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# REASON, REPENTANCE, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

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RECOVERING THE  
RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF  
WESTERN CIVILISATION

The Reverend Peter Kurti



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# REASON, REPENTANCE, AND THE INDIVIDUAL: Recovering the Religious Roots of Western Civilisation

**Peter Kurti**

This is an edited version of the 5th Robert Iles Memorial Lecture delivered in Adelaide on 18 October 2017. The Robert Iles Memorial Lecture is given in memory of a distinguished South Australian Uniting Church Minister who was committed to promoting the Christian faith in society, to engaging with contemporary culture, and to bringing a biblical perspective to contemporary public issues. My thanks go to Bishop Robert Forsyth and Professor Scott Cowdell who read an earlier draft of the lecture and made a number of important suggestions.



## Introduction: On defining 'the West'

**A**ny defence of the religious roots of Western civilization must amount to more than mere dogmatic assertion about the place of religion in our society. Rather, it must attempt to demonstrate that the very existence of that society is built upon religious principles derived, in particular, from Christianity; those roots continue to feed both our culture and our civilization—a conception that can conveniently be described as 'the West'.

'The West' is an elusive concept, and one that has fallen from favour in recent decades. Yet it is one which we are able to grasp almost intuitively, familiar as we are with the freedoms, rights, and protections we enjoy in a secular liberal democracy. Indeed, for thinkers such as Roger Scruton, Western civilization comprises, precisely, "communities held together by a political process, and by the rights and duties of the citizen as defined by that process."<sup>1</sup>

This is a theme developed by President Trump in his *Remarks to the People of Poland* delivered ahead of the G20 summit last July when he spoke about the West and the will to survive:

We value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. Those are the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization. Our freedom, our civilization, and our survival depend on these bonds of culture, history, and memory.<sup>2</sup>

In his remarks, President Trump hints that 'The West', or 'Western Civilization', refers to more than an idea. It appears to describe a community of free nation states, bound by a common set of principles and practices, and by a commitment to preserving a way of life grounded in the rule of law. Or as the British journalist, Daniel Johnson, has remarked:

The West is the culmination of aeons of shared endeavour, and the site of collective memories reaching back deep

into the origins of human society. Western civilization is the cathedral of historical consciousness, the temple of time past and time future, the destination of a journey that began in the land we still call holy, with Abraham and Moses.<sup>3</sup>

Another critical feature of Western civilization is that this community of nations was formed from a religious belief and a sacred text held in common. It is this religion—Christianity, with its own roots in ancient Judaism—that is woven into the fabric of the West. While the presence of Christianity in the common cultural currency varies from age to age, it remains the case that the threads of Western civilization might threaten to unravel were we to forsake our Judeo-Christian heritage altogether.

Does this mean that a realistic ambition for a Western nation is that it ought to be a credal or confessional state? One where the religion of the prince, as it were, is enforced as the religion of the people? Not at all: as the process of secularization got underway in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the driving need was not for a complete break from Christianity but rather, as noted by Wolfhart Pannenberg, a Protestant theologian, an end to confessional conflict:

There was an urgently felt need to get beyond the confessional antagonisms and religious warfare that had disrupted the peace of Europe for more than a century. The turn away from Christianity as the basis of public culture was not, at least in the first instance, caused by alienation from the Christian religion, although that turn may have produced alienation in the long run.<sup>4</sup>

As European secular culture evolved, the status of Christianity changed, too. Yet Pannenberg argues that our understanding of the very distinction between the realms of the religious and secular has, itself, been shaped by the Christian faith—in particular, by “the Christian awareness that the ultimate reality of the kingdom of God is still future. The social order and public culture that exist short of the final coming of the kingdom are always provisional.”<sup>5</sup>



## Secularism and autonomy

One remarkable feature of this end to confessional conflict was the emergence of a principled distinction and separation between church and state. The claim of a right to enforce belief, whether pressed by the church or the prince, gave way to the evolution of a comprehensive conception of rights that describe and defend a sphere of individual autonomy.

The concept of ‘secularisation’ expresses this key principle of the separation of a private realm from the public sphere which affords, in turn, a realm for the exercise of moral choice and moral obligation. Indeed, an individual’s capacity for moral conduct presupposes an area of free choice. Belief that is enforced, after all, is no belief at all.

“Religion thus became a matter for the private sphere,” notes Larry Siedentop in his remarkable study of the emergence of the individual. “Liberal secularism sought to protect that private sphere by means of constitutional arrangements that would disperse and balance powers of the state.”<sup>6</sup> The kernel of Siedentop’s lengthy and detailed exposition is that liberal secularism is the offspring of Christianity, emerging “as the moral intuitions generated by Christianity were turned against an authoritarian model of the church.”<sup>7</sup>

Familiarity with Christian teaching and doctrine has almost certainly reached a low point in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nonetheless, it remains the case that Christianity has given shape to our conception of the moral life, and the good life of the soul. Having grown from Christianity, Western Civilization has left behind its belief and its text, says Scruton, “to place its trust not in religious certainties but in open discussion, trial and error, and the ubiquitousness of doubt.”<sup>8</sup>

But the West cannot remain the West if it becomes indifferent or hostile to its religious heritage. The task before us, therefore, is to recover an understanding of some of the principal ways in which Christianity serves as the very foundation of the secularism that characterises Western Civilisation. This paper will identify three principal roots of this foundation, in particular, and consider each

in turn.

### **The First Root: Reason**

On 12 September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a lecture at the University of Regensburg called “Faith, Reason, and the University” in which he presented an account of the Christian understanding of the relation between faith and reason.<sup>9</sup> The lecture created a storm of protest because Benedict referred to a 14<sup>th</sup> century dialogue about Christianity and Islam, between Byzantine emperor Manuel II and the Muslim intellectual Mouterizes.

During the dialogue, the emperor made some observations about the relationship between religion and violence. He drew a comparison between the two religions and is quoted as remarking that spreading faith through violence is something unreasonable.

In his lecture, Benedict summarised the dialogue: “The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature.”<sup>10</sup> And that was the crux of Benedict’s argument: to act against reason is to act against the nature of God.

Benedict was widely criticized for being antagonistic towards Islam, and the Regensburg lecture was roundly attacked by many as being impolitic. The pope, however, was really addressing his remarks to intellectuals in the West, especially, as Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest and author, remarked, to theologians and philosophers:

To theologians who try to pit authentically biblical Christianity against the Greek intellectual inheritance, thus abandoning the great achievement of the Church’s synthesis of faith and reason; and to philosophers, Christian and non-Christian, who have accepted a modern understanding of reason that reduces it to what counts as “science”, with the same result of sundering faith and reason.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, many contemporary secularists do declaim that science has delivered us from religion. They often appeal to the Greek philosophers, who insisted that rationality was the fundamental

principle of the universe, and for whom science amounted to the triumph of reason.

But a rational universe had also to be an eternal, unchanging, and perfect universe. Change, therefore, could only be illusory, and sense-data had to be untrustworthy. As Edwin Judge has remarked, the unchanging eternity of the universe had to be rejected before the experimental method could evolve.<sup>12</sup> Genesis, not Greece, created modern science, says Judge. “By downgrading the universe into a temporary artefact, made and run by its creator, devout experimentalists gradually opened it up.”<sup>13</sup>

To confine religion to the realm of the non-rational also ignores another essential insight. This is that it was Christianity’s appropriation and synthesis of the Hellenistic philosophical tradition that gave rise to that modern conception of reason from which Western intellectuals have attempted to divorce faith.

Pope Benedict’s intention was to recover and restate the relationship between faith and reason. For if religion belongs to the realm of the non-rational, the discovery of truth can never be part of reasonable discourse and can be nothing more than a series of subjective assumptions. The danger of such a sundering of faith and reason, Benedict argued, is that it results in a grievously attenuated form of Christianity leading to “the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness.”<sup>14</sup>

This is not to suggest that Benedict is advancing an anthropomorphic conception of God; rather, he sought to remind us that between the Creator God and our created reason there exists a real analogy which is capable of expression in language.

The importance of Pope Benedict’s Regensburg lecture lies in the fact that in it he restated both the decisive importance of the synthesis of faith and reason in the development of Western civilization, and the need to broaden the concept of reason beyond the limits of the empirically falsifiable:

In the Western world, it is widely held that only positivistic reason, and the forms of philosophy based on it, are universally valid. Yet the world’s profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the

universality of reason as an attack on their more profound convictions.<sup>15</sup>

Benedict argued that we must reconsider the scope of reason so that enquiry about the nature and purposes of God is once more brought within its fold. After all, Christian theology entails a formal reasoning about God, and this system of reasoned enquiry into the search for truth became foundational in what we refer to as ‘the West’.

As Samuel Gregg, a scholar of religion, has observed, this “emphasis on our minds’ ability to apprehend reality—and not just empirical potentialities and actualities, but also philosophical and religious truths—is woven into the West’s very fabric.”<sup>16</sup>

It is by means of the application of reason that human beings, created in the image of God, have exercised the capacity both to comprehend and to shape their social reality, to exercise moral judgment, and to facilitate what Gregg describes as “wise intellectual and social habits.” These habits include a wariness of superstition, and a desire to avoid error, as well as a concern for just relationships, a suspicion of arbitrary power, and an attachment to liberty. “Reason itself allows us to know that we can transform not just the world around us but also ourselves.”<sup>17</sup>

By the exercise of reason, then, we may use our God-given free will to make reasonable choices, and thereby to grow as reasonable people. And it is in virtue of being reasonable people that we can build human communities which defend human dignity from the indignity of violent assault, the arbitrary exercise of force, and the subversion of courage and character.

Inherent in this is the notion of human progress and the recognition of error, and this leads to a consideration of the second root of the Christian foundation of the West, which is *repentance*.

## **The Second Root: Repentance**

Although repentance may seem an odd concept to identify as foundational for Western civilization, it does, in fact, flow very naturally from the foregoing consideration of reason.

Repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, meaning ‘a change of mind’. It presupposes regret, remorse, contrition, and a changing of one’s ways. And yet, repentance involves not simply an act of the mind: it involves the will and the emotions. In other words, repentance involves the whole human person.<sup>18</sup>

Repentance is founded, principally, on the exercise of reason, deemed by Christians to be the supreme gift from God whereby our understanding of revelation and the scriptures becomes possible. It also expresses belief in the perfectibility of creation—including human beings. As Edwin Judge has remarked:

Classical ethics was focused upon the practice of the virtues, that is the good qualities we possess, rather than upon our response to others. Virtue is put to the test of morality with its high doctrine of personal answerability.<sup>19</sup>

This capacity to reflect on the past and to make amendment of life helps to orient Christianity towards the future and encourages Christians to anticipate the providential action of God. Repentance, in other words, is the seed of Christian hope.

Roger Scruton is one thinker who has eloquently described the integral place of repentance in the moral and spiritual architecture of the West. Indeed, he argues that they are “quintessential parts of the Western soul and the Christian inheritance.”<sup>20</sup>

Scruton associates repentance—along with its concomitant components of confession and forgiveness—with the notion of sacrifice. For Scruton, sacrifice is one of the indispensable habits in Christian culture because it enables individuals to hold one another to account in those matters where our conduct can harm others:

Those who confess, sacrifice their pride; while those who forgive, sacrifice their resentment—renouncing thereby something that had been dear to their hearts. Confession and forgiveness are the habits that made our civilisation possible.<sup>21</sup>

Although Scruton is talking principally about Christian conceptions of repentance, he is right to acknowledge, in addition,

the themes of repentance and amendment of life that occur in Judaism, and he cites the rituals and liturgy of Yom Kippur as a notable example.

Indeed, these rituals are grounded ultimately in the Decalogue, the immutable, rational, and consistent moral code that remains one of the most significant components of the Judaic legacy undergirding the West and its life. Judaism, says Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth, “is God’s call to human responsibility, to create a world that is a worthy home for His presence.”<sup>22</sup>

Repentance, as the liturgical expression of our accountability to God and to one another, is a principal element of Judaeo-Christian culture. In addition, it is a principal tenet of Christian theology that sin is a personal matter: sin inheres in the human heart of the individual rather than in the collective identity of the group. “Christianity was founded on the doctrine that humans have been given the capacity and, hence, the responsibility to determine their own actions,” says sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark.<sup>23</sup>

One consequence of this is that it has led to the much wider acceptance of accountability as a feature of public, social, and political life – something that Scruton notes is completely absent from totalitarian regimes. Democratic elections give electors the opportunity to decide who they will have govern them; and candidates seeking election to office have, in turn, an appropriate sense of being accountable to the electorate.

Indeed, awareness of vulnerability to popular mood is one factor that possibly goes to explain our national obsession with opinion polls whereby politicians and party leaders are reminded, with morbid regularity, about their accountability to us and have impressed upon them the need to do better. A belief in the capacity of the individual *to do better*, to change and improve over time, is a mark of the impact of Christianity on Western Civilization. This is a point emphasised particularly by Stark.

Stark draws a distinction between *orthoprax* religions, such as Islam, that are concerned with correct practice and application, and religions that are *orthodox*, such as Christianity, which are concerned

with the intellectual structuring of creeds and theologies. Stark argues the distinction is, broadly, one between construction and enquiry:

Legal interpretation rests on precedent and therefore is anchored in the past, while efforts to better understand the nature of God assume the possibility of *progress*. And it is the assumption of progress that may be the most critical difference between Christianity and all other religions.<sup>24</sup>

Progress, and an orientation to the future, have their roots in the exercise of human reason, and are two of the key contributions that Christianity made to the foundation of the West. Yet some critics, such as economic historian Joel Mokyr, argue that Stark has placed too much reliance on an appeal to the affinity between Christianity and reason.

Mokyr is critical of what he considers to be Stark's simplistic 'correlation is causation' methodology because it fails to establish how one can be the basis of an assertion about the other:

I know of no metric of reasonableness of religions, though the work of medieval scholasticism obviously tried to place Christian theology on a sound philosophical basis. The notion that there was a direct path leading from Aquinas to modern science and from there to economic development seems speculative.<sup>25</sup>

While the work of Aquinas is certainly an important part of Christianity, Mokyr points out that mysticism and occultism also remained a part. Mokyr argues that by focusing solely on reason, Stark presents "a lopsided view of the intellectual roots of Western civilization."<sup>26</sup>

In making that argument, however, it is important to distinguish between the theological and philosophical principles of Christianity itself, and the institutions of the church which interpreted and applied those principles so as to protect, strengthen, and wield its power.

Indeed, it is true that the church did pursue and exercise power

with some force by determinedly resisting ideas that did not accord with doctrine. It is this pattern of behaviour that prompts Mokyr to remark that “the success of Europe is largely explained by the failure of Christians to suppress people with new ideas, though not for lack of trying.”<sup>27</sup>

Mokyr acknowledges that Stark’s provocative contribution is welcome to the extent that it attempts to correct the frequent slights Christianity endures in accounts of the emergence of the West. Even so, he suspects that in the end, “much like Christianity itself, it is a product of faith rather than of reason or fact.”<sup>28</sup>

Mokyr does have a point. However, even while conceding that, at times in its history, the Christian church has been extremely intolerant of new ideas, the moral and intellectual architecture of Christianity, as a *system of belief*, fostered human progress. Nor should it be imagined that this system of belief floats freely in some pure realm independent of the church. Christians only emerge by being formed and shaped as individuals by the church, or *ecclesia*. Christian practice is always communally embodied in the life of the church.<sup>29</sup>

For all that critics may argue against this point about the church’s legacy, it remains the case that the European environment was conducive to intellectual flourishing in the early modern period. It was an environment that allowed innovation and enquiry to take place and to shape the social and economic life of western societies.

As such, it is, surely, quite justifiable to argue that it was Christianity—as opposed specifically to the conduct of the churches—with its directional conception of both social and human progress, which shaped significantly the environment that enabled all this to occur. At the heart of this progress, a third root of the Christian foundation of the West, and quite possibly the most important one, can be identified. This is the concept of *the individual*.

### **The Third Root: The Individual**

The Christian conception of the individual is so important because it underlies all the propositions about rights, responsibilities, and



liberties that inform Western conceptions of civil society. As Stark has remarked:

Of the major world faiths, only Christianity has devoted serious and sustained attention to human rights, as opposed to human duties. The other great faiths minimize individualism and stress collective obligations. They are cultures of shame, rather than cultures of guilt.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas the ancient, pre-Christian world had at its heart the assumption of natural inequality, Christianity spun a golden thread that came to link key Western liberal ideas of truth, faith, and freedom—that thread being the principle of individual moral agency and the assumption of the inherent *equality* of all human beings.

Larry Siedentop argues that this golden thread of individual moral agency can be traced right back to the Gospels, to the writings of St Paul and his exposition of ‘The Christ’ to describe the presence of God in the world, and ultimately to the teachings of Jesus himself which proclaim the supreme moral fact about humans: that we are all created in the image of God—*imago Dei*.

The genius of Christianity is that by investing every individual with the God-given capacity for exercising individual moral agency, human beings are no longer defined by social status. Rather, life ‘in Christ’ creates what Siedentop calls, “a rightful domain for individual conscience and choice.”<sup>31</sup>

During the Middle Ages, canon lawyers and philosophers began to work out the elements of rights which were needed to protect the notions of individual identity and agency. A moral claim about the individual was converted into a social status concerning individual identity. As this occurred, so, too, an understanding of rights evolved to protect the free exercise of that identity. This conversion was made possible by the development of the notion of equality of souls from which this commitment to individual liberty sprang.

While never side-stepping the church’s shortcomings in upholding the ideal of individual liberty and freedom of conscience, Siedentop makes the bold claim that because of its central egalitarian moral

insight about individual liberty, Christianity played such a decisive part in the development of the individual and the place of the individual in society:

[Christianity] rests on the firm belief that to be human means being a rational and moral agent, a free chooser with responsibility for one's actions. It joins rights with duties to others.<sup>32</sup>

Secularism, then, does not refer to a non-moral, indifference to religion; rather, secularism assumes a moral equality of individuals whereby an appropriate sphere of human autonomy is described. Within this sphere, religious belief can be freely developed, expressed, and defended. In Siedentop's words: "It provides the gateway to beliefs properly so called, making it possible to distinguish inner conviction from mere external conformity."<sup>33</sup>

The commitment of liberal secularism to individual liberty is widely taken for granted these days by many in our society who are, nonetheless, opposed to any form of religion—and especially Christianity. Recall the response to the findings of the 2016 Census that were released a few months ago.

The rise of those describing themselves as having 'no religion' rose to just over 30 per cent, leading to calls for the final push to displace religion from any involvement in Australian public life. Of course, those making the demand conveniently overlooked the fact that nearly two thirds of Australians clearly maintain a religious affiliation of one kind or another, and that Christianity remains the majority affiliate religion.

The aggressive and somewhat hostile, anti-religious secularism of our own age, however, has scrambled the proper relationship between liberty and faith, and, in doing so, has also distorted what should be a healthy relationship between secularism and religion. Indeed, the radical secularists go further: they pursue a civilization that is not simply indifferent to religion, but strictly neutral as to any conceptions of the 'good life' that make demands upon us.

Far from being an irreconcilable opponent of religion, secularism ought, by contrast, to be understood as describing the societal

environment both in which religious belief can freely flourish—and in which different religious believers can continue to contend freely for followers.<sup>34</sup>

## **The Missionary Effect and the Roots of the West**

The claim that the Judeo-Christian tradition forms an essential foundation of liberal democracy and Western civilization is widely contested these days. Resistance to religion is growing in many Western countries, including Australia. Yet the immense debt that liberal democracy owes to Christianity has been shown to be more than merely a rhetorical flourish. It has been tested rigorously and substantially by empirical research.

One scholar who has devoted a great deal of time to researching the relationship between democracy and religion is Robert Woodberry, a political scientist. Woodberry has looked at developing countries to try and answer the question why it is that some countries not only develop over time but develop as democracies.

Woodberry's research is vast and statistically complex. In broad terms, Woodberry examines the role of Protestant missionaries and looks at how they shaped the long-term processes of development and democratization in the non-Western world. The results are quite astonishing: Woodberry found that the greater the number of missionaries per ten thousand local population in 1923, the higher the probability that by now a nation has achieved a stable democracy.

Why did this happen? Woodberry found that the 'missionary effect' was not to be explained simply because missionaries taught the Christian faith. The missions contributed to the rise of stable democracies because they also encouraged wide-spread education, the publication of newspapers and magazines, and the growth of a strong spirit of volunteering—all factors contributing to a healthy civil society.

One of the political implications Woodberry draws from his research is that religious liberty matters because it influences economic and political conditions. It matters even, as he says, "if you're not a religious person, or even if you don't like the types of religious people who do mission work." Woodberry concludes that

religious liberty seems to help the poor and help spread power within a society through the process of religious competition and because religious groups help to break up monopolies and elite control over resources like education.<sup>35</sup>

Christianity has had a profound influence on what we consider to be ‘modernity’, says Woodberry:

[It] had a lot to do with why some societies now have more wealth and power. Not only that, but religious incentives were important. It wasn’t just that they were carriers of things developed by others for non-religious reasons; for many outcomes, religious beliefs actually mattered.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion: Living in Covenant**

Reason, repentance, and the individual are three of the principal roots of Western civilization. They are, moreover, roots that are set firmly in the rich soil of our Judeo-Christian heritage. But the danger is that as our commitment to that heritage weakens, so, too, does our capacity to defend the roots of the West that sustain our society, our democracy, and, indeed, our civilization.

Indifference to those roots might well pose a significant threat to the fabric of Australian society. And in Australia, the problem appears to be more than one of mere indifference.

According to recent polling conducted by the Ipsos Global @dvisor survey which canvassed the views of more than 17,000 people across 23 countries, 63 per cent of Australians think religion does more harm than good. The average from respondents in other countries was around 49 per cent.<sup>37</sup> Whereas 62 per cent of Indians and 45 per cent of Americans thought that religious people make “better citizens”, only 25 per cent of Australians thought so.

There can be little doubt that the social and cultural context in which religion is practised in Australia has changed, and continues to do so. It is, therefore, of considerable importance that we recover an understanding of the important part that reason, repentance, and the

individual have each played—and continue to play—in forging the social bonds that are characteristic of Western civilization.

One concept that expresses the nature of these social bonds and that draws upon the idea, central to Judaism and Christianity, that there is a binding and enduring relationship between God and the people of Israel, is the word *covenant*.

Although it is a term rich in meaning, *covenant* is an important way of describing the relationship that endures between people who entrust themselves to one another, and who accept that entrustment in turn. A covenant goes beyond a contract, therefore, because the focus is not on a stipulated series of obligations but on the relationship between people. *Covenant* stresses mutual faithfulness.<sup>38</sup>

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is one theologian who argues that with a renewed appreciation of covenant we will be able to live in ways that allow us both to be more true to ourselves *and* to be better engaged in the public square.

We know full well that the public square in Australia has become very fractious in recent times as opposing voices are pitched against one another with what appears to be an ever-diminishing scope for nuanced, respectful engagement. What, then, does the Judeo-Christian tradition bring to the public square? Sacks has expressed this idea of religion in the public square very eloquently. By “religion in the public square”, Sacks says he means:

Simply religion as a consecration of the bonds that connect us, religion as the redemption of our solitude, religion as loyalty and love, religion as altruism and compassion, religion as covenant and commitment, religion that sustains community and helps reweave the torn fabric of society.<sup>39</sup>

Once grounded, as we need to be, in the roots of reason, repentance, and the individual—the Christian roots of the West—we can draw upon a renewed understanding of the importance of covenant as a way of expressing how we bear a responsibility towards one another.

“Never was the need for fidelity and firmness more urgent than now,” said Winston Churchill addressing the House of Commons in 1939. Firmness and fidelity are needed now, more than ever if the West is to recover from its present weakened state.

The health of Western civilization depends not simply on the strength of its intellectual fortification but also, as the British journalist Daniel Johnson has noted, on forging “a bold new architecture that can inspire the young to emulate the aspirations of our ancestors.”<sup>40</sup>

Our commitment to the Christian faith and to our Judeo-Christian heritage needs to be renewed, and we need to strive to incorporate the legacy of that heritage in this bold new architecture. If we are resolved to strengthen the Western civilization that has given us individual liberty and the rule of law, then surely we can make no better start than to attend immediately to the health of its Judeo-Christian roots.

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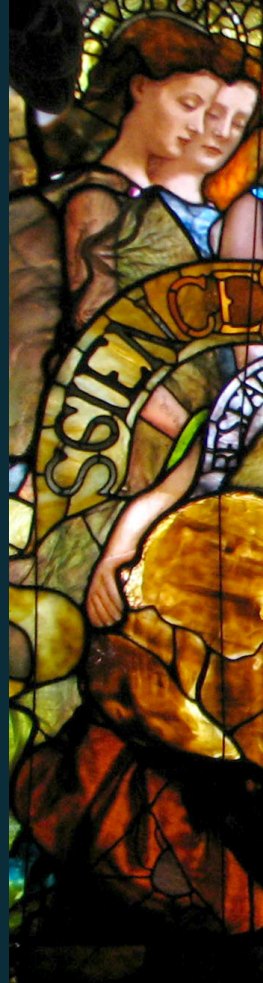




# Reason, Repentance, and the Individual: Recovering the Religious Roots of Western Civilisation

Reason, repentance, and the individual are three of the principal roots of Western civilisation. They are, moreover, roots that are set firmly in the rich soil of our Judeo-Christian heritage. But the danger is that as our commitment to that heritage weakens, so, too, does our capacity to defend the roots of the West that sustain our society, our democracy, and, indeed, our civilisation. Indifference to those roots might well pose a significant threat to the fabric of Australian society. And in Australia, the problem appears to be more than one of mere indifference. This Occasional Paper argues that the West cannot remain the West if it becomes indifferent or hostile to its religious heritage. The task, therefore, is to recover an understanding of some of the principal ways in which Christianity serves as the very foundation of the secularism that characterises Western civilisation.

**The Reverend Peter Kurti** is a Research Fellow co-ordinating the Religion and Civil Society program. The program examines the implications of a liberal approach to religion in civil society and investigates the capacity of that society to maintain freedom for expression of religious values. It does not discuss issues of discipline, dogma or organisation.



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