

# John Robson: The Clash of Worldviews in the West

It seems Western civilization is living on fumes. He should have seen it coming sooner. As should we all.

Don't take my word for it, except about my belated enlightenment. It's the verdict of Tom Holland, author of "[Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World](#)," on his own cosmic thesis: The values we consider universal, including concern for human rights, are not. They arise from a specific tradition and must either transform or bounce off the others.

In his youth, Holland explains, he loved dinosaurs, and tales of classical Sparta and Rome, for similar reasons. The latter, "even when subjected to the minutest historical enquiry, retained their glamour as apex predators ... like a great white shark, like a tiger, like a tyrannosaur."

Cool, huh? But there's a problem: "giant carnivores, however wondrous, are by their nature terrifying." And the more he studied "classical antiquity" the more "alien" it seemed, from Spartan eugenics to mass killing of foes to "extremes of callousness" and, above all, "the complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value."

He has a point, doesn't he? Classical civilization fascinates us, from key steps toward functioning self-government, to its statues and monuments, to Antony, Cleopatra, Socrates, and outsized villains like Nero and Caligula. Yet, there is something profoundly alien in its response to some basic "human" things.

For instance, if you'd tried to lecture them on "human rights," they'd have laughed so hard they'd have struggled to get you on the crossbeam. But managed anyway. Ditto that the meek would, should, or conceivably could inherit anything but the butt end of a spear, or the sharp one.

So what happened? Here's where things get really tricky. Holland realized that just because "my belief in God had faded over the course of my teenage years did not mean that I had ceased to be Christian. ... Assumptions that I had grown up with – about how a society should properly be organized, and the principles that it should uphold – were not bred of classical antiquity, still less of 'human nature', but very distinctively of that civilization's Christian past."

Oh dear. At one point in this sprawling but richly rewarding book, he mentions that it took a visit to Sinjar in Iraq, where ISIS had inflicted hideous cruelties upon the Yazidi, including crucifixion, to jolt him into realizing that many enemies of the West were, figuratively or literally, trying to reclaim the cross as an emblem of the right of the powerful to brutalize and terrorize others, and just how vast the stakes were.

In another place, he observes that the Nazis remain key villains to us because they, like the Marquis de Sade, dismissed Christian metaphysics in theory and practice, whereas communists are regarded indulgently, despite mountains of corpses, because they claimed to defend the downtrodden. I've long pondered, and resented, the glaring discrepancy. Now I get it.

Others don't. As Holland observes, contemporary liberals don't know or won't say that things like secularism or "human rights," concepts and phrase, arose from medieval Christianity, not the universal patrimony of personkind. So when they encounter cultures and ideologies that reject both angrily, they're paralyzed. Including by Islamists protesting in Western cities who respond to "live and let live" appeals by gunning down Charlie Hebdo staff over cartoons.

The book does sprawl. But how could it not (unless I'd been his editor, speaking of apex predators) because the revolution wrought by Christianity, with its bizarrely compelling transformation of the ultimate symbol of pain and humiliation into the ultimate icon of hope triumphant, is so vast and complete it's hard to grasp from inside? Especially given centuries of Western global dominance, it's easy to assume everyone thinks much the same way about church and state, or that all "religions" follow the Christian template in structure, logic, and history.

What if they don't? What if it's Christianity or callous terrors without end? Then we're in a heap of trouble because you can't, as Romans like Julian the Apostate discovered trying to rekindle the old faith for utilitarian reasons, believe something because it's useful. You have to believe it because it's true. But equally, you can't disbelieve something because you decide it's not useful, including Holland's thesis that only from Christianity come "universal" values like compassion for our fellows.

Holland remains optimistic. Despite the West's conspicuous loss of faith, "so many of its instincts remain—for good or ill—thoroughly Christian. It is—to coin a phrase—the greatest story ever told." But if it's about to end, it won't end well.