ARISE & BUILD

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DIGGING DEEPER INTO THE DEATH OF AN AGE

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



This issue of *Arise & Build* features R. J. Rushdoony's 1970 discussion of *The Death of an Age and its Faith*. Rushdoony begins by observing that "the death of an age is a bloody business" marked by ugliness and evil, and he goes on to articulate the dynamics of humanism as its inevitable march into chaos advances.

Like the Philistines who still worshiped Dagon long after the Ark of the Covenant had smashed their idol's pretensions (1 Sam. 5), humanists remain committed to their false gods despite their legacies of dismal failure. This is precisely what Jer. 2:11 reports, that pagan nations refused to change their gods, remaining fiercely loyal to their idols, while God's people "changed their glory for that which doth not profit." The pagans are more loyal to their false gods than Christians are to the true God.

As often as not, the death of humanism in a culture creates a zombie whereby humanism persists in a new guise. However, when Christians become serious about God's kingdom, the dawn of godly reformation can change the playing field in one nation after another.

LIPSTICK ON THE PIG

What do you do with a corpse? To hide the odor of putrefaction, you apply ointments and fragrances. You do everything you can to hide the reality of the corpse's decay, which would otherwise be evident to all observers. Humanism is vigorously defended despite its decay, and despite the ways in which its collapse is assured (culturally, economically, educationally, artistically, etc.). As some wags have suggested, we've been subjected to the movie *Weekend at Bernie's* on an international scale, in nation after nation, except it's no longer a vapid comedy about dragging a dressed-up corpse around to fool people.

As Rushdoony has elsewhere warned, we live in a superficial age where the most important aspect of our world is the surface. Control of the surface, the façade, the appearance, the narrative, is all-important to humanistic ages. The Philistines of Ashdod did their best to restore Dagon's temple in Ashdod to its original condition after its encounter with the Ark of the Covenant, and that mindset persists today.

HUMANISM: A MULTI-FACETED INFECTION

The various modes by which humanism infects our world are discussed in three newly-published books by Dr. Rushdoony appearing in late 2026, two of which we'll be citing here for the first time. The first one, *Underground Man: Vulgarity as Virtue*, expands on Dostoevsky's concept of the "underground man," in which Rushdoony shows the organic connection between humanistic values and death.

Rushdoony points out that it isn't certainty, but the hatred of certainty, that is symptomatic of a death wish. He explains the situation as described by Dostoevsky thus:

> Certainty in any area is a bondage for man, who needs to be free to be himself without any certainties compelling his conduct. Certainty is *"the beginning of death."*[1]

In commenting on D. H. Lawrence's "polymorphous perversity," Rushdoony observes:

> In all the arts as in life generally, we have seen the humanistic efforts to gain freedom outside of and apart from the triune God end in negation, perversity, the enthronement of the ugly and the meaningless, and in a will to death. Underground man is governed by a will to death, but an insistence that death is the true life.[2]

The conclusion that Rushdoony draws from across the humanistic landscape is inescapable:

> This spirit of negation, the choice of evil, is not new. What is new in our era is its enthronement in places of authority and power. It now speaks as the true intellectualism. Underground man now seeks to impose his meaninglessness, negation, and will to death on all men.[3]

As Mark Rushdoony writes in the foreword to *Revolutionary Man: Chaos as Virtue*,

> My father often described the current historic scene as the end of the age of humanism, its increasingly obvious failures representing its death throes. While it still holds sway over much of our culture, it is lurching from failure to failure. As it does so, it is becoming increasingly irrational.[4]
>
> The author's intent was to point out the revolutionary spirit as evidence of the death of the long-held sway of humanism.[5]

Mark makes clear that his father wasn't penning a gloom-and-doom volume but was confident in the conquest of God's kingdom as the Great Commission advanced further into the future.

R. J. Rushdoony summarizes the collapse of the "beyond good and evil" schools of thought, and the chaos cults based on that amoral view, both of which attempt to dissolve history into myth but then slam headfirst into the Bible:

> But the reality remains, *history is the arena of the struggle between good and evil; history is inescapably ethical*. To transcend good and evil, to overcome alienation, requires the suspension and death of history; it requires an escape from history to myth. Biblical religion is rigorously anti-mythical, and it wages war on a world of myth. Every attempt of the champions of chaos cults to ascribe myth to the Biblical record is not only intellectually dishonest but is also a failure. Attempts at syncretism also break down: the Bible is unassimilable to myth. … As a result, the way out comes to be warfare against the Bible and Biblical religion, against Christian theism.[6]

ANOTHER VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Herbert Schlossberg's seminal *Idols for Destruction* encapsulates the kind of argumentation made by Rushdoony and others, setting forth the reasons why humanism, in its commitment to irrational action, is dying.

> The common tendency to seek technical solutions to societal problems is nothing more than the substitution of a technical-rational model for the older religious-moral one. When social pathologies appear, we blame them on the "structures of society" (or if the religious establishment is speaking, our problem becomes "structural sin"). If the structures of society are guilty, and not we, then there is no possibility for personal repentance and no way to deal with guilt. We then do the irrational and destructive acts that maintain the systems of redistribution and humanitarianism, in a desperate and futile attempt to expunge guilt feelings by what seem to be good works. Doing as we please and blaming the result on structures is the moral equivalent of the free lunch. … The diagnosis is wrong, and so the intended cure is futile.[7]

The tendency toward cultural death is built into the system that Schlossberg so accurately identifies:

> The modern habit of subsuming moral categories into material categories is a debunking process. The most sophisticated social thought places its emphasis not on one's obligations but on one's desires, although those are often dignified by being called "needs" or "rights." The moral foundation is thrown out the window and only the appetite is left. This may account for the fact that virtually every expression of modern idolatry is fatalistic.[8]

When Schlossberg observes how

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money flows in such a hamstrung, guilt-governed culture, the suicidal nature of humanism can no longer be hidden.

> Materialist philosophies are unable to see that the focus of capital that is indispensable is the moral and intellectual strength that creates abundance out of whatever is available. The West and its developing imitators, however, destroy what they have been given.[9]

In this way, humanism floors the accelerator as it points its ships of state to the grave.

ISAIAH 28: WARNING AND HOPE

We now turn to Scripture and its witness.

> Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves. Therefore, thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. (Isa. 28:14-16)

The "scoffers" or "scorners" represent "the last degree of ungodliness: open contempt of religion." G. Rawlinson shows that the cascade into chaos begins with the one word, *scorn*, and how that scorn of men is directed:

> "Scorners," in the language of Scripture, are those who set at nought God's prophets, or His messages, or His Holy Word, or His Church, or His ministers. Men delight in such scorn because it seems to them so fine a thing, so grand a thing, so bold, so brave, so heroic. It is a poor thing, comparatively, to exalt one's self against man; it is magnificent to measure one's strength with God's, and enter the lists against *Him*.[10]

It is in their irrationality and absurdity that humanistic ages march toward their doom.

In the words of George Adam Smith, "men are never saved from death and hell by making covenants with them."[11]

H. C. Leupold notes that the leaders' claims at Isa. 28:15 amounted to this: "We have taken all necessary measures to insure our safety and that of the state."[12] Using modern terminology, Isaiah essentially tells them, "Let me fix that sentence for you," offering this more accurate assessment: "We have made lies our refuge and falsehood our shelter."[13] This is the essence of humanism, from the Tower of Babel onward.

W. Clarkson, commenting further upon Isaiah 28:15, adds that the leaders and the people essentially believed their own fictions, even justifying the refuge their lies have fabricated.

> Sinful men convince themselves of that which they might know to be wholly false. They "make lies their refuge, and hide themselves under falsehoods." 1. They choose the wrong course, and tell themselves they are acting under compulsion, and are guiltless. 2. They soften their sin by covering it with some pleasant euphemism. 3. They place between themselves and the condemnation of God the shield of human example, the frequency and popularity of their vice; they screen themselves behind their brethren, as if God did not see them, and did not hold them guilty. 4. They even glory in their shame, so have they lied unto themselves.[14]

In combination, these rationalizations accelerate a culture's march into the grave.

A NOTED ISAIAH SCHOLAR WEIGHS IN

The connection between R. J. Rushdoony's analyses and Isaiah's assessment from twenty-seven centuries ago is the primary axis around which all serious discussion needs to revolve. We therefore conclude with a closer look at the prophet's denunciations and promises concerning Israel's detour into humanism at that juncture.

J. Alec Motyer lays out the prophet's warning to the people in Isaiah 28:14ff: "Refusing the true resting-place, they will find that there is no other security."[15] Insecurity would be bad enough, but the nation is actually being steered toward *death* by its leaders.

> What is in reality the security they have chosen? Nothing but signing their own death warrant! … Isaiah names no names, he is concerned with the principle of what they have done. They have covenanted for their own death! Outside

> trust in the Lord and His promises there is only death; there is no alternative salvation.[16]

The moral decline that Isaiah pinpoints is described in more detail in Isaiah 30. We provide a quick sketch care of Motyer's analysis to point out the fatal trajectory that results when Biblical faith decays into humanistic counterfeits.

> The people … did not want a supernatural message (10ab), nor a message of moral demand (10cd), but a ministry that left the surface of life unruffled, a ministry of trifles. … They did not ask that preaching should cease but only that it be innocuous, void of moral imperatives and without the backing of the ultimate moral absolute of the nature of God. … They choose to have a new morality (10e-11b) and every humanly devised morality is sooner or later a bondage and a cruel master.
>
> Two illustrations follow. First a wall collapsing under its own weight and secondly a pot smashed by external force. … Like a crack running down, bulging out, in a high wall.[17]

Isaiah's ominous image of a collapsing wall captures the death wish of humanism perfectly. The prophet then explains (vv. 15-16) why the people are committed to militarism (what Rushdoony saw mutating into today's "perpetual war for perpetual peace"). It is then no surprise that Isaiah's imagery concludes at Isa. 30:17 with lethal import:

> *A flagstaff on a mountaintop* and a *banner on a hill* are not natural features. They speak of human activity, but if they are all that is left, they only prove that *people once lived there and are now gone*.[18] (e.a.)

While Rushdoony isn't a canonical prophet like Isaiah, his insights, being informed by Isaiah, lead us to truths for our day, especially as they relate to a course of action for regenerate men and women in an age that is in its death throes.

Consequently, an important message for us today is the *nature of the alternative* provided in Isa. 28:16, namely, the sure foundation that the Lord God lays in Zion. Men are impressed with appearances, but God uses humble and modest means, albeit imbued with the power of His Spirit (e.g., Zech. 4:6-10 in reference to the tin stone plumbline in the hands of Zerubbabel). In this instance, God has chosen means with little to no outward visibility, as Motyer notes:

> *Sure foundation* is "(well)-founded foundation." Note the emphasis on "foundation" throughout; the superstructure is not yet there (see 1 Pet. 2:4-8a). This underlines the call to faith in the Lord when He declares that He has completed the substructure, *that which lies out of sight, below ground*. They must trust Him that it is so. (e.a.)[19]

Will you walk and work as one who trusts in the sure foundation that He has laid for His Kingdom's victory, even though it is out of sight, below ground? It is time to build upon that foundation, and since the Lord is building the house, our labor will not be in vain – unlike the labor that humanism expends in building each consecutive kingdom of man destined to fill the Graveyard of Humanism's Ages.

1. R. J. Rushdoony, *Underground Man: Vulgarity as Virtue* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2026), 3.
2. Ibid., 65.
3. Ibid., 66.
4. R. J. Rushdoony, *Revolutionary Man: Chaos as Virtue* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2026), ix.
5. Ibid., xiii.
6. Ibid., 72.
7. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 265.
8. Ibid., 266.
9. Ibid., 267.
10. G. Rawlinson on *Isaiah* in Spence & Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 10:453.
11. George Adam Smith, *Isaiah* in volume 3 of *The Expositor's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1903], 1982), 654.
12. H. C. Leupold, *Isaiah, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1967,1971), 442.
13. Ibid.
14. Smith, 10:462.
15. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 232.
16. Ibid., 232-233.
17. Ibid., 248-249.
18. Ibid., 249.
19. Ibid., 233.

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THE DEATH OF AN AGE AND ITS FAITH

BY R. J. RUSHDOONY

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The death of an age is a bloody business. Men, disillusioned with the promises of their faith, yet unwilling to surrender them, strike out at everything in rage and in frustration. Like a rudderless ship, the civilization loses its direction and is driven by events instead of driving through them. Today, in the last days of humanism, as men steadily destroy their world, it is important for us to understand the meaning of the times and act in terms of that knowledge. The humanists in their blindness celebrate "the death of God," when it is in fact the death of humanism and their own funeral that they are racing to in their heedless course.

Humanism is dying because its faith is false, and its promises bankrupt. Let us examine that faith in order to understand more clearly its failure. *First* of all, humanism presupposes a faith in man, even to insisting on the basic goodness of man. This idealistic affirmation comes in conjunction with the assumption that evil is not in man but rather in his environment. Change the environment, and you thereby change man, it is held. As a result, humanistic sociology and politics are rigorously environmental: every effort is made to provide better housing, better education, every kind of environmental control, but, in all of this, man's evil only seems to proliferate.

As a result, many humanists have themselves abandoned their faith in man. Nietzsche, ahead of most, proclaimed the need of superman to replace man, and evolutionists and socialists have dedicated themselves to working towards the creation of a new man. Man as he now is, in terms of this hope, is expendable: he is merely the ape who shall produce the man of the future. Lenin, who held this view, could therefore treat with ruthless contempt the apes beneath him as he worked to bring the new man out of them. In every version, this belief is a break with the humanistic faith in man.

A *second* basic concept of the humanistic faith is its affirmation that man is his own god. As I have pointed out, in several of my books (e.g., *This Independent Republic*, pp. 142–143), basic to every sound theology is the doctrine of the unity of the godhead. A schizophrenic god is no god at all. Mankind, humanity, being made up of gods, must be united to avoid a division in this new godhead, man. This means world unity, a one-world order; it means world peace, for the godhead must not be at war with itself.

Ironically, this faith has led to what has been called "perpetual war for perpetual peace." To demand the unity of all men is the essence of total imperialism. The result is total warfare. The peace lovers are history's greatest warmongers. Worldwide interventionism to effect world peace has characterized the policies of late of the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Nations, and others. Granted their presuppositions, all are "sincere," but sincerity does not mean either truth or justice.

Moreover, man without God ends up as man without man, unable and unwilling to live at peace with anyone, and unable to live at peace with himself. The existentialist Sartre has stated the modern mood bluntly: "Hell is other people." If every man is his own god, knowing or determining for himself what constitutes good and evil, then every man is at war with any limitation upon himself imposed by other men or by a state. Hell, then, is logically "other people," and the humanistic faith in man as his own god becomes history's major impulse towards suicide. The satanic temptation (Gen. 3:5) thus becomes the counsel of death to men and nations.

The *third* basic doctrine of the religion of humanism is the belief in equality (see again *This Independent Republic*, p. 140). Equality is a concept of the age of humanism, with its respect for the authority of science, transferred from the realm of math-

ematics and applied to man. The results have been devastating. Two plus two equals four is a valid concept, and a necessary abstraction. Such abstractions are important tools. In dealing with board feet of lumber, all cut to size, and graded, such abstractions work. But the richness and variety of man cannot be expressed by abstractions. Two Africans and two Englishmen do not equal four Americans, or vice versa: the equation mark now becomes an absurdity. Who are these eight men, and what are their talents? Are they saints of God or are they apostates, criminals, or good citizens? One may be a plumber, and the other a concert violinist; the plumber may be more important to you today, and the violinist tonight. Each have their place, their function, and the term "equality" is irrelevant to it: it imposes an abstract mathematical judgment in an area where a vast variety of considerations must govern.

But we are governed today by the politics of equality. To challenge the doctrine is in bad form, although everyone is troubled, and society in an uproar, over the unrealistic attempts to enforce an abstraction onto the concrete facts of life.

The doctrine is honored in principle and denied in practice. The Marxist world affirms, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," but this is not an equality of work but of wealth. In practice, even this is abandoned by the Marxists in favor of a variety of rewards and a radically unequal society, one with greater variations of social status than the old Russia had. Both Fabian and Marxist socialisms now favor meritocracy, rigid examinations, state control of all jobs, and positions being assigned (and power) in terms of examinations. The result is the rise of a new privileged class. In Britain, the House of Lords is steadily packed with Labor politicians, who have been made peers, and there are signs that its power may be revived under the leadership of this new elite. The equalitarians end up by asserting, as in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, that some animals are more "equal" than others! Whether it is the peasants of Russia, or the Negroes of America, the most rebellious and angry people, the most disillusioned members of equalitarian society, are those who have been "made equal" by acts of state. They know that they have been defrauded, and their impulse becomes revolutionary.

The *fourth* basic concept of the religion of humanism is its belief in the inevitability of progress. This is a secularized version of the belief in providence. Humanism, by denying God, has depersonalized history. The world and its events are no longer the plan and handiwork of a personal, sovereign God; they are the product of anonymous, impersonal social forces. These impersonal forces, with planning man now guiding his own evolution, are supposed to ensure, not only progress, but more rapid progress. The result is, as Robert L. Heilbroner, in *The Future as History*, has termed it, a "philosophy of expectations." In terms of humanism, mankind should now be moving rapidly into a paradise on earth. In the 1920s and 1930s, teachers and professors often waxed lyrical in portraying the golden age which scientific planning would usher in. Today, the most intelligent of humanism's children are most in revolt against its failure to deliver on its promises. According to Kenneth Keniston, in the November 1969 *Yale Alumni Magazine*, the students involved in campus protests are usually the most intelligent on the campus. "One study finds that the best way to predict whether a college will have antiwar protests is to count the number of National Merit Scholars in the freshman class . . . Furthermore, protesting students have been shown again and again to be an elite within each college and university more privileged in background, more academically successful, more socially concerned than their less active classmates . . . It is partly for this reason that student unrest concerns us profoundly. To be sure, if we consider white students (and I will not discuss black militants here), only a minority of America's almost 7,000,000 college students are vocally disaffected. Yet if this minority is selectively drawn from the future leaders of our society, does this fact not threaten the continuity of our culture?" It does indeed, and the continuity of humanistic culture is being destroyed by its own bitter and disillusioned sons.

The destruction is also written into humanistic culture at every turn. Because of this belief in the inevitability of progress,

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men can believe that progress will come inevitably after destruction. Destroy the past, clear the ground, and progress is inevitable. This is basic to the revolutionary mentality. This scientism is described by Ortega y Gasset, in *The Revolt of the Masses*, as a new form of barbarism. Such a barbarian "believes that civilization is *there* in just the same way as the earth's crust and the forest primeval." As a result, this barbarian destroys in order to advance, because the destruction supposedly speeds up progress. The more revolutionary humanism becomes, the more it is suicidal.

Fifth, the basic saving institutions of humanism, i.e., its church or temple, are state and school. Both today are morally bankrupt. The implicit anarchism in all humanism makes man hostile to the state: it is always a hated establishment to him, a restraint on his freedom to be his own god. Whatever form the state takes, it displeases humanistic man. Very consistently, some leaders on the New Left now call for perpetual revolution as the only answer.

The school is also bankrupt. The mathematical dream of equality is especially absurd when applied to education, which is the process of differentiation, analysis, and understanding, not a massive leveling, of ideas and facts. Education is thus in growing chaos, and it cannot improve on humanistic terms. Nothing is more ridiculous than a "save our public schools" movement. In its origin, the public-school movement was socialistic and humanistic, and it cannot be otherwise. It is a state agency for state purposes, and its basic premise is the state's right to control and educate the child. The public-school movement is bankrupt, and it is dying.

Humanism is dying, if not dead. Living with a corpse is no pleasant matter. It does not require documentation to tell us that a corpse is far gone. The answer to our problem lies elsewhere, not in documentation on death, but in reconstruction for life.

Humanism is dead, but the triune God lives and rules, sovereign over all. There must be reconstruction, godly reconstruction. Let the dead bury the dead. The living have work to do. All things shall be made new; new schools, new social orders, new institutions, renewed family life, in every area the principle of godly reconstruction must be applied.

Defensive warfare is a mistake: it leaves the initiative to the enemy. Those who are content to protect the past die with it. Our calling is to offensive warfare to subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over it (Gen. 1:26–28). This is what it means to be a man, created in the image of God. Remember: dominion does not belong to a mouse.

Some years ago, J. Allen Smith, by no means a conservative, wrote as follows in *The Growth and Decadence of Constitutional Government* (1930): "The basic conception of the old political order was not the divine right of kings, but the sovereignty of God. The assumed divine right of the temporal ruler was not an essential part of this doctrine. Divine sovereignty, as envisaged in the Christian theory of the world, was simply a conception of God as the ultimate source of authority. Direct human intermediaries, such as pope or king, were purely adventitious features of this belief." This belief in God's sovereignty meant also the rule of law. As Smith continued, "Supreme unlimited power had no place in the political thought of the early constitutionalists. All human authority was conceived to be limited." The "ultimate sovereignty of God precluded the idea that any human authority could be unlimited."

Precisely. And because today the sovereignty of God is denied, the sovereignty of man and the state is affirmed. It is useless to rail against the present trend if we are a part of it, and unless we affirm the sovereignty of God in its every aspect, we are to all practical intent affirming man and his humanistic order. In other words, you have already taken sides, and you had better know it. You are either working for the "crown rights of King Jesus" or for the crown claims of humanistic man. You cannot logically affirm "the rule of law," "moral principles," and "old-fashioned virtues" without affirming the sovereignty of God. The Marxists are right in recognizing God as the basic and ultimate enemy. Unless you stand in terms of the sovereignty of God as your strength, your first and last line of defense, and the ground of all advance, move over and join the enemy: you are a humanist.

There is no solution other than the long-term mission of Christian Reconstruction.

Rushdoony predicted the times in which we live which is why he focused the mission of Chalcedon on the great work of Christian Reconstruction. The only remedy to what we face is a return to Christian faith, character, and obedience.

Rushdoony wrote, "The Biblical doctrine of theocracy means the self-government of the Christian man," (*Sovereignty*, p. 31) which means the Christian most needs the resources to equip him for Biblical self-government.

The Chalcedon Foundation is a "think-tank for the self-governing Christian," and our mission is to equip Christian families and churches to apply the faith to every area of life and cultivate faithfulness to God's law and covenant in order that Christ's Kingdom might increase.

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