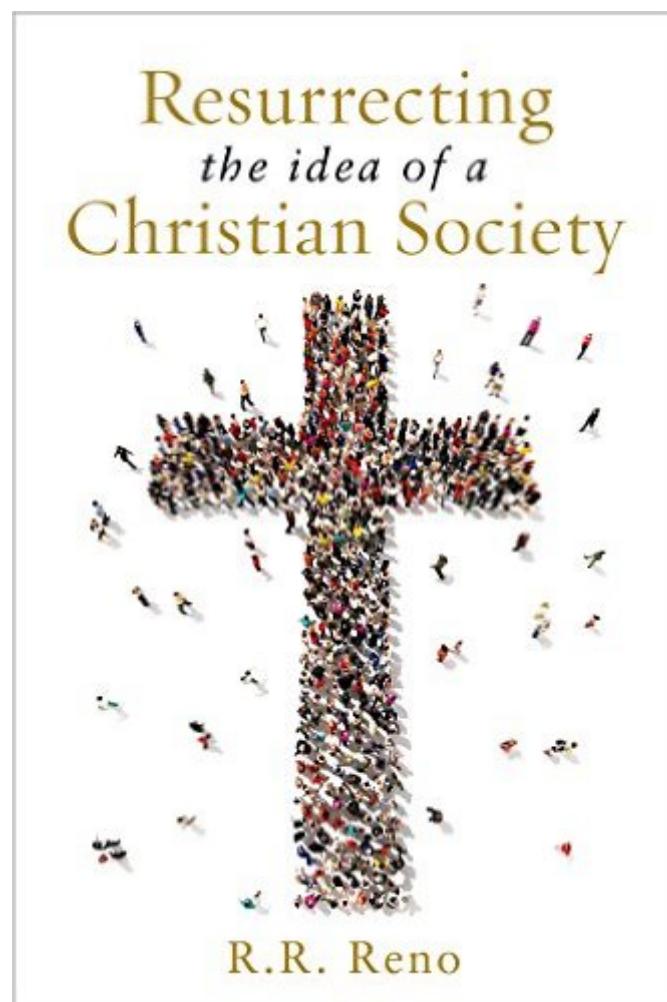


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Resurrecting The Idea Of A Christian Society



Synopsis

America's two greatest strengths—her liberal democratic culture and her free-market economy—have made her a global superpower. But left unchecked, these two strengths can become great cultural weaknesses, sowing selfishness, recklessness, and apathy. In *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*, theologian R. R. Reno argues that America needs a renewal of Christian ideals—ideals that encourage self-sacrifice, responsibility, and solidarity. Drawing on T.S. Eliot's 1940 essay "The Idea of a Christian Society," Reno shows how Christianity encourages an abiding ambition for higher things—and a moral vision that can strengthen communities and transform America into a truly great nation.

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Customer Reviews

Because the adage "Don't judge a book by its cover" is so often ignored, it is likely that Reno's 'Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society' will occupy a small niche of readers, and be reflexively dismissed by many others. That is a shame because the content is so critical and pertinent to our world today. Importantly, although Tocqueville does not rate a single mention in this book, the state of America in 2016 as described by Reno is one of the possible outcomes Tocqueville foresaw, and feared, in the 1830's. Echoes of Tocqueville's foresight appear throughout this book. In other words, this book is grounded on a respected tradition of thought. Reno surveys contemporary America and notes the familiar troubling trends (divorce rates, out-of-wedlock births, etc.) in our contemporary society (he characterizes our society as a "post-Protestant WASP" culture - p. 172) and attributes

many cultural failings to a failure in moral leadership. He also makes the case for how the burdens of "moral chaos" (p. 81) fall disproportionately upon the "poor and vulnerable" (p. 54). In a clever turn of phrase he describes this lack of moral leadership as "moral deregulation" (p. 85). Reno's concern is consistent with Tocqueville's, of whom Alan S. Kahan wrote, "For Tocqueville, religion was the most powerful, possible moral, intellectual and spiritual influence on human beings, and he wanted to enlist religion in the service of the highest ends, freedom and human greatness" (see *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls* - p. 4). For both Reno and Tocqueville, it appears, "democracy" is only one of the necessary tools to achieve real freedom and human flourishing and that in the absence of a "moral anchor" (see below) the 'logic of egalitarianism' can lead to social dysfunction and the diminishment of freedom. Tocqueville wrote, "After the general idea of virtue, I do not know any more beautiful thing than that of rights, or rather, these two ideas merge. The idea of rights is nothing more than the idea of virtue introduced into the political world." Reno's chief concern appears to be restoring a sense of virtue into our culture and to again recognize that freedom requires the linkage of virtue with politics. Virtue and normative social mores, of course, are seldom-used terms today. Again, Tocqueville wrote, "Religion is considered the guardian of mores, and mores are regarded as the guarantee of the laws and the pledge for the maintenance of freedom itself." In 1995 Vaclav Havel said regarding Dutch resistance fighters, "To me personally, their endeavor serves as proof that the roots of a free, democratic, and equitable society lie deep in the sphere of morality - that such a society would in fact be unthinkable without a moral anchor" (see *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice* - p. 189). The echoes continue. Reno writes of the imperative for "a thick local culture" (p. 120), of an "ever-cruder mass culture [which] normalizes dysfunctional behaviors" (p. 1), and of how "Materialism denies the existence of higher things" (p. 148). These lines of thought can be found in Tocqueville's writings, too. Reno writes of restoring a sense of patriotism as a means of promoting "solidarity" "We're facing a crisis of solidarity, not freedom, and the crisis of solidarity foretells a crisis of freedom" (p. 111). Tocqueville wrote, "guided by the religious 'habit of thinking' that freedom was made possible by virtue of obedience, the American comes to recognize that patriotism involves a giving over of some freedom in order that true freedom be attained." Tocqueville's 'Democracy in America' is a masterpiece, while Reno's is a good read which I enjoyed (there is no comparing the two in terms of importance), but Reno's 'Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society' can profitably be read as a commentary consistent with Tocqueville's, and engagement with the ideas of each may have significance for our future.

Perhaps the first thing one should note about *R.R. Reno's Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* is that he's not calling for a return to some imagined Christian government for the United States. The title might lead some to believe that, given it's a presidential election year, and given that it's this presidential election, with people talking of whom they're voting against rather than whom they're voting for. No, Reno, editor of *First Things Magazine*, isn't writing about a Christian government. He's writing about the idea of a society informed by the values of justice, mercy, and protection of the weak, as opposed to what the United States has become – a society informed by social Darwinism; a political, cultural, and economic elite that makes the rules for everyone except itself; and a culture of nonjudgmentalism that permeates our education system. Among other things. Among a lot of other things. Reno completed this book before the political primary system got fully underway. And so it's surprising to see just how well he anticipated, without once mentioning their names, the rise of the anti-elitists in both major parties – Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party and Donald Trump in the Republican Party. He has much to say about America's elites – corporate elites, political, elites, cultural elites – and none of it is good. *Visit the poorest neighborhoods of a major American city or an impoverished rural town and you'll quickly discover a misery more profound and pervasive than simple material want,* he says. *Drugs, crime, sexual exploitation, divorce, fatherlessness, streams of expletives, pornography, violent images – they are everywhere. The sheer brutality and ugliness of the lives of countless Americans – not only poor but middle-class as well – is shocking.* And the worst impoverishment of all, and the one he lays at the feet of American elites, is spiritual impoverishment. Through actions like movies, news media, corporate CEO's lobbying on social issues, social engineering in public schools, and more, American elites ridicule the values of family, honesty, hard work, caring for the weak, and decency – while often typically practicing those very same virtues in their own families. It's fine to make often ridiculous rules and issuing directives for the children of the middle class and poor when your own children are in private schools and will be exempt. It's normal to contemplate major changes to Social Security when you yourself have another pension system (Congress) and won't be affected. (Those brilliant legislators in California – the ones so sanctimoniously passing gun control legislation – are exempting themselves from the bill because, as one of them explained, *We need protection.*) What Reno is doing here is tearing away the hypocrisy of what passes for elite thought – right and left – in this country. One small example: *There is a far greater range of moral and political opinion in*

American churches than in a typical newsroom or editorial board. Reno's suggestions for change recognize the difficulties of that change. It's relatively easy to pass rules or make bureaucratic decisions out of the public spotlight; it's quite another to change hearts. And it's hearts that must be changed. It doesn't take a moral majority to do that, either, for Reno understands something else, something profound: It doesn't take a lot of salt to ensure sufficient seasoning. A small number of people, standing with moral authority of doing what is right, doesn't need political judges, people rewriting laws behind closed doors. And the hysterical rants of newspaper editorial writers to create change. If you want to understand what is happening in this wild and crazy political season, and why there is hope no matter who wins the White House, "Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society" is a good place to start.

R. R. Reno is editor of *First Things*, the publication of the Institute for Religion and Public Life. He has a unique ability to see through the rhetoric of current issues that are of interest to practitioners of religion and to those who take no interest in traditional religious values. His column, "The Public Square," published in each of the ten annual issues of *First Things*, provides a fresh view of current topics that tend to divide people along religious lines. This book is no exception. It is extremely well written, and offers clarity on a number of fronts. Although Reno does not expect that America will become a Christian nation soon, he does believe that Christians have a love for all people that can go a long way toward reconciling differences that have so often led to conflicts. He is no Bible-Thumper, and yet he does not back down when confronted with those who argue for unbridled freedom from any social constraints. For a community to thrive, it must at least have a set of commonly agreed upon conventions by which those within the community interact. This book represents Reno's deeply thought out effort to bring people together for common purposes, and for the common welfare. I hope that it will receive broad dissemination among those who consider themselves to be leaders.

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