

## Author issues call to privilege religion

Timothy Kelly | Jun. 8, 2011

THE TURN TO TRANSCENDENCE: THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Glenn W. Olsen

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Glenn Olsen is a troubled man. He is sure that the liberal state has destroyed the human capacity for true community by denying the transcendent. But he sees hope. In America and the rest of the Western world there is a groundswell of demand for restoring the transcendent to its central role in our culture, and such a restoration may yet be possible.

Olsen's argument is both straightforward and nuanced. The author, professor emeritus of medieval history at the University of Utah, claims that Americans once acknowledged a firm, hierarchical order with a transcendent God and absolute meaning, but today have forsaken that worldview because liberal elites waged a successful war against religion in public life. But now Americans (and other Westerners) have tired of a soulless culture and want the transcendent once again. Only liberal elites stand in the way.

In Olsen's view, the absence of transcendence allowed technology and capitalism to reign supreme over our culture, it released any check on our natural greed, and it destroyed true community. Conservatives are blind to capitalism's evils, and therefore impotent to battle it successfully. Olsen spends little time on them.

He is much more concerned with those classical liberals who gave birth to capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, and their modern descendants who today seek to control the market through an expanded, regulatory, godless state -- an evil even more dangerous than unchecked capitalism. The only true solution is for the state to privilege Americans' natural religious sensibilities. The government must stop its war on religion and instead put religion at the center of public life.

Olsen's argument raises many important questions, even for sympathetic readers, and hints at some troubling answers. For example, what form of religion should the U.S. government put at the center of our culture? Olsen seems to favor a conservative Catholicism, but he also quotes approvingly throughout his work from Jews, Muslims, evangelical Christians and mainline Protestants who agree that religion must stand at the center of a seamless public/private culture. But what if Muslims, Protestants and Jews would not welcome a public culture rooted in conservative Catholic beliefs? Olsen does not address this specifically, but points out that other nations have divided themselves into distinct geographic regions based on coherent public cultures rooted in a common religion. He singles out Slovenia and Croatia as particular ideals. Perhaps we should strive to be more like Croatia, which has had no trouble dismissing the false neutrality of multiculturalism.

What evidence does Olsen see of an unmet hunger for the transcendent in the contemporary Western world? The evidence is slight and anecdotal, taken almost entirely from reading the perspectives of a handful of artists and historians. Attempts to discern popular sentiment are remarkably free of any of the social historical methods developed so thoroughly over the past half century -- not too surprising in one who expresses such discomfort with democracy. Instead, we get idiosyncratic readings of modern history. The rise of fascism in Italy, Spain

and Germany in the 1930s gets lots of attention. Say what you will about their particular means of satisfying the hunger, Hitler, Franco and Mussolini at least saw the gnawing need in their people for a public culture rooted in absolutes. Their blending of religious culture and nationalism, a civil religion on a grand scale, was, in Olsen's eyes, an insightful exploitation of the impulse that Olsen asserts to be rising still today.

How does Olsen discern the denial of transcendence in American society? Here, as elsewhere, he relies not on what Americans report about their own beliefs, which reveal a remarkable consistency in a belief in the transcendent, but rather on Supreme Court rulings that strive to separate church and state. In Olsen's view, citizens cannot sustain their beliefs in the transcendent and cannot make that a significant part of their understanding of themselves and their society unless the state endorses those beliefs explicitly, in policies. And, Olsen asserts, the state cannot be neutral regarding religion, so its failure to privilege the transcendent means that the state is hostile to religion. If the state is hostile to religion, then its citizens cannot be religious, even though they really want to be by their very natures (and apparently think that they already are).

Finally, there is more than a little irony in Olsen's polemic. He worries that Americans have lost their sense of a common culture in favor of a diffuse, soulless, materialist multiculturalism that divides us from each other. His solution, to bind us together through barbed critiques, seems more than a little ill-fated from the outset. And it reveals the difficulty that any government would have in privileging religion at a time when even common faith communities with long histories fracture in deep disagreement. Do we want to build a public culture as unified as the Anglican church has been over the past 10 years? Or will any effort to assert a society rooted in this transcendent ideal result inevitably in island communities of ideological purity, fearful and suspicious of each other?

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