

*How  
Should We  
Then Live?*

*The Rise and Decline of  
Western Thought and Culture*



FRANCIS A.  
SCHAEFFER

“This book was formative for me as for so many others. You will be amazed at how relevant it is right now.”

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FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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## Author's Note

IN NO WAY DOES THIS BOOK make a pretense of being a complete chronological history of Western culture. It is questionable if such a book could even be written. This book is, however, an analysis of the key moments in history which have formed our present culture, and the thinking of the people who brought those moments to pass. This study is made in the hope that light may be shed upon the major characteristics of our age and that solutions may be found to the myriad of problems which face us as we look toward the end of the twentieth century.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Ancient Rome

THERE IS A FLOW to history and culture. This flow is rooted and has its wellspring in the thoughts of people. People are unique in the inner life of the mind—what they are in their thought-world determines how they act. This is true of their value systems, and it is true of their creativity. It is true of their corporate actions, such as political decisions, and it is true of their personal lives. The results of their thought-world flow through their fingers or from their tongues into the external world. This is true of Michelangelo's chisel, and it is true of a dictator's sword.

People have presuppositions, and they will live more consistently on the basis of these presuppositions than even they themselves may realize. By *presuppositions* we mean the basic way an individual looks at life, his basic worldview, the grid through which he sees the world. Presuppositions rest upon that which a person considers to be the truth of what exists. People's presuppositions lay a grid for all they bring forth into the external world. Their presuppositions also provide the basis for their values and therefore the basis for their decisions.



“As a man thinketh, so is he,” is really most profound. An individual is not just the product of the forces around him. He has a mind, an inner world. Then, having thought, a person can bring forth actions into the external world and thus influence it. People are apt to look at the outer theater of action, forgetting the actor who “lives in the mind” and who therefore is the true actor in the external world. The inner thought-world determines the outward action.

Most people catch their presuppositions from their family and surrounding society the way a child catches measles. But people with more understanding realize that their presuppositions should be chosen after a careful consideration of what worldview is true. When all is done, when all the alternatives have been explored, “not many men are in the room”—that is, although worldviews have many variations, there are not many basic worldviews or basic presuppositions. These basic options will become obvious as we look at the flow of the past.

To understand where we are in today’s world—in our intellectual ideas and in our cultural and political lives—we must trace three lines in history, namely, the philosophic, the scientific, and the religious. The philosophic seeks intellectual answers to the basic questions of life. The scientific has two parts: first, the makeup of the physical universe, and then the practical application of what it discovers in technology. The direction in which science will move is set by the philosophic worldview of the scientists. People’s religious views also determine the direction of their individual lives and of their society.

As we try to learn lessons about the primary dilemmas which we now face, by looking at the past and considering its flow, we could

begin with the Greeks, or even before the Greeks. We could go back to the three great ancient river cultures: the Euphrates, the Indus, and the Nile. However, we will begin with the Romans (and with the Greek influence behind them), because Roman civilization is the direct ancestor of the modern Western world. From the first conquests of the Roman Republic down to our own day, Roman law and political ideas have had a strong influence on the European scene and the entire Western world. Wherever Western civilization has gone, it has been marked by the Romans.

In many ways Rome was great, but it had no real answers to the basic problems that all humanity faces. Much of Roman thought and culture was shaped by Greek thinking, especially after Greece came under Roman rule in 146 BC. The Greeks tried first to build their society upon the city-state, that is, the *polis*. The city-state, both in theory and fact, was comprised of all those who were accepted as citizens. All values had meaning in reference to the *polis*. Thus, when Socrates (c. 469–399 BC) had to choose between death and exile from that which gave him meaning, he chose death. But the *polis* failed since it proved to be an insufficient base upon which to build a society.

The Greeks and later the Romans also tried to build society upon their gods. But these gods were not big enough because they were finite, limited. Even all their gods put together were not infinite. Actually, the gods in Greek and Roman thinking were like men and women larger than life, but not basically different from human men and women. As one example among thousands, we can think of the statue of Hercules, standing inebriated and urinating. Hercules was the patron god of Herculaneum, which was destroyed at the same time as Pompeii. The gods were amplified humanity, not divinity.

Like the Greeks, the Romans had no infinite god. This being so, they had no sufficient reference point intellectually; that is, they did not have anything big enough or permanent enough to which to relate either their thinking or their living. Consequently, their value system was not strong enough to bear the strains of life, either individual or political. All their gods put together could not give them a sufficient base for life, morals, values, and final decisions. These gods depended on the society which had made them, and when this society collapsed the gods tumbled with it. Thus, the Greek and Roman experiments in social harmony (which rested on an elitist republic) ultimately failed.

In the days of Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), Rome turned to an authoritarian system centered in Caesar himself. Before the days of Caesar, the senate could not keep order. Armed gangs terrorized the city of Rome, and the normal processes of government were disrupted as rivals fought for power. Self-interest became more significant than social interest, however sophisticated the trappings. Thus, in desperation the people accepted authoritarian government. As Plutarch (AD c. 50–120) put it in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, the Romans made Caesar dictator for life “in the hope that the government of a single person would give them time to breathe after so many civil wars and calamities. This was indeed a tyranny avowed, since his power now was not only absolute, but perpetual, too.”

After Caesar’s death, Octavian (63 BC–AD 14), later called Caesar Augustus, grandnephew of Caesar, came to power. He had become Caesar’s son by adoption. The great Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BC) was a friend of Augustus, and he wrote the *Aeneid* with the object of showing that Augustus was a divinely appointed

leader and that Rome's mission was to bring peace and civilization to the world. Because Augustus established peace externally and internally and because he kept the outward forms of constitutionality, Romans of every class were ready to allow him total power in order to restore and assure the functioning of the political system, business, and the affairs of daily life. After 12 BC, he became the head of the state religion, taking the title *Pontifex Maximus* and urging everyone to worship the "spirit of Rome and the genius of the emperor." Later this became obligatory for all the people of the empire, and later still, the emperors ruled as gods. Augustus tried to legislate morals and family life; subsequent emperors tried impressive legal reforms and welfare programs. But a human god is a poor foundation, and Rome fell.

It is important to realize what a difference a people's worldview makes in their strength as they are exposed to the pressure of life. That it was the Christians who were able to resist religious mixtures, syncretism, and the effects of the weaknesses of Roman culture speaks of the strength of the Christian worldview. This strength rested on God's being an infinite-personal God and His speaking in the Old Testament, in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and in the gradually growing New Testament. He had spoken in ways people could understand. Thus the Christians not only had knowledge about the universe and mankind that people cannot find out by themselves, but they had absolute, universal values by which to live and by which to judge the society and the political state in which they lived. And they had grounds for the basic dignity and value of the individual as unique in being made in the image of God.

Perhaps no one has presented more vividly to our generation the inner weakness of imperial Rome than has Fellini (1920–1993) in

his film *Satyricon* (1969). He reminded us that the classical world is not to be romanticized, but that it was both cruel and decadent as it came to the logical conclusion of its worldview.

A culture or an individual with a weak base can stand only when the pressure on it is not too great. As an illustration, let us think of a Roman bridge. The Romans built little humpbacked bridges over many of the streams of Europe. People and wagons went over these structures safely for centuries, for two millennia. But if people today drove heavily loaded trucks over these bridges, they would break. It is this way with the lives and value systems of individuals and cultures when they have nothing stronger to build on than their own limitedness, their own finiteness. They can stand when pressures are not too great, but when pressures mount, if *then* they do not have a sufficient base, they crash—just as a Roman bridge would cave in under the weight of a modern six-wheeled truck. Culture and the freedoms of people are fragile. Without a sufficient base, when such pressures come only time is needed—and often not a great deal of time—before there is a collapse.

The Roman Empire was great in size and military strength. It reached out over much of the known world. Its roads lead over all of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. The monument to Caesar Augustus at Turbi (just north of modern Monte Carlo) marks the fact that he opened the roads above the Mediterranean and defeated the proud Gauls. In one direction of Roman expansion the Roman legions passed the Roman city Augusta Praetoria in northern Italy, which today is called Aosta, crossed the Alps, and came down the Rhone Valley in Switzerland past the peaks of the Dents du Midi to that place which is now Vevey. For a time the Helvetians, who were Celtic and the principal inhabitants of what is now Switzerland,

held them in check and made the proud Romans pass under the yoke. The Swiss painter Charles Gleyre (1806–1874), in a painting which now hangs in the art museum in Lausanne, has shown the conquered Roman soldiers, hands tied behind their backs, bending to pass under a low yoke. All this, however, was temporary. Not much could hold back the Roman legions, neither difficult terrain nor enemy armies. After the Romans had passed what is now St. Maurice and the peaks of the Dents du Midi, and as they flowed around Lake Geneva to modern Vevey, they marched over the hills and conquered the ancient Helvetian capitol, Aventicum, today called Avenches.

I love Avenches. It contains some of my favorite Roman ruins north of the Alps. Some have said (although I think it is a high figure) that at one time forty thousand Romans lived there. Today the ruins of Roman walls rise from the blowing wheat in the autumn. One can imagine a Roman legionary who had slogged home from the vastness of the north, mounting the hill and looking down on Avenches—a little Rome, as it were, with its amphitheater, theater, and temple. The opulence of Rome was at Avenches, as one sees by the gold bust of Marcus Aurelius which was found there. Gradually Christianity came to Roman Avenches. We know this by studying the cemetery of that time—the Romans burned their dead, the Christians buried theirs. One can find many monuments and towns similar to Turbi, Aosta, and Avenches all the way from Emperor Hadrian's wall, which the Romans built to contain the Scots (who were too tough to conquer), to the forts of the Rhine and North Africa, the Euphrates River, and the Caspian Sea.

Rome was cruel, and its cruelty can perhaps be best pictured by the events which took place in the arena in Rome itself. People

seated above the arena floor watched gladiator contests and Christians thrown to the beasts (see Plate 1). Let us not forget why the Christians were killed. They were *not* killed because they worshiped Jesus. Various religions covered the whole Roman world. One such was the cult of Mithras, a popular Persian form of Zoroastrianism which had reached Rome by 67 BC. Nobody cared who worshiped whom so long as the worshiper did not disrupt the unity of the state, centered in the formal worship of Caesar. The reason the Christians were killed was because they were rebels. This was especially so after their growing rejection by the Jewish synagogues lost for them the immunity granted to the Jews since Julius Caesar's time.

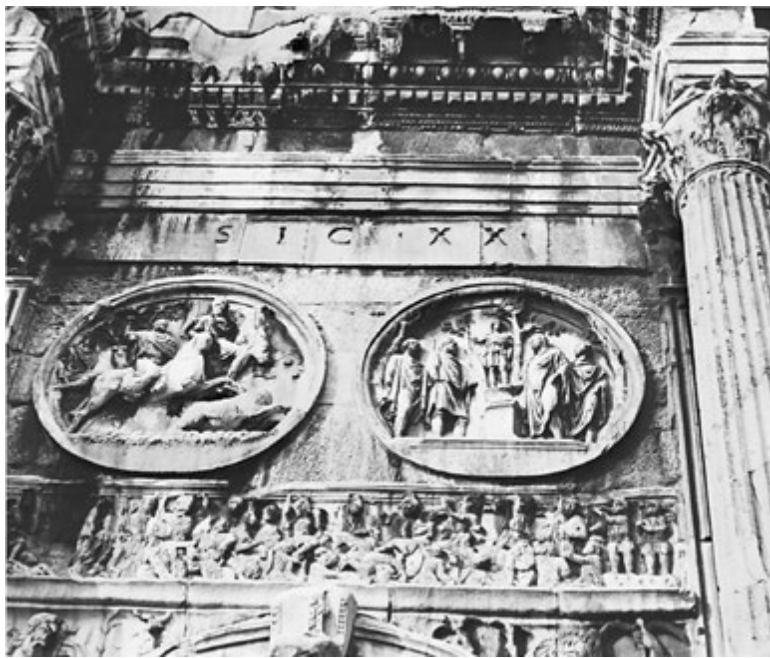
We may express the nature of their rebellion in two ways, both of which are true. First, we can say they worshiped Jesus as God and they worshiped the infinite-personal God only. The Caesars would not tolerate this worshiping of the one God *only*. It was counted as treason. Thus their worship became a special threat to the unity of the state during the third century and during the reign of Diocletian (284–305), when people of the higher classes began to become Christians in larger numbers. If they had worshiped Jesus *and* Caesar, they would have gone unharmed, but they rejected all forms of syncretism. They worshiped the God who had revealed Himself in the Old Testament, through Christ, and in the New Testament which had gradually been written. And they worshiped Him as the *only* God. They allowed no mixture: All other gods were seen as false gods.

We can also express in a second way why the Christians were killed: No totalitarian authority nor authoritarian state can tolerate those who have an absolute by which to judge that state and its actions. The Christians had that absolute in God's revelation. Because the Christians had an absolute, universal standard by which to judge



**Plate 1** *The Dying Gaul* (also known as *The Dying Gladiator*), Capitoline Museum, Rome. “Rome was cruel . . .” Photos by Mustafa Arshad.





**Plate 2** Detail of the Arch of Constantine, Rome. “In poor contrast to its second-century sculptures . . .” Photo by Mustafa Arshad.

not only personal morals but also the state, they were counted as enemies of totalitarian Rome and were thrown to the beasts.

As the Empire ground down, the decadent Romans were given to a thirst for violence and a gratification of the senses. This is especially evident in their rampant sexuality. For example, in Pompeii, a century or so after the Republic had become a thing of the past, the phallus cult was strong. Statues and paintings of exaggerated sexuality adorned the houses of the more affluent. Not all the art in Pompeii was like this, but the sexual representations were unabashedly blatant.

Even though Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of the Christians and Christianity became first (in 313) a legal religion,



**Plate 3** Ruins at Pompeii, Italy. “And Rome gradually became a ruin.”  
Photo by Mustafa Arshad.

and then (in 381) the official state religion of the Empire, the majority of the people went on in their old ways. Apathy was the chief mark of the late empire. One of the ways the apathy showed itself was in a lack of creativity in the arts. One easily observed example of the decadence of officially sponsored art is that the fourth-century work on the Arch of Constantine in Rome stands in poor contrast to its second-century sculptures, which were borrowed from monuments from the period of Emperor Trajan (see Plate 2). The elite abandoned their intellectual pursuits for social life. Officially sponsored art was decadent, and music was increasingly bombastic. Even the portraits on the coins became of poor quality. All of life was marked by the predominant apathy.

As the Roman economy slumped lower and lower, burdened with an aggravated inflation and a costly government, authoritarianism increased to counter the apathy. Since work was no longer done voluntarily, it was brought increasingly under the authority of the state, and freedoms were lost. For example, laws were passed binding small farmers to their land. So, because of the general apathy and its results, and because of oppressive control, few thought the old civilization worth saving.

Rome did not fall because of external forces such as the invasion by the barbarians. Rome had no sufficient inward base; the barbarians only completed the breakdown—and Rome gradually became a ruin.