

# SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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## Hard Thinking

In 1995, Thomas Cahill came out with the provocatively titled book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. "Ireland," contended Cahill,

"had one moment of unblemished glory...as the Roman Empire fell, as all through Europe matted, unwashed barbarians descended on the Roman cities, looting artifacts and burning books, the Irish, who were just learning to read and write, took up the great labor of copying all of Western literature..."

Then missionary-minded Irish monks brought what had been preserved on their isolated island back to the continent, refounding European civilization. And that, Cahill concludes, is how the Irish saved civilization. But there is more at hand in Cahill's study than meets the eye. Beyond the loss of Latin literature, and the development of the great national European literatures that an illiterate Europe would not have established, Cahill notes that something else would have perished in the west: "the habits of the mind that encourage thought." Why would this matter? Cahill continues his assessment: "And when Islam began its medieval expansion, it would have encountered scant resistance to its plans – just scattered tribes of animists, ready for a new identity." Without a robust mind to engage the onslaught – and a Christian one at that – the West would have been under the crescent instead of the cross.

Never before have the "habits of the mind" mattered more. As Winston Churchill stated in his address to Harvard University in 1943: "The empires of the future will be empires of the mind." Oxford theologian Alister McGrath, reflecting on Churchill's address, notes that Churchill's point was that a great transition was taking place in Western culture with immense implications for all who live in it. The powers of the new world would not be nation-states, as with empires past, but

ideologies. It would now be ideas, not nations, that would captivate and conquer in the future. The starting point for the conquest of the world would now be the human mind.

John Stott writes "We may talk of 'conquering' the world for Christ. But what sort of 'conquest' do we mean? Not a victory by force of arms...This is a battle of ideas." This was the concern of the apostle Paul, who reminded the Corinthian church that "...we do not wage war as the world does...We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (II Corinthians 10:3-5, NIV).

In light of this, there are surprising few warriors. Those who follow Christ have too often retreated into personal piety and good works, or as one BBC commentator I heard over the radio while jogging one morning in Oxford, Christians have too often offered mere "feelings" and "philanthropy." Speaking specifically to the challenge from Islam, he added that what is needed was more "hard thinking" applied to the issues of the day.

Once again the challenge of Islam is at hand. Once again, hard thinking is called for, the "habits of mind that encourage thought."

What remains to be seen is whether there will be any hard thinkers to do it.

James Emery White

#### Sources

Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*

Winston S. Churchill, *Address to Harvard University, 1943*

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*

John Stott, *Your Mind Matters*

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