

Why Americans Must Once Again Become 'Good Pagans'

Many of you know C.S. Lewis as a Christian apologist.

But in [an interesting and little-known letter](#), C.S. Lewis told [a Roman Catholic priest](#) in 1953 that he thought it was crucial to worry first about making the younger generations “good pagans” before trying to make them Christians.

Here is the relevant paragraph:

“For my part I believe we ought to work not only at spreading the Gospel (that certainly) but also at a certain preparation for the Gospel. It is necessary to recall many to the law of nature before we talk about God. For Christ promises forgiveness of sins: but what is that to those who, since they do not know the law of nature, do not know that they have sinned?... Moral relativism is the enemy we have to overcome before we tackle Atheism. I would almost dare to say ‘First let us make the younger generation good pagans and afterwards let us make them Christians.’”

According to Lewis’ thinking, relativism had so infected the Western mind that there first needed to be a counter-movement to teach people to once again believe in *truth itself* before trying to convince them of the truth of Christianity.

In my estimation, Lewis’ recommendation expresses what should be the program for America today: to make its citizens “good pagans” once again.

Now, by “paganism”, neither Lewis nor I are referring to the attempt to recover a pagan spirituality, but the pagan intellectual tradition. Think “School of Athens” rather than winter solstice festivals. For over two-thousand years, an education in this pagan intellectual tradition taught Western

minds to think clearly, to act for the common good, to ask the deeper questions about the meaning of life, and to seek after truth.

It is this kind of paganism that's so needed among today's younger generations of Americans, who are entering adulthood prepared to pursue lucrative careers, but unprepared to be human persons and citizens who pursue truth, goodness, and beauty in life.

To clarify, Christianity and "paganism" have not been separate realities for all of Western history. It's important to note that the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and "bears the imprint of the Greek spirit," as Pope Benedict XVI said in his [2006 Regensburg Address](#). In the early centuries of Christianity, theologians utilized the language of pagan philosophy to formulate their doctrines, achieving a synthesis sometimes referred to as "Christian Hellenism." And in the Middle Ages, it was Christians who preserved the great pagan works of the past for posterity.

But this synthesis was weakened with the Renaissance, when Western man once again became enamored with a pre-Christian Hellenism. And it was ruptured with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, which somewhat represented the fulfillment of Tertullian's (155-240 A.D.) question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" The Reformers deemed the Hellenistic influence on Christianity as responsible for a centuries-long corruption of the latter, and assumed that maintaining the purity of both the Christian faith and Hellenism could only be accomplished through an amicable divorce.

Ostensibly untethered from Christianity, Western man's love affair with paganism continued into the Enlightenment. America was itself a product of this Enlightenment. In [The Founders and the Classics](#), history professor Carl Richard argued that the founding of America was perhaps the last great act of the

Renaissance, and demonstrated how dependent the Founding Fathers—and America—were on the thought of Ancient Greece and Rome.

However, [as historian Peter Gay implies](#), the Enlightenment had a schizophrenic attitude toward antiquity, one that used the fruits of paganism and then dispensed with that same paganism in the name of progress. The leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, he writes, “used their classical learning to free themselves from their Christian heritage,” but then, “having done with the ancients, turned their face toward a modern world view.”

Since the time of the Enlightenment, the scorn for America’s pagan roots has only increased, and is seen most clearly in an education system today that exalts STEM but fails to put students in touch with the authors, ideas, and virtues that shaped Western Civilization and their country’s founding. As Notre Dame professor Patrick Deneen [has said](#), it is an education system that has a “commitment to producing individuals without a past for whom the future is a foreign country, cultureless ciphers who can live anywhere and perform any kind of work without inquiring about its purposes or ends, perfected tools for an economic system that prizes “flexibility” (geographic, interpersonal, ethical).”

If America is to have a future, it will depend upon its recovery of the pagan spirit that animated its creation. It will require, as C.S. Lewis put it, that Americans once again become “good pagans.