

## *Progress and Decline*

### *The Ongoing Search for Markers*

*(Anticipating What There is to be Known)*

*Russell C. Baker, February 14, 2018*

- 1. Populism is not where social change starts; such change is initiated by an elite who have the necessary resources in both time, money, and skills to make things happen.** The Buddha was a member of the elite; his early converts were from the nobility. Christ was likely a trained rabbi, whose members wrote letters to each other at a time when very few people were literate. Also, it is a myth that poverty leads to revolution. Instead, social conditions can be used as a means of justifying or rationalizing a individual or a group's rise to power. *The marker for decline lies in the rationalizations used in the drive for power over others?*
- 2. Magic/Paganism.** Rituals, tribal affiliations, creation myths giving meaning to families and tribes, can all be used to explain how things work. Even religious can become ritualized, with the advantage that they can appeal to god or to spirits to explain how the universe works. Paganism enshrines the powers as a family-writ-large of gods and goddesses engaging in all the human follies. This stands in contrast to societies that have discovered the mind and therefore rely not on the gods for explaining why things are the way they are but on reason. *The marker for decline lies in the presence of myths and magic as the explanation for what is taking place?*
- 3. Power vs. Piety.** There have always been two sources of authority within the Roman Church that have vied for control over meaning throughout the centuries. One, characteristic of the period shortly after Constantine, had to do with the election of bishops and other important

people in the church who knew the ways of the world and would adjust their actions accordingly. At the same time, there has also been a movement toward piety, perhaps best expressed through the life of the desert fathers but also present during the crusades. *Marker for progress: an emphasis on piety over power, where the transcendental takes precedence over human authority?*

- 4. Fertility's impact on religion.** There appears to be an evolutionary selection favoring ever more transcendently orientated individuals and groups. This can best be observed in the different fertility rates between religious and non-religious families: religious families have more than the basic replacement rate of approximately 2.1 children per family, while non-religious families average a little more than one child. The only two Western cultures that are not going into demographic decline are the USA and Israel. And the reason for that is the presence of large number of religious people. It is interesting to note the remarkable decline of Muslim fertility, going from 6-7 children down to a little over 1 in one generation. *Marker for progress: a believe in a loving and caring Divine Mystery?*
- 5. Rule of Law vs. Public Passions.** The Inquisition was not what the public thinks: a brutal murderous purge of the unfaithful. Each of the over four thousand cases are well documented, for the inquisitors kept detailed records that have been available to historians. It turns out that one of the major tasks of the inquisitors was to bring to a halt public witch-burnings by carefully considering each case as if it were a court of

Rodney Stark, *Doing History a Second Time Around*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbEsyKJJQcU&index=80&list=WL&t=0s>

Baylor ISR, 54:52

- law. Over the entire period they were active, the average number of individuals executed each years works out to be about ten. And executions were the primary sentence for most crimes at that time. *Marker for progress: a reliance on the rule of law rather than public fads and fashions?*
- 6. The theologian's quest for why.** Wanting to understanding why things are the way they are can be very destructive of traditional common sense norms and values. This is complicated by the impossibility of ever reaching a conceptual understanding of the Divine Mystery without some form of revealed transcendent knowledge. *Marker: the recognition that human proportionate knowing is not up to the task of understanding or explaining the Divine Mystery?*
  - 7. Congregationalists.** In broad terms, there are two kinds of human political institutions: the first is totalitarian, whose leaders are justifiably paranoid and therefor cannot allow the formation of any independent group with the potential for being outside their direct control; the second is a more open society where free associations are not only permitted but encourage as part of the social development of a society. *Marker: the right to free association?*
  - 8. The Roman Empire was a block to progress.** The only two innovations of the Romans are concrete and Christianity. Otherwise, they were engaged in suppressing others, blocking creative individuals and movements. *Marker: the recognition and encouragement of creative innovators both at the individual and group level?*