

## **Apologetics to a Post-1989 World**

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I was enjoying one of Dad's last meals before retirement in a restaurant in Geneva, where we lived. At one point Dad spied at another table the competitor who would likely be taking over after he left. The man was courting a Russian PTT representative. Dad was in the telecommunications business. He and Mom lived in Geneva, Switzerland for some 20 years working for a New York based company. An important part of his work was to do business with his European counterparts. Among other things this meant convincing companies, most of the government controlled, that one American-lead outfit was what they needed.

At one point the Russian saw Dad, came over and gave him a bear hug and slobbered him with kisses. I glanced over to see a disgruntled competitor, who likely realized doing his job was going to be a lot more difficult than he had imagined.

I liked to say Dad was secretly disguised as a businessman. In reality he was a diplomat. After surviving the great depression, he had fought for the Allies in World War Two. He once told me his military years had "made a man" out of him. What he did not tell me in so many words was that he was thoroughly committed to the role of America in the world. My brother and I fussed with him while we were in college and then argued with him over the Vietnam War. To his credit he eventually changed his view about our foray into Southeast Asia. But he never doubted our mission, forged in the bargains mad at the end of World War Two.

America represented many values it generously shared with our allies: the ideal of freedom, the radical notion that citizens could disagree with each other about politics and even take issue with our government and yet never be threatened for it. This was a foreign concept to Dad's Russian friend, at least officially. And there was much more. For me chief among our virtues was the music of jazz generated mostly in our African American citizenry. In any case, we had something to offer Europeans.

To be sure, America has made massive mistakes. I have just mentioned Vietnam. We've enacted a number of other military blunders, some of which cost thousands of lives. Our inner cities have seen a good deal of trouble. We have been far too slow in dealing with racial injustices. The list goes on. Still the geo-political configuration of the decades following the end of the war were

determinative. To be sure, also, Americans had, and still have, a great deal to learn from Europeans. Our best strategy is to work together.

That has all changed. If the Cold War was the defining reality of those years, much of that has now gone. It's a long story. There were many twists and turns, including moments when we were in grave danger of losing our "side" to the rival superpower, the Soviet Union (and in an adjunct way to China). It looked like Western-style democracy would triumph. A defining moment was no doubt 1989, the "miracle year" when the Berlin Wall crumbled, statues of Lenin were toppled, and so many satellite countries shed their communist governments' controls. One year later the Soviet Union itself gave way to a form of democracy.

Things were going so well Francis Fukuyama called it "the end of history". He was not saying human history would not continue, but in his Hegelian way he was saying the entire purpose of the Cold War had ended, and from 1989 on humanity would bask in democracy. The events in those years surprised even the most optimistic pundits. There was a level of euphoria that those of us who were of age will never forget. Celebrations were happening all over.

It did not last. On the successive anniversaries of the miracle year, any celebrations were muted. Today we simply don't celebrate. What happened? A number of events occurred which greatly diminished the significance. The first most of us remember was the Tiananmen Square massacre. As we know the protests were triggered by the death of the pro-reform Chinese Communist Hu Yaobang in April. Student-led protests multiplied like an epidemic. The government eventually responded and on June 4<sup>th</sup> (the name now used for the event) several thousand were killed or wounded.

Other events put a damper on the positive repercussions of the events of 1989. Conflicts in the Balkans surfaced again. Iran initiated an Islamic revolution in 1979 which only today is beginning to be questioned seriously enough so there is hope for a restoration.

Then, many of the countries newly liberated from Communist control simply could not find satisfaction in their new-found freedom. Having traveled extensively in Eastern Europe, I can testify first-hand to this disillusionment. So many people seem exhausted. And conditions are just right for the rise of extreme right populism. Anne Applebaum, an expert on Soviet history and the plight of satellite countries, has warned that just as several European countries are on track for authoritarianism, so is her native America.<sup>1</sup> William Galston has similarly outlined the frustrations of many with liberal democracy, and the messianic allure of tyrants.<sup>2</sup> David Brooks has declared the end of the post-war

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> William Galston, *Anger, Fear, Domination: Dark Passions and the Power of Political Speech* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2025).

era, with its liberal internationalism, the NATO alliance, and the universal moral order.<sup>3</sup>

These commentators are not typical doomsday prophets. They are describing a historical moment, one in which the world-order my Dad believed in is giving way to quite another. We have here two realities. (1) The demise of liberal democracy, often led by America, is becoming obsolete. (2) This is a remarkable opportunity for Christian apologetics. How so?

In what may be considered the marching orders for the task of Christian apologetics, the apostle Peter tells us: “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,” (1 Peter 3:15)

Christian apologetics by definition must embody two things. The message must be faithful to what Scripture tells us (our “hope”). And it must be “ready” to address the needs before us. A good deal could be said about this passage. Suffice it to say here, the time is poised for both the hope and the readiness. Are we properly ready to respond to the character of our times?

Given the complexities of our historical moment, it is tempting to take the “Benedictine option” and retreat for a spell. For various reasons we simply cannot go there. Among the many things wrong with it, is a lack of love, a refusal to being “salt” and “light” to a vanishing generation. Christian apologetics is hard. But it is not optional. We may never return to the post-war order. That could mean significant losses. But armed with hope, we do not need to despair. Indeed, this may be one of the greatest opportunity for the gospel in a long time.

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<sup>3</sup> See his “Time to Say Goodbye” *New York Times* January 30, 2026.