

# EMPIRES OF DIRT



And you could have it all,  
My empire of dirt...

*Nine Inch Nails*  
*Johnny Cash*

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

*Percy Bysshe Shelley*

Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket,  
And are counted as the small dust of the balance:  
Behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing.

*The prophet Isaiah*

*Acknowledgements:*

Many thanks are due to Steven Wedgeworth, whose careful editorial work is most appreciated. ~ D.W.

Published by Canon Press  
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843  
800.488.2034 | [www.canonpress.com](http://www.canonpress.com)

Douglas Wilson, *Empires of Dirt: Secularism, Radical Islam, and the Mere Christendom Alternative*. Copyright ©2016 by Douglas Wilson.  
Edited by Steven Wedgeworth.

Cover design by James Engerbretson. Front cover painting: “The Wreck” by Knud-Andreassen Baade (1835).  
Interior design & illustration (Chester Cathedral window) by Valerie Anne Bost  
Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the King James Version.

Printed in the United States of America.

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:*

Names: Wilson, Douglas, 1953- author.

Title: Cathedrals of the new foundation : the biblical alternative to American exceptionalism and radical Islam / Douglas Wilson.

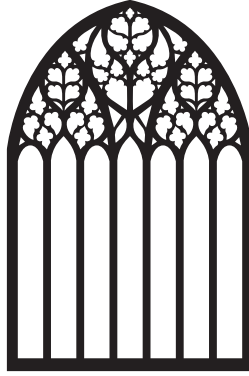
Description: Moscow : Canon Press, 2016. | Originally published: 2013.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016027445 | ISBN 9781591281436 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Christianity and politics. | Exceptionalism--United States. | Religious fanaticism--Islam. | Apologetics.

Classification: LCC BR115.P7 W497 2016 | DDC 261.7--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016027445>



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*Bankrupt Secularism, Radical Islam, and the  
Mere Christendom Alternative*

Douglas Wilson

*Edited by Steven Wedgworth*

canonpress  
Moscow, Idaho 



*This book is for my grandsons—  
Knox, Judah, Rory, Seamus, Titus, Shadrach, and Moses.  
I trust that you will be faithful in the fight  
long after I am gone.*







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# INTRODUCTION: CATHEDRALS OF THE NEW FOUNDATION

**I**n the past, it is true, I have occasionally written positive things about generally despised groups. I have done this with the medievals, with the Puritans, and even for some aspects of the Confederacy. Given this propensity of mine, was it not just a matter of time before I would come out to praise some aspect of the dissolution of the monasteries?

The word *praise* overstates it, but should we not be more suspicious than we are whenever we find a general consensus of unexamined condemnations? In England, the cathedrals of the Old Foundation were the ancient structures that were built before Henry VIII took money from said monasteries

and . . . built the cathedrals of the New Foundation. Those new cathedrals were at Chester, Gloucester, Peterborough, Bristol, and Oxford. The point to be made here is not that the dissolution of the monasteries was praiseworthy through and through. Nor is it that certain individuals did not feather their own nests significantly, which they certainly did. My point is a simple one—contrary to popular perceptions, the money from the dissolution was not *entirely* spent by corrupt barons binge drinking in their ancient manorial halls. Some of it—five cathedrals worth, at any rate—came from the Church and went to the Church. This may be faint praise, and that is all it is intended to be, because the only thing I am really after here is a metaphor for what we need to be doing now.

We need a Christendom of the New Foundation. I am speaking historically here, and not theologically. Theologically, Christ is the cornerstone (Acts 4:11), and there is no need for a new foundation—there can be no new foundation in that sense. The apostles and prophets are the foundation stones that God established together with Christ for the building of His Church throughout all ages (Eph. 2:20). In this sense, Christendom will always be a Christendom of the Old Foundation.

But historical circumstances change. There are times when we must regroup, take stock, and start over. Without abandoning any of the fundamental assumptions that all Christians should share, we must still recognize the differences between ages and labor from where we are, not from where we wish we could have been.

It is my contention that the centuries of secularism we have been dealing with, and more than this, the centuries of secularism that Christians have made an accommodation with, have gotten us *a peculiar form of bankrupt wealth*—kind of like the monasteries. What is needed is for us to figure out a way to take the inheritance that we have received from secularism, and to build churches with it. This Christendom of the New Foundation I am proposing will be a *mere Christendom*. But what do I mean by that?

In his engaging and admirable book *Bad Religion*, Ross Douthat mentions me in an aside,<sup>1</sup> and in that particular citation, he touches on a few things that need to be addressed at the very outset of any argument for a mere Christendom. They can be grouped under the heading of proposals that no one should be making and, if they are, they should stop it. But at the same time, the boys down in the secularist ministry of propaganda are dead set to make sure that any proposals that recognize that secularism is turning out to be pretty lame get accused of these things. In other words, Douthat is quite right that we shouldn't be doing the things we will invariably be accused of doing—provided we are doing something appropriate instead.

Certain things sound pretty scary, and theocracy is one of them. Douthat says that at times I have flirted with theocratic sentiments. It would be closer to the mark to say that—provided the necessary qualifications are made—I have been a

<sup>1</sup> The quotes on this page and the next come from Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 281 ff.

full-throated advocate of theocracy. Theocracy is not, however, to be confused with “theocracy” or any other form of government contained within scare quotes, to which I am unalterably opposed. As will be argued at length later, all societies are theocratic, and the only thing that distinguishes them is which God they serve. I want a theocratic society that maximizes human liberty, including liberty of consciences, and since this is a good thing, this means that we have to worship the God who gives all good things, the true and living God.

The second thing that concerns Douthat is the trap of separatism—a move which results in “paranoia, crankishness, and all the other pathologies of the religious ghetto.” When the world gets too big and bad, the temptation for believing Christians is to withdraw to their ghettos, compounds, and monasteries. This can happen two ways. The first is the move of the principled separatists, such as the Anabaptists pursuing a parallel culture to the “decadent American imperium.” Douthat mentions Hauerwas as an example of this, not to mention the more radical separatists among the Amish and Mennonites. But he also cautions the “neo-Calvinist homeschoolers” in this same regard, and it is a caution worth hearing. The original idea was “don’t retreat, reload,” but sometimes the temporary calm afforded by reloading can turn into a *de facto* retreat. Kuyperian efforts to regroup really need to take care to not turn into something else.

And last, Douthat mentions my doughty claim to be a “paleo-Confederate.” This was actually in the context of rebuffing the accusation that I was a neo-Confederate, yearning for a

do-over at Gettysburg. But I would actually want to identify with men like T.S. Eliot or Eugene Genovese on this topic, and not the last three Grand Kleagle Wizards. I am so far out of touch with that world that I am not even sure how to spell Kleagle. But any person who proposes we go in a completely different direction than secularism urges needs to be ready for this part of it—the slanders will come, and some of those charges will *appear* to stick. That is part of the cost of doing business. In our day, there is absolutely no way to argue for any form of Christendom whatever without having to answer for the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials, the slave trade, and numerous other icky things. But by “answer for,” I do not mean that we should argue that such things were the bright sunbeams of history, lighting up our path along the way—although that will be what we are accused of doing. All you have to do is put any of those atrocities in some sort of context and you will be accused of being a strident defender of them. The atrocities of Christendom (which have been grievous when compared to the holy law of God) still pale in comparison to the great pyramid of skulls that the secularists have constructed. Understandably, they don’t like having that pointed out, and have managed to make the *tu quoque* fallacy their ultimate defense.

But all this is necessary, I would argue, because secularism is on its last legs, and we will have to do something. But how is this possible to say? There are a number of ways this argument can be made, but allow me to point to just a couple. These indicators are not my own private claim to be able to

see the future, as though I had a crystal ball, but rather indicate which way I see certain important currents running. The things I am pointing out do not seem to me to be disputable, and it also seems obvious to me that they are highly significant.

First, the anemic response of the secularists to the idea of sharia law has been quite striking. For example, consider the various accommodations to forms of sharia law that have been made around Europe. And through recent years, when I have pointed *that* out, the laughter and the chortling have quite patronizing. “That couldn’t happen here, you boob.” But then the encroachments of the advocates of sharia law here proceed apace . . .

Now I know there is sharia law and there is sharia law. There is the chopping off of hands and death by stoning, on the one hand, and spiritual jihad against eating too much cheesecake on the other. Given how human beings generally spread themselves out across a range of opinions, it is not surprising that some advocates of sharia law are not as out there as others. But this distinction is one that secularism, back in its robust and virulent phases, would have been incapable of making. This is the kind of reasonable distinction that secularism can only make because it is in the process of unraveling.

Think back to the days of the Christian reconstructionists. Think of Ezekiel One-Tooth, living on his theonomic compound somewhere in the Ozarks, unbending just a little, in order to argue that the biblical requirement of death by



stoning could actually be met by a firing squad, for what are bullets, he asks, but very little stones? Meets the requirement, he says. And then put alongside him a moderate theonomist, a scholar and careful thinker like Greg Bahnsen, say. Do you think that as many secularists would be rushing to praise the “moderation” of Bahnsen the way they are defending the “moderate” advocates of sharia law? To ask the question is to answer it. No, what is happening is that self-confidence is draining clean out of secularism, as can be seen in their inability to take a clear, public stand against the encroachments of militant Islam. The pathetic European attempts to dab around the edges of this problem—by trying to ban burkas, for example—are a day late and a Euro short.

The second reason I would like to offer for considering secularism a spent force is that the devil is moving from opposing Christendom across the board to a more nuanced stance of supporting and advancing some forms of it. This will require greater development, but here is the outline of it.

When the Church crosses the border between “outside and persecuted” to “inside and influential,” that border crossing does not mean that the devil has gone into retirement. He does whatever he can to prevent the formation of Christendom in the first place, but then, when it looks as though we are going to get ourselves some sort of Christendom regardless, he is concerned to manage what kind of Christendom we get. It was altogether a good thing that Constantine converted, and there was nothing bad about how the persecutions of the

Church ceased. Three cheers for all of it. But the spiritual war continued on, unabated.

Anybody who thinks that the apostle Paul would have had us put up a big “mission accomplished” sign on the aircraft carrier of truth at that point is seriously mistaken. Once we have Christendom, which the devil opposed, are there forms of it that provide him with a great deal of scope to continue his work? You bet.

And I have seen, in recent years, arguments from Christian scholars that, if adopted in the context of a renewed Christendom, would present a really big problem. In fact, they would be a problem in just the same area where people have accused Constantine. The idea is that Constantine wanted something to prop up the existing order and not something that would transform the existing order. Leave aside for the moment whether the accusation against Constantine is true. It is a plausible accusation nonetheless.

“Let’s get Jesus to help us to succeed in what we were already trying to do.” In a similar way, those Christian thinkers who want the lordship of Jesus Christ acknowledged in public affairs coupled with a continuation of soft socialism (e.g., N.T. Wright, William T. Cavanaugh) want something that cannot be. And when they get the former, what they want with regard to the latter will be completely undone. For someone like Eusebius, someone like James Madison turns out to be something of a letdown. Oh well, I would say.

So, then, the issues are perennial, but the terms are not. Anyone working through the tangled weave of religion and

politics may need some help with terms. Anyone whacking away at the thicket of culture and faith with the machete of curiosity could probably use a simple lexicon. It seems only fair at the beginning here to provide some basic definitions.

I will be arguing throughout for the political expression of a mere Christendom. By *mere Christendom* I mean a network of nations bound together by a formal, public, civic acknowledgement of the lordship of Jesus Christ and the fundamental truth of the Apostles' Creed. I do not mean establishment or tax support for any particular denomination of Christians, but it is possible (and necessary) to avoid such establishment without falling for the myth of religious neutrality. Religious neutrality is an impossibility. So mere Christendom stands in contrast to sectarian Christendom on the one hand and complete secularism on the other. Approaching these alternatives from the middle distance are the claims of radical Islam, about which more in a minute.

*Secularism* refers to the idea, popular for the last few centuries, that it is in fact possible for nations to be religiously neutral. This impressive trick is managed by having everyone pretend that secularism does not bring with it its very own set of ultimate commitments. But it does bring them, and so secularism has presented us with its very own salvation narrative, in which story the Enlightened One arose to deliver us all from that sectarian strife and violence. The horse and rider were thrown into the sea, and this is why you can't put that Christmas tree up in the county courthouse.

*American exceptionalism* is the idea that America is a more of a creed than a nation. This kind of American exceptionalism makes a certain kind of civic religion possible, a quasi-sacramental approach which all consistent Christians reject as, in equal turns, blasphemous and silly. American exceptionalism in this sense is currently the high church form of secularism. American exceptionalism should *not* be defined as the grateful recognition that we live in a nation that has been enormously blessed in many ways. What might be called normal patriotism is not idolatrous, but is simply natural affection.

*Radical Islam* is a Christian heresy, but one of the features that it retained in its departure from the truth was the idea that religious claims are total and absolute. Islam functioned in this way for many centuries, competing head to head with the Christians, before the Enlightenment arrived in order to demote all forms of religious totalism (except for its own). Muslims who have accepted the claims of this secularism are now called “moderate” Muslims, while Muslims who are faithful to the older, all-encompassing claims of Islam are called radical Muslims. The word radical comes from the Latin *radix*, which means root. Radical Muslims have gone to the root of the matter, and they are the ones who at least understand the nature of the conflict. If Allah is God, then follow him. If he isn't, then we shouldn't.

And I would say the same thing about Jesus. If He is Lord, we should do what He says. If He is not, then we needn't bother.