely human, and purely abstract, notions.

Further research suggested that the Polynesian islanders themselves were not really sure why these prohibitions existed, either; indeed, when taboos were [abolished entirely](#) in parts of Polynesia a few decades later, there were few immediately obvious consequences. So were such prohibitions meaningless all along? No: But when the context in which they once had meaning evaporates—once times change—the taboos, even if they are still standing, have less and less meaning. They eventually become relics. Once a society reaches this stage, one shove is all it takes to start a domino effect that will knock them all down.

In the West, the final taboos are falling like ninepins, and from all across the cultural spectrum the effects are being felt.

If you're broadly socially conservative, the questions are coming at you in a rolling barrage. Why should a man not marry a man? Why should a man not become a woman? Why should a child not have three fathers, or be born from a uterus transplanted into a man's body? Why should the state [not assist](#) people to commit suicide?

Things are not much better, though, for those on the left who are concerned about the destructive inequalities created by the modern economy. "Woe to you who are rich," [said Jesus](#), in one of many blasts against wealth and power in the Gospels. "Greed is a sin against God," wrote Thomas Aquinas. Not anymore. Now our economy runs on greed, and it laughs in the face of any foolish and unrealistic romantic who rejects it. The shaky binding straps with which medieval Christendom kept the traders, the merchants, and the urban bourgeoisie tied down have long since broken, leaving us with no better argument against rampant greed and inequality than against total sexual license or the remaking of the human body itself.

If you knock out the pillars of a sacred order, the universe itself will change shape. At the primal level, such a change is experienced by people as a deep and lasting trauma, whether they know it or not. No culture can just shrug off, or rationalize away, the metaphysics which underpin it and expect to remain a culture in anything but name—if that.

When such an order is broken, what replaces it? The end of the taboos doesn't bring about some abstract "freedom"; it strips a culture of its heart. That heart had, in reality, stopped beating some time before, but once the formal architecture is gone too, there is an empty space waiting to be filled—and nature abhors a vacuum.



We are now at this point in the West. Since at least the 1960s, our empty taboos have been crumbling away, and in just the last few years the last remaining monuments have been—often literally—torn down.

Christendom expired over centuries for a complex set of reasons, but it was not killed off by an external enemy. Instead, we dismantled our story from within. What replaced it was not a new sacred order, but a denial that such a thing existed at all.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre explains what happened next. The Enlightenment project of the 18th century was an attempt to build a “morality” (a word that had not existed in this sense before that time) loosed from theology. It was the project of constructing a wholly new human being “After God,” in which a new, personal, moral sense—no longer eternal in nature, or accountable to any higher force—would form the basis of the culture and the individual.

Did it work? In a word: no. Post-Enlightenment “morality” was no substitute for a higher purpose. If the correct path for society or the individual is based on nothing more than that individual’s personal judgement, then who or what is to be the final arbiter? Ultimately, without that higher purpose to bind it—without, in other words, a sacred order—society will fall into emotivism, relativism, and ultimately disintegration. This was MacIntyre’s prediction. It’s starting to look like he was spot-on.

Every culture, whether it knows it or not, is built around a sacred order. This does not, of course, need to be a Christian order. It could be Islamic, Hindu, or Taoist. It could be based around the veneration of ancestors or the worship of Odin. But there is a throne at the heart of every culture, and whoever sits on it will be the force you take your instruction from.

The modern experiment has been the act of dethroning both literal human sovereigns and the representatives of the sacred order, and replacing them with purely human, and purely abstract, notions—"the people" or "liberty" or "democracy" or "progress." I'm all for liberty, and it would be nice to give democracy a try one day too; but the dethroning of the sovereign—Christ—who sat at the heart of the Western sacred order has not led to universal equality and justice. It has led, via a bloody shortcut through Robespierre, Stalin, and Hitler, to the complete triumph of the power of money, which has splintered our culture and our souls into a million angry shards.

This has been the terrible irony of the age of reason, and of the liberal and leftist theories and revolutions which resulted from it. From 1789 to 1968, every one of them ultimately failed, but in destroying the old world and its sacred order, they cleared a space for money culture to move in and commodify the ruins.



CUSTOMERS BROWSE CLOTHES AT THE EL CORTE INGLÉS DEPARTMENT STORE ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WINTER SALES IN BARCELONA, SPAIN, ON JANUARY 7, 2012. (DAVID RAMOS VIA GETTY IMAGES)

The vacuum created by the collapse of our old taboos was filled by the poison gas of consumer capitalism. It has now infiltrated every aspect of our lives in the way that the Christian story once did, so much so that we barely even notice as it colonizes everything from the way we eat to the values we teach our children. Cut loose in a postmodern present, with no center, no truth, and no direction, we have not become independent-minded, responsible, democratic citizens in a human republic. We have become slaves to the power of money, and worshippers of the self.

The old taboos are not coming back, and Christendom will not be returning to Europe anytime soon. Neither do we need to desire it. The point is not to make an idol of the past, but to recognize that when a culture kills its sovereign, the throne will not remain empty for long.

We are not in an existential fight for the future of “Western civilization.” Western civilization is already dead—and both sides of the current “war” are reacting, in their own particular ways, to the vacuum that has replaced it—a vacuum which something must come to fill.

When a sacred order collapses, despair can ensue, even among those who would not want its return or who are not even aware of what is missing. But the cycle of rise and fall is an inevitable part of the human historical pattern, and a necessary one. “The passage from one cycle to another,” wrote French philosopher and Sufi mystic [René Guénon](#), “can take place only in darkness.”

What if we are in that passage now? It would explain the strange, tense, shattering, and frustrating tenor of the times. It would start, too, to get to the heart of what we are lacking, for we modern creatures are people with everything and nothing all at once. We—at least if we are among the lucky ones—have every gadget and recipe and website and storefront and exotic holiday in the world available to us, but we are lacking two things that we seem to need, but grasp at nonetheless: meaning, and roots.



From [AGAINST THE MACHINE: On the Unmaking of Humanity](#) by Paul Kingsnorth, published by Thesis, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC. Copyright © 2025 by Paul Kingsnorth.

The Free Press earns a commission from any purchases made through all book links in this article.

Recommend The Free Press to your readers

A new media company built on the ideals that were once the bedrock of American journalism.

Recommend

Paul Kingsnorth

Writer, Orthodox Christian, reactionary radical,
aspiring beekeeper. www.paulkingsnorth.net

TAGS:

TECHNOLOGY

BOOKS

IDEAS

RELIGION



MAKE A COMMENT



LIKE ARTICLE



SHARE ARTICLE

Comments

212

COMMUNITY GUIDELINES



Write a comment...



Lanny Lanny 10m

...

Even when I disagree with Paul I find his writing always makes me think and question.

Good job TFP.



LIKE (1)



REPLY



SHARE



PJHansen PJHansen 14m

...

Excellent article, Paul! I always enjoy your insights and pray you have a wonderful book tour and much success.

♡ LIKE (1) 💬 REPLY

📤 SHARE

[210 more comments...](#)

More in Faith



We Were Taught to Hate Jews

‘It’s like asking me how often I drink water. Antisemitism...

💬 552 ♡ 1,058

MADELEINE ROWLEY — 12.16.23



The Young Catholic Women Bringing Back Veils

A new generation of worshippers is longing for a ‘lost type of



As Christians Are Slaughtered, the World Looks Away

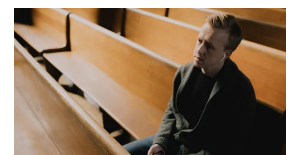
Islamists massacred over 200 people in Yelwata, Nigeria—...

💬 883 ♡ 735

MADELEINE KEARNS — 06.26.25



Things Worth Remembering: The Resurrection of the Body and the



Hallowed Be Thy App

Since it was launched in 2018, the Christian prayer app Hallowed h...

Immortality of the Soul

Preacher-poet John
Donne gave voice to
his faith with a...

 351  564

DOUGLAS MURRAY —
03.31.24

Catholicism.'

 793  1,216

Madeleine Kearns — 08.25.24

 610  535

MADELEINE KEARNS —
04.05.25

FOR FREE PEOPLE.

[SEARCH](#)[ABOUT](#)[CAREERS](#)[SHOP](#)[PODCASTS](#)[VIDEO](#)

DOWNLOAD THE APP  

©2025 THE FREE PRESS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

POWERED BY SUBSTACK.

[PRIVACY](#) · [TERMS](#) · [COLLECTION NOTICE](#)