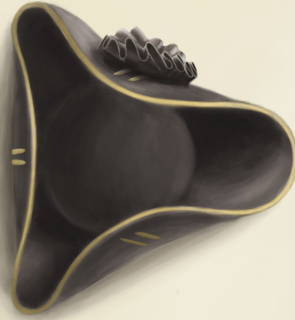
ANDREW
WILSON



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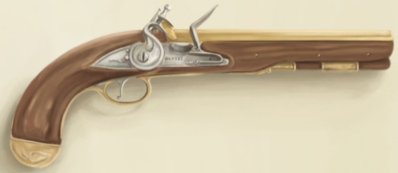

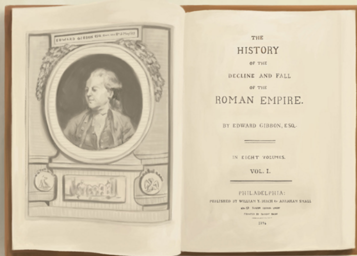

the WORLD

How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West

"Andrew Wilson's book is extraordinary in every way: extraordinary in the breadth of research; extraordinary in the multitude of world-significant events that Wilson identifies for 1776; extraordinary in the depth of his insight on what those events meant (and continue to mean); extraordinary in the verve with which he makes his arguments; and, not least, extraordinary in the persuasive Christian framework in which he sets the book. *Remaking the World* is a triumph of both creative historical analysis and winsome Christian interpretation."

Mark Noll, Research Professor of History, Regent College; author, *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911*

"Andrew Wilson is a wise and witty guide through the eventful year 1776 (eventful in, as he shows, sometimes surprising ways). He convincingly demonstrates that we're still living in the wake of that historical moment—and offers shrewd suggestions for how Christians might navigate those rough waters."

Alan Jacobs, Distinguished Professor of Humanities, Baylor University

"Andrew Wilson's extraordinary *Remaking the World* delivers a gripping history of how the seeds of the post-Christian West were sown in the late eighteenth century. It is an intellectual tour de force and a model of Christian scholarship."

Thomas S. Kidd, Research Professor of Church History, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh*

"The eighteenth century is one of the most fascinating and important periods in human history, and in this book, Andrew Wilson shows exactly why. *Remaking the World* isn't just a history book, however. It's a wide-ranging examination and exploration of the past that makes sense of our present and shines a light on the future. Few books offer as compelling, rich, and insightful cultural analysis that covers so much ground as this one. It's history for history lovers—and for the rest of us."

Karen Swallow Prior, author, *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*

"Brilliantly conceived, carefully researched, and written with verve, this book shows how one single year—1776—made the world all of us inhabit. Bringing together historical drama and specific events told in granular detail, this is history as it should be recounted—provocative, engaging, and consequential. Heartedly recommended!"

Timothy George, Distinguished Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

"When Americans see '1776' in the subtitle of a book written by an Englishman, they likely think they know what to expect—an apologia for monarchy. That's not this book. Instead, *Remaking the World* offers an insightful and trenchant intellectual history of how the ideas and figures of a single year catapulted us into the present. A book like this should make Christians more discerning and critical about the taken-for-granted assumptions that we all believe are routine but are really the product of forces outside our control. Toward the end, Wilson gives Christians a pathway to witness to a world that thinks it has eclipsed the claims of Christianity but remains unable to explain itself apart from it."

Andrew T. Walker, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Fellow, The Ethics and Public Policy Center

"This is an arresting book. Even though Andrew Wilson is a vocational pastor and not a professional historian, his historical judgment and modesty are exemplary. His narrative is sensitive to the many complex causes of 'modernity,' never gets bogged down in details, and is written with elegant and lively prose. I can think of no better book to help Christians understand how our world has (and has not) become post-Christian. In *Remaking the World*, Wilson has established himself among contemporary Christianity's most subtle and interesting thinkers."

Matthew Lee Anderson, Assistant Research Professor of Ethics and Theology, Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University; Cohost, *Mere Fidelity*

Remaking the World

Remaking the World

How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West

Andrew Wilson

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Remaking the World: How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West

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For Mum, Dad, Annie, Sarah, and David,
in abundance

We have it in our power
to begin the world over again.

THOMAS PAINE, *COMMON SENSE*

The modern world is full
of the old Christian virtues
gone mad.

G. K. CHESTERTON, *ORTHODOXY*

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Author's Note

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SPELLING and punctuation can be erratic. In general, I have tidied up the sources to make them more readable; occasionally, I have left them unchanged for effect, even though I know that makes me inconsistent. I have also tended to use each person's most familiar name or title throughout their lives (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Rebecca Protten, Captain James Cook, and so forth), rather than varying it in order to be strictly accurate. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

PART 1

CHANGES

1

Roots

The Presence of the Past

Who controls the past controls the future.

GEORGE ORWELL

We are our history.

JAMES BALDWIN

IN 1776, AT WEYANOKE on the James River in Virginia, Mary Marot Armistead married her fiancé, John. With all that was going on in America that year, it didn't make headlines. She was only fifteen, and John was nearly thirty, but age gaps like that were fairly normal in the thirteen colonies. In many ways, they were a classic example of rich Virginians at the time: Mary was the only daughter of wealthy parents and stood to inherit the beautiful family estate on the edge of Chesapeake Bay, while John had attended William and Mary College, shared a room with Thomas Jefferson, started practicing as a lawyer, and then served a stint in the Continental Army before being appointed as a judge.

Together they had eight children. Unusually, in an age of high infant mortality, all eight of them survived into adulthood. Although John became Governor of Virginia, the chances are that most of us would never have heard of the family were it not for their sixth child, born in 1790 and also named John. He was a frail boy, wafer thin and prone to bouts of diarrhea

with which he struggled his whole life. But he followed his father into law and local politics and gradually climbed through the ranks until on April 4, 1841, John Tyler became the tenth president of the United States. Four years later, he signed into law the annexation of Texas.

Curiously, that is only the fourth most remarkable thing about him. The third is that he served the longest presidential term in history without being elected, stepping into the role after William Henry Harrison died just a month into his term. The second is that he got married in office, the first of only two presidents to do so, after his first wife suffered a stroke and died in the White House. And the first—which sounds like it cannot possibly be true for someone who predated the metric system and whose parents were courting during the Battle of Lexington—is that as of 2022, one of his grandsons is still alive.

Not Even Past

Harrison Ruffin Tyler still lives in Charles County, Virginia, where his great-grandparents were married in 1776. He is well into his nineties. Born in 1928, just before the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties gave way to the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression, Harrison was in elementary school when Hitler came to power and secondary school when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Like anyone of his generation, he has seen astonishing change, both technologically (televisions, atom bombs, the moon landing, the Internet) and politically (World War II, Indian independence, the Chinese Revolution, decolonization). But the social changes he has witnessed are even more dramatic. Just one year older than Martin Luther King, Harrison lived to see the election of Barack Obama and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, despite having had a father who defended the Confederacy and a grandfather who owned seventy slaves.

Harrison's father, Lyon Gardiner Tyler (1853–1935), lived through an even more seismic period of world history. He learned to read and write before the US Civil War, in a state where people owned slaves but not light bulbs. China was in the midst of the Taiping Rebellion, in which thirty million people died. Japan was a feudal society under the *shogun* and the *samurai*. Karl Marx was working on *Das Kapital* in the reading room of the British Museum, and David Livingstone was exploring the Zambezi River. Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* when Lyon was six.

The vast majority of the world's population worked on the land, with an average life expectancy of twenty-nine. By the time Lyon died, the Second Industrial Revolution had swept across the world, bringing electricity and indoor plumbing, telephones and movies, factories and skyscrapers, planes, trains, and automobiles. Global life expectancy was above forty and rising rapidly. Women in dozens of countries were going to university, gaining equality under the law, and voting.

Lyon's father, John (1790–1862), would have struggled to cope with the world of his children, let alone his grandchildren. They, and we, would have struggled to live in his. John came into the world on a slave plantation, a few weeks after George Washington's first State of the Union, and nine months into the French Revolution. He was a toddler when Beethoven was first commissioned to write music and when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As John grew up, his days were continually punctuated by revolution—from the Reign of Terror in France (1793–1794) to the Latin American wars of independence (1808–1833) to the overthrow of nearly all European governments in 1848—not to mention the even more significant "revolution" which was emanating from the mines and mills of Northern England. The speed of transformation was dizzying, as we can tell from the rapid evolution of the English language. Dozens of terms that we cannot imagine a world without—including *industry*, *factory*, *scientist*, *journalism*, *nationality*, *railway*, *working class*, *middle class*, *statistics*, *capitalism*, *socialism*, and *photograph*—were coined during John's lifetime.[1]

The world in which John Tyler's parents were married in 1776 seems almost unimaginably different from ours. It feels more like a period drama or a theme park than a place where our ancestors actually lived: a land of duels and harpsichords, where people took snuff and talked about "Providence" and "victuals," wearing wigs on their heads, frock coats on their backs, and smallpox scars on their faces.

Yet we are separated from it by only a couple of generations.* The legacy of that world lives on in our ideas and institutions, our race relations and

* The British Prime Minister H. H. Asquith (1852–1928) was born during the life of Eliza Hamilton (1757–1854) and yet lived to see the birth of the future Queen Elizabeth II (1926–2022). More astonishingly, a giant tortoise named Adwaita, who once belonged to Robert Clive of India, was born in the Seychelles before the Seven Years War started (ca. 1750) and died during the American occupation of Iraq in 2006. The past is closer than we think.

sexual relations, our ambitions and maps. Grandparents are like that. Their influence lingers on in the lives of their grandchildren, shaping their prospects and their values long after they are gone. "The past is never dead," wrote Faulkner. "It's not even past."[2]

A Forgetful Age

Ours is a forgetful age, though. Lots of us do not remember the names of our great-grandparents; perhaps it is unsurprising that we do not remember their world either. The rate of change in the last two centuries makes the past feel much further away than it actually is, which inclines us to fawn over the future, and either patronize the past or ignore it altogether.

Our technology does not help us here. We spend much of our lives on devices that are designed to need replacing every three years, accessing social media platforms that amplify the sense of a continuous present and an absent past. A huge number of well-educated people, for example, marked the end of 2016 by lamenting it (quite unironically) as "the worst year ever," despite having marked the one-hundredth anniversary of The Battle of the Somme just six months before. Mainstream media outlets are no different. The Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 was repeatedly described as unprecedented in its impact, despite the Spanish flu (or for that matter, the Black Death). More amusingly, I think of the European correspondent for Reuters in the 1970s who, apparently unaware of World War II, claimed that "Relations between Britain and Germany fell to an all-time low today over potato quotas."[3] In an era of instant news, amnesia is baked in. And amnesia has consequences.

One is confusion. The dizzying number of social changes in the anglophone West from 2014 to 2017 alone—gay marriage, Brexit, Trump, #BlackLivesMatter, transgender rights, Antifa, #MeToo, and so forth—left many people reeling, punch-drunk, even fearful about what would happen next. For obvious reasons, periods of social upheaval are always disorienting. But they can be particularly distressing when we do not know our history. Everything feels unexpected, as if it is coming out of nowhere. Developments appear unconnected to the past, and indeed to each other. In the absence of a plausible historical narrative, people retreat into tribalism or conspiracy theories (perhaps both) to help them make sense of the pace of change, because the deeper currents that shape society over decades and

centuries—what James Davison Hunter calls the cultural "climate," as opposed to the "weather"—are invisible to them.[4] The results can be painful.

Another result of amnesia is arrogance, and it is available in both conservative and progressive flavors. In the progressive version, our current mores are self-evidently correct, which means that anyone who thought differently a hundred years ago, or even ten years ago, must have been either stupid or evil (or both). In the conservative version, the only reasons for a person's success are their own ability and effort, which means that anyone who highlights the importance of historical privileges, or oppression, must be either jealous or lazy (or both). Memory, in contrast, should generate humility: the acknowledgment of our past, with all its strengths and weaknesses, and the recognition that the reason we have the moral convictions we do, and the material advantages we do, is because of our ancestors. As James Baldwin relentlessly pointed out, we are our history.[5]

Remaking the World

The big idea of this book is that 1776, more than any other year in the last millennium, is the year that made us who we are.[6] We cannot understand ourselves without it. It was a year that witnessed seven transformations taking place—globalization, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Great Enrichment, the American Revolution, the rise of post-Christianity, and the dawn of Romanticism—which have remade the world and profoundly influenced the way we think about God, life, the universe, and everything.[†]

These transformations—some call them "revolutions"—explain all kinds of apparently unrelated features of our culture. They reveal why we believe in human rights, free trade, liberal democracy, and religious pluralism; they ground our preference for authenticity over authority, choice over duty, and self-expression over self-denial; and they account for all kinds of phenomena that our great-grandparents would have found incomprehensible, from intersectionality to bitcoin. 1776 provides us with an origin story for the post-Christian West.

That involves a combination of two claims. One relates to the world we live in today, and one to the world of two and a half centuries ago.

† Needless to say, none of these transformations springs up out of nowhere in 1776. For the larger stories within which each development makes sense, see chapters 3–9.

The first claim, which will be the focus of chapter 2, is that the most helpful way of identifying what is distinctive about our society, relative to others past and present, is that it is WEIRDER: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic, Ex-Christian, and Romantic.[7] Those seven features make us outliers. The vast majority of people in human history have not shared our views of work, family, government, religion, sex, identity, or morality, no matter how universal or self-evident we may think they are. We are the WEIRDER ones.[‡]

The second claim is that all seven of those things are true because of things that happened in 1776. Telling that story will occupy most of this book, but we can see it in outline by considering just ten prominent events from that year.

In January, Thomas Paine released his pamphlet *Common Sense* in Philadelphia, arguing that the American colonies should pursue independence from British rule; it caused an immediate sensation and became one of the fastest-selling and most influential books in American history. In February, Edward Gibbon published the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which set new standards in history writing, while also challenging the established church and providing a skeptical narrative of early Christianity that endures to this day. James Watt's steam engine, probably the single most important invention in industrial history, started running at the Bloomfield colliery in Staffordshire on March 8. The very next day, Adam Smith released the foundational text of modern economics, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

‡ There are numerous other ways of referring to this world, but all of them suffer from significant limitations. Some—*the First World* or *the civilized world* or *the free world*—are patronizing and inaccurate. Geographical descriptors like *the Western hemisphere* make little or no sense to anyone who has consulted a globe and seen where "Western" countries actually are. Chronological terms like *modern*, *late modern*, or *postmodern* are complicated by heated disagreements over what exactly "modernity" is and whether we are still in it. Some terms highlight ideas and values (*secular*, *liberal*, or *pluralist*), or institutions and systems (*capitalist*, *democratic*), to the exclusion of material circumstances. Others do the reverse and focus on material or technological development, like *industrialized*, *rich*, *developed*, *urban*, *bourgeois*, *postindustrial*, or *digital*, although these terms are too broad to stand on their own, since they apply just as much to Shanghai and Dubai as they do to Paris or Chicago. By contrast the term WEIRDER, in bundling seven adjectives into one, combines geographical, material, ideological, historical, and even emotional features of the world it describes, which gives it a range and nuance that other terms lack.

The most famous transformations of the year took place in the American summer, with the establishing of a nation that would play an increasingly dominant role in the next two centuries: the ratification of the Declaration of Independence (July 4), the Battle of Long Island and the taking of Brooklyn by the British (August 27), and the formal adoption of the name United States (September 9). On the other side of the Atlantic, Captain James Cook was sailing southward in the *Resolution* in the last of his three voyages to the South Seas, the impact of which can still be felt throughout the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, and Australia. Immanuel Kant was in Königsberg, writing the outline for his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which would bring about a so-called Copernican Revolution in philosophy. In Edinburgh, David Hume finally completed his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, one of the greatest arguments against Christian theism ever written, before dying on August 25. The autumn saw Friedrich Klinger write his play *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Stress"), which soon gave its name to the proto-Romantic movement in German music and literature, just as Jean-Jacques Rousseau was writing his extraordinary *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. And in December, as Washington and his army were crossing the Delaware to surprise the British at Trenton, Benjamin Franklin arrived in Paris on a diplomatic mission to bring France into the war against Britain. It would eventually prove successful, and lead ultimately to the American victory at Yorktown (1781), and the collapse of the French *ancien régime* into bankruptcy and revolution (1789).

Between them, those ten events represent a series of transformations that inaugurated the WEIRDER world. Some are so prominent that they have passed into everyday speech. People freely refer to the Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution and the Enlightenment. Others are less recognized but no less significant. You could argue that the long-term impact of globalization or post-Christianity or Romanticism or the Great Enrichment has been just as "revolutionary" as American independence, if not more so.

As such, it is only fair to my American readers to point out that much of this book is not about America at all. For obvious reasons, people who look back to 1776 as the start of their nation are inclined to see it as a year in which only one significant event occurred; in the immortal words of Ron Swanson, "History began on July 4th 1776. Everything before that

was a mistake."[8] But many of the momentous events that took place in this remarkable year had nothing to do with independence or war with Britain, and instead were occurring in French salons, Italian cafés, German theaters, Scottish pubs, and English factories.

It was a year in which the things that were done—battles, retreats, river crossings, and so forth—were not nearly as important as the things that were said and written. Indeed, it is hard to think of a year in which more quotable, seminal remarks were made than this one. Some of them, of course, have passed into folklore in America because of their rhetorical power in the context of the revolutionary war: Thomas Paine's "These are the times that try men's souls,"[9] and Washington's "Are these the men with which I am to defend America?"[10] Others are noteworthy for how well they articulated the implications of the revolution: Lemuel Haynes for his fellow African-Americans ("Liberty is equally as precious to a black man as it is to a white one, and bondage equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other"),[11] Abigail Adams for women ("In the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies")[12], and Edmund Burke for Britain ("I can hardly believe, from the tranquillity of everything about me, that we are a people who have just lost an empire. But it is so").[13] John Wesley, eager to defend his own loyalty to the Crown and his willingness to pay taxes, explained his radical commitment to simple living: "I have a silver teaspoon at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me lack bread."[14]

Other statements are famous because they encapsulate the spirit of an age: a spirit of confidence in human reason and potential that was almost tangible in the late eighteenth century, and the aftershocks of which can still be felt today. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," declared Paine in one of the most audacious sentences ever written.[15] Matthew Boulton, revealing his phalanx of steam machines to James Boswell, drew his optimism from the possibilities of technology: "I sell here, Sir, what all the world desires to have—POWER."[16] Jeremy Bentham took the opportunity to reframe human ethics ("It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong"),[17] and Adam Smith did the same with economics ("He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an

end which was no part of his intention").[18] Horace Walpole captured the ambiguity of the age of enlightenment and sentiment with his trademark wit: "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel."[19] James Madison, making adjustments to the Virginia Declaration of Rights, insisted that the final section include the phrase, "All men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience."[20] Most influentially of all, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed it "self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."[21]

These ideas—and the individuals, institutions, and inventions with which they are associated—made us WEIRDER. We are who we are because of them. That is the argument of chapters 3–9.

Table 1.1 1776 and the WEIRDER world

	Feature	Development	Key Events in 1776
W	Western	Globalization	Captain James Cook's third voyage begins *Endeavour* / *Lord Sandwich* sails for New York Mai returns to Tahiti on the *Resolution* Georg Forster writes his *Voyage Around the World*
E	Educated	Enlightenment	Immanuel Kant drafts his *Critique of Pure Reason* Edward Gibbon publishes his *Decline and Fall* Carl Linnaeus retires Baron d'Holbach's salon, The Club, Poker Club, etc.
I	Industrialized	Industrial Revolution	James Watt's steam engine Richard Arkwright's mill at Cromford Bridgewater canal opens Lunar Society begins meeting
R	Rich	Great Enrichment	Beginning of dramatic rise in GDP Adam Smith publishes *Wealth of Nations* American Revolution Raynal's *Histoire* released in English

(Table 1.1 continued)

	Feature	Development	Key Events in 1776
D	Democratic	American Revolution	Declaration of Independence Virginia Declaration of Rights Benjamin Franklin's diplomatic mission Washington's crossing
E	Ex-Christian	Rejection of Christianity	David Hume completes his *Dialogues*, then dies Franklin's edit to the Declaration of Independence Diderot's *Interview* Sade's ex-Christian morality
R	Romantic	Romantic Revolution	Rousseau writes his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* Klinger writes *Sturm und Drang* Herder, Goethe and friends all in Weimar First sexual revolution in London

So What?

The final two chapters address the question: So what?

I am writing as a Christian pastor. I find history fascinating, and I am convinced that it can help us become wiser, humbler, and more loving neighbors. But my primary motive in writing this is to help the church thrive in a WEIRDER world. What challenges and opportunities emerge from Westernization or Romanticism or Industrialization, and what should we do about them? How should Christians act in an Ex-Christian culture? What does faithful Christianity look like in the shadow of 1776? And here, I believe, we can draw a great deal of wisdom from an obvious source: faithful Christianity in 1776. How did believers in this turbulent and transformative era respond to what was happening around them? And what can we learn?

As it happens, several strands within the contemporary church look back to 1776 as an especially formative year. It was a crucial period in the development of early Methodism. John Wesley secured, and began fundraising for, a site on which to build a new headquarters in London. John Fletcher, whom most people assumed would succeed Wesley as the next

leader, caught tuberculosis, which prompted a complete rethink of how the movement would be led in the next generation. The American Revolution began a chain of events that would lead the Methodists to ordain their own ministers and finally separate from the Anglican church. The need for new premises, new leadership, and a new denomination would prove catalytic for the rapid growth of Methodism in the following century.

It was a landmark year in other denominations as well. American dissenters, as we have just seen, saw the crucial words "free exercise of religion" appear in the Virginia Declaration of Rights and subsequently in the first amendment of the US Constitution. San Francisco was founded by Catholic missionaries. Former slave trader John Newton was working on the Olney Hymns, which would be published in 1779 and include his "Amazing Grace" and William Cowper's "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." Lemuel Haynes wrote his antislavery manuscript *Liberty Further Extended*. The fifteen year-old William Carey, who would grow up to become the father of modern missions and translate the Bible into six Indian languages, had the experience that led to his conversion. Marie Durand, the French Huguenot famous for scratching the word "RESISTER" on the wall of her cell during an imprisonment that lasted thirty-eight years, died at the age of sixty-five. Calvinist vicar Augustus Toplady published "Rock of Ages." Holy Trinity Church Clapham, later attended by members of the Clapham Sect including William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, and Hannah More, opened for worship.

Most of these people would be widely known within Christian circles today, and often outside them. Their institutions, hymns, missionary exploits, and abolitionism are part of the mythology of evangelicalism. But we will also reflect on some individuals whose contributions are less recognized: Rebecca Protten, the former slave who became a Moravian missionary; Johann Georg Hamann, the first postsecular philosopher;[22] Olaudah Equiano, whose *Interesting Narrative* would become so important in the battle to end the slave trade. Though miles apart in their experiences and writings, each of these people have a great deal to teach us about living as Christians in a WEIRDER world.

The Need for Roots

A few years ago, I noticed how many of my favorite authors were writing during or immediately after World War II. It had not occurred to me before,

and I wondered why it might be the case. There are probably some stylistic reasons. Their language is near enough to our own day not to sound arcane, and the crispness, simplicity, and visual quality of their prose was shaped by the advent of the cinema. Their works are also marked by a deep awareness of radical evil, which is hardly surprising given the times in which they lived. It gives their essays an urgency, and their poetry and fiction a cosmic drama that few writers before or since have achieved: think of Big Brother and Room 101, Sauron and Saruman, *Lord of the Flies*, the White Witch, *Animal Farm*, and the role of sin and the devil in Graham Greene's novels.

So it is fascinating how often their responses to radical evil involve an appeal to history. Sometimes this comes as a direct address to the reader, like James Baldwin's writings on race, Hannah Arendt's on revolution, Leszek Kołakowski's on communism, Isaiah Berlin's on liberalism, or Dorothy Sayers's *Creed or Chaos*. T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden do it through their numerous references and allusions. Greene and Flannery O'Connor draw on their Catholicism. C. S. Lewis makes the point through essays on why we should read old books and by skewering chronological snobbery at every opportunity, from *That Hideous Strength* to the fates of Uncle Andrew and King Miraz in the Narnia stories.

J. R. R. Tolkien does it through his medieval language and setting, his complex prehistories, and his plot: remember Sam on the edge of Mount Doom, reminiscing about the Shire and reminding Frodo of the old stories long before totalitarian evil seized the world. Simone Weil's greatest work is entitled *L'Enracinement*, usually translated *The Need for Roots*. Most powerfully of all, George Orwell creates worlds where nobody remembers the past, and where those in power, from the pigs in *Animal Farm* to the Party in *1984*, are free to manipulate it for their own purposes, throwing unwanted recollections down the memory hole. "History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right."[23] All of these writers had witnessed the near-collapse of the West in recent memory, and they knew the dangers of losing their history, as well as the importance of not allowing it.

We do not have to look too hard for contemporary equivalents. History is the most contested of subject areas, now as then, because (as Orwell pointed out) those who control the past control the future. If you want to prevent twenty-first century Christians from preaching the gospel, pursu-

ing social reform and holding fast to orthodox faith, then history is your friend: just cast eighteenth-century missionaries as rapacious villains, nineteenth-century reformers as patrician moralists, and the defense of biblical authority in the twentieth century as a thinly disguised power play, and browbeaten believers will flee the public square like rabbits in the field when the fox arrives. Conversely, if you want to ensure that the divisions and injustices of the eighteenth-century church continue into the present, then give people a triumphalist historical narrative of evangelistic breakthrough, social transformation, and spiritual revival, while carefully omitting the egregious racial, sexual, and political failures of their heroes. Paint goodies and baddies in lurid color, and make all historical context a vague, indecipherable pastille gray. Rinse, wash, repeat.

We are storytelling creatures, so narrating origin stories is inevitable. Indeed, since it is impossible to be theologically neutral when it comes to history, narrating *theological* origin stories is probably inevitable. The only question is whether those origin stories are true, good, and beautiful: whether they reflect what really happened and why; whether they nudge us toward courageous humility and love; whether they recount the wondrous deeds of the Lord alongside the successes and failures of human beings. The arrogance of amnesia is always a threat, not least in periods of great technological and economic change, and so is the defeatism born of weary cynicism about flawed ancestors.

So it is vital, as the Psalms and the Prophets remind us, to remember: remember the deeds of our fathers and mothers, remember the rock from which we were hewn, and the quarry from which we were dug. It can help us understand why our world is the way it is—how it became Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic, Ex-Christian, and Romantic, not least through the transformations of 1776—and how to love, live, and thrive in it.