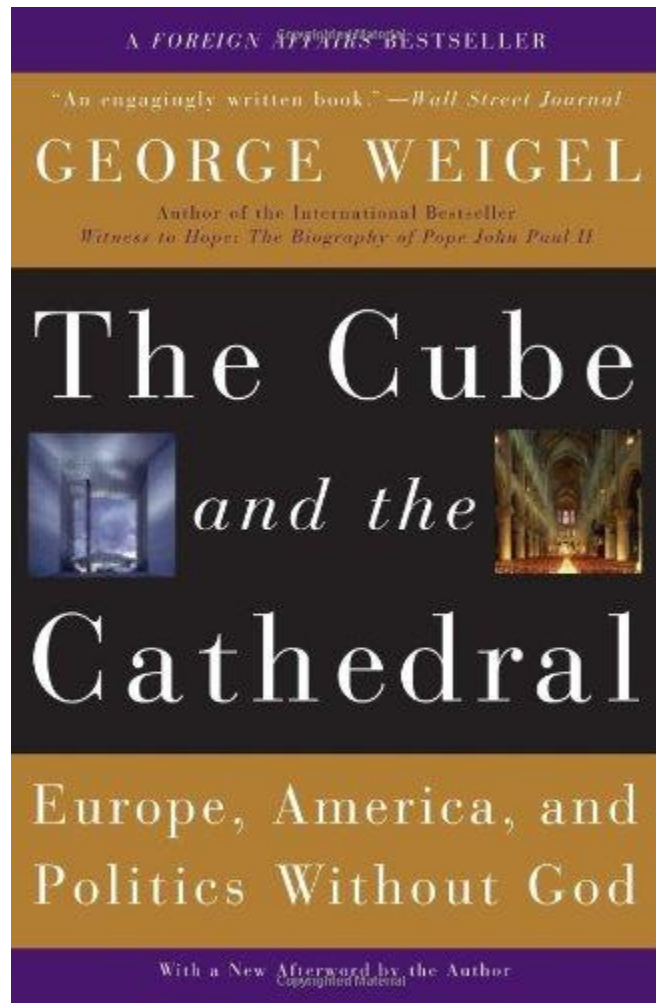


A Summary of *The Cube and the Cathedral* by George Weigel



A Summary of *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics without God* by George Weigel

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About the Author

George Weigel is a Roman Catholic theologian, author, and commentator on religion and public life. In addition to his master's degree from the University of St. Michael's in Toronto, Weigel has received eight honorary doctorate degrees as well as the papal cross *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*. Best known for his bestselling *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, he has authored a dozen books, as well as op-eds, essays, reviews, and a weekly syndicated column titled "The Catholic Difference." Weigel is a consultant on Vatican affairs for NBC news, and a frequent guest on radio and television programs. Weigel is a Senior Fellow and a director of the Catholic Studies program at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. He is also Founding President of the James Madison Foundation, an organization dedicated to improving education about the United States Constitution in secondary schools. Weigel and his wife Joan currently live with their three children in Maryland.

General Overview

In his book *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics without God*, George Weigel explores the increasingly secular and demographically unstable culture of Europe. Taking as symbolic models the La Grande Arche de la Defense – the Parisian base for the International Foundation for Human Rights – and the nearby Notre Dame Cathedral, Weigel poses the query: which culture is best equipped for protecting human rights? He sees in the European Union's insistently secular Constitution and Europe's disturbingly low birth rate unfavorable portents for the future of human rights. As he makes the case that a Christian culture provides the best reasoned, coherent defense for human rights, Weigel embarks on an analysis of the European problem at a cultural, not merely political or economic, level. For, he argues, "Culture is what drives history over the long haul."

Questions atop the Cube

While admiring the view of Paris from atop La Grande Arche de la Defense, Weigel compares that geometrically precise but featureless structure with the Notre Dame cathedral, which would fit inside the Arche. He ponders which culture, the secular world of the Arche or the Catholic culture of Notre Dame, would best protect human rights.

More Questions

Weigel examines why America and Europe seem to be parting ways in regard to an understanding of democracy – its sources, possibilities, and enemies. This divergence has been brought into sharper focus by the 9/11 attacks and the war in Iraq. Many Europeans seem convinced that Christianity has no place in the future of the European Union, and they are determined to forget its place in Europe's past. These troubling portents, as well as the urgent problem of Europe's dramatically falling birthrate, cannot be explained in solely political terms. Weigel insists that the answer is of great importance to America as well as Europe, for the European problem could one day be America's as well.

Martians and Venusians?

Weigel broaches an interpretation of the European problem offered by Robert Kagan. Kagan, author of *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, argues that the demilitarization and pacifistic tendencies of Europe (i.e. Europe being "Venus" to America's "Mars") stem from a reaction to the horrors and devastation that engulfed that continent in the twentieth century. Seeing the havoc that "hard power" can wreak, some Europeans enthusiastically embrace the promise of "soft power," including refined international law, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Kagan ironically notes that the relative peace now

present in Europe is sustained not only by soft power, but by the hard power of America, manifest in troops still stationed throughout Europe and particularly in the Middle East.

True, but Insufficient

While admitting that Kagan's argument has merit, Weigel determines that it does not penetrate to the heart of the matter: why did Europe react in this particular way to their uniquely horrific experience in the twentieth century? Weigel believes that Josef Joffe and Alain Finkeilkraut, a German commentator and French political theorist, may offer further insight into this question. Joffe and Finkeilkraut speculate that Europe's antipathy to hard power stems from an overreaction to the horrors of the Holocaust. Europe has carried its antifascism to the opposite extreme of transcending the world and completely renouncing nationalism and power. By proclaiming an end to politics, Europe may be seeking absolution for its part in the Holocaust and other tragedies of the past century. Weigel, however, believes that he can probe beyond even this analysis.

Puzzles

Weigel presents a series of conundrums about European politics: why was Western Europe only half-heartedly disapproving of Communism? Why is it so enthusiastically supportive of international organizations, the Kyoto Protocol, and Yasser Arafat, yet so quick to believe the worst about America? Why did Spain elect a president committed to appeasement immediately following the 2004 Madrid train bombings? Why is European productivity down, its bureaucratic structures multiplying and its political discussions log-jammed? Why do European courts seek increasingly international jurisdiction? Why are so many European intellectuals both anti-politics and Christophobic? And why is Europe committing demographic suicide? Weigel asserts that, to answer these puzzles, one must ask the question: Why did Europe have the twentieth century it did?

A Disclaimer

Weigel asserts that he does not pursue the question of the European problem out of bitterness toward Europe or a too-sunny view of America. He reminds the reader that America could one day have a problem much like that of Europe.

What Makes History Go?

In order to plumb the depths of his questions, Weigel turns to an analysis of European culture. He asserts that history is not driven by economics or politics but by culture, by what "men and women honor, cherish, and worship." Weigel attributes the remarkable survival of Poland through the Polish partitions, World Wars I and II, and Communism to its dynamic and distinctly Catholic culture. This theory of a culture-driven history has been propounded by English historian Christopher Dawson, author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and many Slavic authors and playwrights. Weigel concurs with Solzhenitsyn's conclusion that Europe's civilizational crisis is born of a crisis of morale.

The Trapgate of 1914

Weigel sees a cultural disease manifest in Europe even prior to the outbreak of World War I, traceable to the influence of the nihilist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The violence and will to power that Nietzsche advocated drove the arms race. To many Europeans, destruction seemed to be the path to European regeneration. The will to power, intense nationalism, imperialism, and the breakdown of trust between nations provoked and perpetuated the slaughter of the First World War. Europe came to embrace this suicidal philosophy by forgetting the civilizational morality that had been its heritage – it forgot its humanity...it forgot

God. Since history is driven by culture, by what men honor, cherish, and worship, Europe's decayed sense of morality and amnesia about its Christian past was central to the horrors that engulfed it in the twentieth century.

Something New: The Drama of Atheistic Humanism

Catholic theologian Henri deLubac attributes Europe's crisis during the Second World War to atheistic humanism – that is, the liberation of man achieved through the deliberate rejection of God. The Judeo-Christian God, who endowed man with free will and came to dwell with him and redeem him, had previously been viewed as liberation from the meddling, tyrannical gods of Greece, Rome, and those nations approximate to Israel. Now that same God was seen by atheistic humanists as the barrier to human self-realization and freedom. This atheism in the name of humanism was a new idea, essentially different from the skeptic atheism or indifferent agnosticism of the past. DeLubac draws out the consequences of this new idea: “It is not true...that man cannot organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can only organize it against man.”

Getting at the Roots of Things

Weigel argues that atheistic humanism (found not only in Nietzsche, but also in Auguste Comte, Feuerbach, and Marx) was a philosophy that found its fullest expressions in concentration camps and gulags, but that had been simmering beneath the surface of world events since the beginning of the twentieth century. This still-potent idea also explains the drive among some Europeans to exclude God and transcendence from their political, social, and cultural life. In order to be free, the secular European believes that he must be radically secular. Therefore, he must stamp out his Christian heritage and instead take refuge in the purported security of internationalism and governmental bureaucracy.

A Hard Judgment

Weigel recalls Christopher Dawson's characterization of modern Europe not as pagan – which is “religious” in a way –, but as a spiritual no-man's-land. Dawson wrote, “A secular society that has no end beyond its own satisfaction is a monstrosity – a cancerous growth which will ultimately destroy itself.”

Growing Body, Withering Soul

Weigel attributes the fierce opposition among most European nations to the mention of Christianity in the 2004 European Union constitution draft to a conviction that Christianity is an obstacle to peace, human rights, and democracy. The ideology of *laicite*, a value-neutral secularism, came to the forefront in debates over the constitution. The closest mention to the centuries of Christian influence and formation in historic Europe in the completed draft was a reference to “the cultural, religious, and humanist inheritance of Europe.” The fact that so many doubted that Christianity has made any contribution to democracy and human rights speaks to a deficient modern understanding of those concepts.

What Constitutions Do

Weigel presents the thought of J. H. H. Weiler on the European Union constitution. Weiler makes a case in *Christian Europe: An Exploratory Essay* that a European constitution which deliberately ignored its Christian heritage would be illegitimate. Since it is the repository of a society's values, symbols, and ideas in addition to organizing state functions and defining the relationship between citizens and state, a constitution that distorts or ignores its own cultural foundations is disabled and futile. Weiler argues that a coherent European

constitution would acknowledge its Christian past and protect both freedom of religion and freedom from religion.

Historical Memory and Moral Community

Weiler observes that, by celebrating tolerance and freedom and ignoring Christianity, the European constitution in reality imposes *laicite* on its adherents. Christian thought is the inheritance of all Europeans, Christian and non-Christian, and its absence impoverishes everyone.

Christophobia

Weigel presents Weiler's eight sources of Christophobia among European elites. The first is the mistaken belief that the anti-Semitism of the Holocaust had its source in Christian anti-Semitism. The second component is the "1968 mind-set," a rebellion against traditional authority. Third is a backlash to the Revolution of 1989, crucially influenced by Christianity, which expanded freedom and democracy to Eastern Europe but which also spelled the demise of Communism, the most secular of governments. The fourth component is resentment of the influential role played by Christian Democrats in post-war Europe, and the fifth is the identification of Christianity with the political "right," along with bigotry and intolerance. The sixth is resentment over the effective leadership and witness of Pope John Paul II. The seventh component is the absence of Christianity in the teaching of European history. Finally, many of the children of these European elites have become Christians, to the confusion and dismay of their parents.

Two Ideas of Freedom

Weigel sees beneath the argument over Christianity's place in the European Union's constitution a disagreement over the meaning of freedom. He illustrates two interpretations of freedom by relating the theories of two friars: St. Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham. Aquinas saw our liberty as *freedom for excellence*, the freedom to choose the good. Freedom is therefore inseparable from virtue. Ockham is best known for his philosophy of nominalism, the belief that universal concepts like human nature are products of the human mind, while only particulars exist in reality. By implicitly declaring human nature to be illusory, nominalism destroyed the basis for natural law, those moral principles that derive from man's common human nature. Therefore, morality became arbitrary, a form of coercion without reference to the good of man. Ockham introduced the *freedom of indifference*, freedom being simply a neutral choice, a mechanism for self-assertion. This idea would, centuries later, find its fruition in the will to power of Nietzsche and the autonomous, isolated individual asserting his will over others. This idea evidently holds currency in Europe today.

By Name

Weigel lists five pages of Christian, European figures (e.g. Aquinas, Roger Bacon, Galileo, Michelangelo, Lech Walesa, et cetera) and opines where Europe would be today without their monumental influence.

Making Europe "Europe"

Weigel now asks the question *how* did Christianity "make" Europe? Dawson posits that the Church – monks specifically – preserved remnants of Roman culture through the "Dark Ages" and civilized the barbarians, notably the Franks, through conversion. Peter Brown, historian and author of *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A. D. 200-1000*, argues that Christendom developed through the

interaction of barbarians and Christianity that had been adapted to the various cultures to which it had been spread.

Those Not-so-Benighted Middle Ages

Weigel holds that the Middle Ages proved formative to the modern democratic project. For example, Pope Gregory VII settled the investiture controversy – over whether the pope or the emperor would appoint bishops – by keeping the Church and state separate in this matter. The Church retained its independence and the state was not all-powerful or deified. “The Western ideal,” Weigel asserts, “a limited state in a free society – was made possible in no small part by the investiture controversy.” Furthermore, the Christian conception of the dignity of man and the elevation of creation through the Incarnation gave both man and his work in the world nobility and meaning. Through the Christian tradition of natural law and logic, not only was the groundwork for science prepared, but also the notions of transcendent justice and objective morality, so crucial to order in the public square. The Christophobia of European elites willfully dismisses the rich heritage that Christianity bequeathed to Europe.

Giving an Account

If, as Weigel argues, democracy is an expression of specific moral commitments, then the democratic citizen ought to be able to give an account of why he supports human rights and the rule of law. Although Christians are currently charged with being a threat to public life for the opposite reason that they were condemned in ancient Rome (which was because they were “*a*-theists,” i.e., “against gods”, not believing in the Roman gods), Weigel asserts that Christians can give a more coherent account of their commitment to democracy than can their secular counterparts. Indifference, skepticism, and relativism do not provide compelling reasons to be tolerant and civil. Conversely, the Catholic Church recognizes the dignity of each individual and asks only to enter into dialogue with man in pursuit of objective truth.

What False Stories Do

John Paul II, a thoroughly European individual who figured prominently in the Revolution of 1989, addressed the European problem in his apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa* on June 28, 2003. He diagnoses Europe’s most pressing concern as a need for hope, manifested in its religious indifference, fear, emptiness, selfishness, and declining birth rate. This hopeless attitude has its source in the rejection of Christ, which leaves man feeling alone. Seeing great hope in the Revolution of 1989, John Paul II exhorts Europeans to reclaim their Christian heritage, which was the source of so much of its humanistic culture.

A Free and Virtuous Europe

Rather than yearning to return to past days when popes and cardinals played political roles on the world stage, the Church now offers her moral counsel to help modern societies become free and virtuous. Through natural law and Catholic social doctrine, the Church proposes a framework in which any society can be free through embracing justice and truth. In order to be authentically “new,” Europe must have a moral dimension, like the “new city” of the Book of Revelation. John Paul II encourages Europeans to be not afraid, for the Gospel is not against them, but for them.

The Stakes for the States

Weigel recalls a conversation he had with a Polish friend who had been involved with the Polish Solidarity Movement, which was so instrumental in the Communist collapse in that country. While trying to analyze

what made that movement so effective, the friend concluded that the spiritual dimension of Solidarity was the underlying force that brought Communism down. The striving of all people, Christian and non-Christian alike, to live Christian values blossomed into inner freedom and conviction, even in the face of an apparently insuperable enemy. Weigel's friend suggested that spiritual communion would remedy the isolation and loneliness of modern Europeans. Weigel then asks the question: Why should Americans care? He gives several reasons, including reverence and gratitude for one's forebears, as well as the worldwide impact of Europe's population crisis, especially if its demographic vacuum is filled by militant Islamists. Finally, it is entirely probable that European political and cultural trends will find their way into American society, particularly as references in court decisions.

Futures

Weigel proposes four possible conclusions to Europe's present situation. First, the European Union, as currently conceived, works. Its "soft power" successfully wards off terrorism and the E. U. expands. Weigel, however, sees this as a long shot. The future economic prosperity of Europe would depend on a rebirth of incentive and entrepreneurship and a decline in bureaucracies and social welfare programs, none of which seem likely at the moment. Furthermore, assimilation of the increasing European Muslim population will unlikely prove easy, despite Europe's professed "neutrality" between worldviews. Weigel is also doubtful that the E. U.'s policy of appeasement will produce a longstanding peace with terrorists. Finally, Weigel echoes John Paul II's remark that "one does not cut off the roots from which one is born." Could the E. U. survive severed from its Christian cultural roots?

A second conclusion Weigel terms "The Muddle." In this scenario, different countries within the Union adopt different solutions to the current demographic problem. For example, France could see an increase in radical Muslims, Austria might seal off its borders, and Britain might forge a peace between its secularized Muslim inhabitants and post-Christian British citizens. This may work well for individual states, but it is not the united Europe presently envisioned by the European Union.

Thirdly, Europe could be reconverted to its Christian roots. New hope could spring from the burgeoning supply of African missionaries, from Christian renewal movements like Taizé and Opus Dei, from an intensely Catholic country like Poland, or from the many pilgrimage sites that attract millions to Europe. Signs of springtime are evident in the overwhelming response of European youth to the 1997 World Youth Day in Paris – a response that was incomprehensible to their elders, those of the 1968 revolution mentality. This hope motivates Vatican enthusiasts for the European Union; perhaps this moment of question presents an evangelistic opportunity.

Finally, Weigel broaches the darkest conclusion, which he titles "1683 Reversed." In this case, European demography continues to decline, militant Islamists continue to immigrate, finances progressively destabilize and morale sinks. While some states of central and Eastern Europe retain their Christian and democratic heritage, much of Western Europe becomes Islamicised, reversing the pivotal 1683 defeat of the Turks at Vienna. Weigel contends that this could in fact happen, much as the Christian civilization of seventh century North Africa, weakened by theological controversies, fell to the Muslims and disappeared completely within eighty years. Today, an advancing Muslim army would not have to storm Vienna; Europe would have handed itself over to its conquerors. If the Church would disappear from Europe in this way, the human rights celebrated by the makers of the "cube" would be in peril.

Reversing the Question

Weigel restates that he has probed the question of the European malaise not out of American anti-Europeanism, but out of concern for Europe's demographic decline and, for example, its indifferent response to the reception of several post-Communist Eastern European states into the E. U., which, given the defeat of

Communism, ought to have been an occasion for rejoicing. Weigel hopes that Europeans are asking themselves the question: “For what are we being unified?” Hopefully, not for mere economic or legal conveniences. The debate over the European Constitution has brought into the open the assumption of many elite Europeans that a free, tolerant, pluralistic Europe can only be achieved without reference to God. The old question of whether Christianity could accommodate itself to democracy has been answered; the revolution of 1989 and the impassioned defenses of human rights made by John Paul II give ample evidence of Christianity’s commitment to authentic freedom. Now, the question is reversed: Can this new society, divorced from God, make a reasoned, sustained commitment to freedom and human rights?

The Cost of Boredom

Orthodox theologian David Hart posits that faith and the “will to a future” are linked; therefore, a culture without faith would have no reason to reproduce. While this analysis may be simplistic, a lack of self-confidence and purpose may play a part in Europe’s demographic meltdown. Hart suggests that the problem at its root is a kind of metaphysical boredom. Hart writes, “A culture...is only as great as the religious ideas that animate it...The eye of faith presumes to see something miraculous within the ordinariness of the moment, mysterious hints of an intelligible order calling out for translation into artifacts, but boredom’s disenchantment renders the imagination inert and desire torpid.”

A Different Modernity

Weigel sees in the witness and teaching of John Paul II a challenge to a new kind of modernity that could elevate Europe from its torpor. At the heart of his message is the “Symphony of Truth,” discernible in theology, philosophy, and morality – not contradictory, but unified. Truth is objective, and each man can and must seek it, or ignore it at his own peril. Modern man can embrace a new Christian humanism by reflecting on the true humanity revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Without reference to the transcendent, man’s vision becomes cramped and the foundation of his dignity destabilizes. It is this Christian Humanism of John Paul II that ignited the consciences of millions and led to the Revolution of 1989. Perhaps the same humanism can renew Europe again.

The Cube and the Cathedral

Weigel returns to his original question: Which culture can best defend human rights, that of the cube or of the cathedral? Throughout this book, Weigel has argued that Christianity can offer a coherent defense of human rights, where modern atheistic secularism can only offer foundationless tolerance. He offers a final question, proposed by Joseph Weiler: Can the cultures of the cube and the cathedral coexist? Christians have a reason to respect and defend others’ freedom, since it is their Christian obligation to do so. From whence would a similar obligation come in the society of the cube? This is the pivotal question for modern Europeans to ponder.