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# Out Of The Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture



## Synopsis

What do you do when an entire civilization is crumbling around you? You do everything. This is a book about how to get started. Providence College professor Anthony Esolen, blunt and prophetic, makes the case that the decay of Western civilization is alarmingly advanced. Our sickly, sub-pagan state resembles a bombed-out city. We have to assess the damage, but merely lamenting it does no good. There is work to be done. The first step is the restoration of truth. America's most powerful institutions—including the government—are mass producers of deceit. We have to recognize the lies and clear our minds of cant. Our culture produces only the drab or the garish. We must restore beauty—in art, architecture, music, and worship. There are two things wrong with our schools—everything our children don't learn in them, and everything they do learn. Public schools are beyond reform; we have to start over. Our universities are as bad as our schools. A few can be saved, but for the most part, we must build new ones. In fact, this is already being done. We have to support these efforts as if our children's souls depended on it. Repudiating the Sexual Revolution, that prodigious engine of misery, requires more than zipping up. The modern world has made itself ignorant about sex—in particular that there are two of them and they're profoundly different. We must restore manhood and womanhood. In our servile economy, we raise bureaucrats not craftsmen. We must rediscover how to make things that are beautiful and lasting—the products of human work. And we must dispense with the rent-seekers—the proliferating middlemen whose own work contributes nothing. We have turned sports into a job for our children. Instead of playing we work out. A genuine civilization is based on celebration. We must restore play to human life, seeing all the other days of the week in light of the Sabbath. The gigantic scale of government has made us a nation of idiots, incapable of attending to public affairs and the common good. We must insist that the Constitution is not whatever judges say it is, complying with but not obeying their edicts while we reclaim our freedom of religion one outdoor procession, one public lecture, one parish picnic at a time. We must love this world, but we have here no abiding city. The great division is between those who place all their hope in the present life and those who know that we are pilgrims. There is no retreat, but take courage—we have our map. Let us begin.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Let me strongly encourage readers to buy, read, and thoroughly absorb two important new books: Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* and Anthony Esolen's *Out of the Ashes*. Dreher (Orthodox) is an articulate, provocative, and insightful social commentator. Esolen (Catholic) is a distinguished scholar and educator whose English translation of Dante Alighieri's majestic *Divine Comedy* ranks among the finest available anywhere. Neither man's book disappoints in the power of its arguments. Both men have the gift of combining erudition with common sense, and of making their ideas available and engaging to the harried ordinary reader. Both books offer a tough, frank, and true assessment of contemporary American culture. Both also share an adult Christian grasp of the virtue of hope and a deep trust in the goodness of God. Each offers practical steps forward in sustaining and rebuilding Christian life in confused times." — "First Things Magazine" "Out of the Ashes is a full-throated, stout-hearted call to arms; soul-stirring, uncompromising, and irresistible." — ROD DREHER, author of *The Benedict Option* "Reading Anthony Esolen is a bit like a ride on your favorite roller coaster. Out of the Ashes is an astonishing combination of energy, humor, insight, and exceptional erudition, topped off by a vivid personal style and a special gift for tweaking the nose of secularist nonsense-peddlers. If you're looking for a guide to our current cultural predicament (and how to fix it), one that's sobering and invigorating at the same time, start with this book." — CHARLES J. CHAPUT, O.F.M. Cap., Archbishop of Philadelphia "Anthony Esolen is one of our nation's best writers because he's one of our best thinkers. Out of the Ashes is vintage Esolen: eloquent, bold, insightful, profound." — RYAN T. ANDERSON, Ph.D., Senior Research Fellow, The Heritage Foundation, and author of *Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom* "Our culture suffers from many debilitating diseases. Anthony Esolen's voice is a much-needed tonic. Here's hoping America heeds his counsel." — R. R. RENO, editor of *First Things* and author of *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*

Anthony Esolen is a professor of English at Providence College and a senior editor of Touchstone magazine. He is the editor and translator of several epic poems, including the three volumes of Dante's Divine Comedy. His published works include Life Under Compulsion: Ten Ways to Destroy the Humanity of Your Child (2015) and The Politically Incorrect Guide to Western Civilization (2008). He lives in Rhode Island with his wife, Debra, and his two children.

First, check out the top of the page on the site. The first question: "What do you do when an entire civilization is crumbling around you?" All of the text that follows is drawn from the book's jacket notes and gives the reader a quick summary of the book's contents. It is a reliable summary. The book is a pious jeremiad. The author is a fervent Catholic who gives no quarter with regard to essential principles. The rhetoric is prophetic, in the sense that the speaker/author stands upon a mountaintop, surveying a vast array of human behavior, and systematically records our current failures, failures which in many cases are revealed as madness. We dwell in a morass of failure; we have sold our souls for a form of secular materialism that is, ultimately, vacuous. We have magnified Thoreau's lives of quiet desperation, lost our sense of beauty, of love, of meaning, of learning, of manhood and of womanhood. We permit ourselves to be ruled by remote, self-serving bureaucracies and tyrannical courts and central governments. Disconnected from divinity our every step is doomed and yet we continue the slog. This is a very brave book, one that "to put it mildly" runs against the current grain. The message is an important one, one that all should hear and reflect upon. I think its conclusions should be considered very carefully. I also think its conclusions should be considered empirically. For example, the notion that we once built objects of great beauty and fail to do so now. Some of this is opinion (opinion with which I fully agree, but opinion nonetheless). He prefers the art deco masterpieces of the depression to the international style glass boxes that look like a mixture of bureaucracy palaces and minimum security prisons. He speaks of the beauty of one-room, spired schoolhouses which create an ethos of the infinite as well as the public square, contextualizing the experiences that are heard and felt, within. I personally prefer Magdalen College, Addison's Walk and the river Cherwell, but the question, a fair question, remains: why do we lack the vision (in our wealthy societies) to build objects of beauty? Dr. Esolen would return to traditional conceptions of male and female roles, believing them to be anchored in human nature. I don't see us returning to 1954 anytime soon, though I share his belief that our current cultural practices are radically flawed. These are difficult rivers to navigate, but perhaps the technology which he sees as

tyrannizing over us can be a source of hope, enabling the mother, father, or both to work at home and raise children in more traditional ways. The actual breakup of the family (as opposed to the repositioning of the family) is as significant a problem as he perceives it to be, particularly when it ripples through our school systems, creating further disorder and failure. Our subservience to government, particularly a government with values that run counter to our own, has resulted in a realignment of political power, on which the jury is still out. Some of his principles appear wistful, but they echo with my own experience. He longs for the return to the play of childhood, with kids outdoors, exercising, interacting and developing. When I published a book on my adolescence I was interviewed by a local radio station. The first question asked by a young man who was probably 30-35 years younger than me concerned those wonderful times when you could play outside, safely, in your neighborhood, in, e.g., the local woods. I told him that every summer day in my youth was an adventure, beginning at first light and continuing until dinner time. But then, I pointed out, we were safe in Fenwick Park Woods because we were armed with knives, hatchets and BB guns. Some of Dr. Esolen's book is almost Wordsworthian in its memories of childhood, though he is aware that we were human in all senses of that term, for good or ill. In some ways this book is like a copy of Reminisce magazine, but it is undergirded with considerable wisdom and a broad range of classical reference. At the same time it is a hard-nosed philippic that makes strong, defensible points and challenges a status quo that has, in many ways, failed us miserably. I don't want to write a comparably-sized book here, but just a few points: the discussion of higher ed is spot-on, but I'm not sure that the encouraging and building of small, focused colleges (that, inevitably, will not be able to do serious science, engineering, etc.) will be sufficient to solve our problem. Second, the views of George Steiner on the necessity of the presence of the divine for all significant human activity would add greater weight to the argument. Finally, the discussion should go on, but with a greater sense of the details in which the devil is known to dwell. When one is moved by the spirit wonderful things can happen, but one should also spell names correctly (it's James, not Joseph Boswell and Carrie, not Carry Nation). Bottom line: a thoughtful, honest and important book.

This is a book with real insight. It provides a reminder of what we have lost, both as a people and as individuals, but it does not rest content with this but calls us to gird up our loins so that we may reclaim a more human life for ourselves and for our children. This is a Christian book. The author is Roman Catholic but it speaks to every Christian and the author is clearly conversant with the broad range of orthodox Christian thought and experience. While any person may benefit from this book I

would particularly encourage parents or people who aspire to be parents to read this book. It will help enrich your vision of how you can raise your children to live more fully the life that God intended man to live in the midst of His creation.

Reading this book is like wearing sackcloth and heaping ashes on your head. It certainly brings home to you that things have gone wrong, but unless the act of penance itself calls forth redemption, which sadly today it does not, without further action it only makes you feel bad and gets you dirty. Don't get me wrong—I am all for sackcloth and ashes. Hence, I am busy preparing for what is, for a certain type of conservative, the Event of the Year—the publication in one week of Rod Dreher's "The Benedict Option." To prepare for this, I am reading all the books with a closely related theme that have been published in the past several months. There are, depending on how you count, roughly five such books, among them this book, Anthony Esolen's "Out of the Ashes." It is disconcerting to note, though, that roughly 80% of the blurb quotes for each of the five books come from the authors of the other four books. I am not sure what that says, if anything, but it may suggest a small audience for all these books. And if these books are to do more than preach to the converted, they need a significant audience, or they need to be exceptionally valuable to a core audience. But "Out of the Ashes," unfortunately, accomplishes neither goal. Oh, it's an excellent book with excellent writing, and I agree with nearly 100% of what Esolen has to say. After reading it, though, I find myself knowing neither more facts nor having a clear sense of what Esolen thinks we should actually do about the problems he outlines. His book is a jeremiad, but that is not the problem. Jeremiads may not be to everyone's taste, but Jeremiah, after all, chose his methods and the tone of his message for a reason (although let's not forget he failed in his aims). The difference is that Jeremiah got his message across by getting physically in front of a mass target audience (who promptly tried to kill him). I am sure Esolen is brave enough to also do that. He is currently being persecuted at his academic employer, Providence College, though he does not mention that in the book. But those who read this book, unfortunately, all or almost all already know the litany of horrors Esolen presents, and are already just as horrified as Esolen. The book will therefore not reach a mass audience, and the audience it does reach will know neither new facts nor have a concrete action plan. They'll just be sad. Esolen begins with an introduction, evocatively (and characteristically) titled "The Rubble." Using the metaphor of a decayed family, mansion and town, he succinctly lays out the devastation he sees everywhere in today's society, and quotes Livy, the historian of the very late Republic, that we "sank lower and lower, and finally began the downward plunge

which has brought us to the present time, when we can endure neither our vices nor their cure. The devastation, of course, is not material so much as cultural—the destruction of beauty and virtue. From here, Esolen first calls for The Restoration of Truth-Telling. This is a personal call to each reader, and I think this is the best and most practical part of the book. Esolen sees us adrift in a sea of unreality, in which even the names of things are ever-shifting. Like the Archmage Ged in LeGuin's "A Wizard of Earthsea" (a fantastic trilogy ruined by LeGuin's later shrewish re-visitation and re-interpretation), or Puddleglum in C.S. Lewis's "The Silver Chair," we viscerally know that to give things their true names is both to understand and to have power over them, what otherwise have power over us. We should, each of us, begin by clearing our minds of cant, rejecting the multiplicities of lies we are fed, from that the Constitution has a right to privacy, and that right guarantees the right to kill children, to that family structure does not matter to society, to unexamined meta-lies like Religion is the cause of almost all wars. We should reject using words that have no meaning other than political force, such as diversity, inclusion, equality, and homophobia. We should focus on the real, for it is hard to go completely mad if you spend your free time being free and accepting the free bounties of the world round about. . . . Things, in their beautiful and imposing integrity, do not easily bend to lies. So, focusing on real things, we should learn to speak and read, with the depth of knowledge, learning and appreciation of virtue and beauty that at one time characterized all writing for educated people. The next call is for Restoring a Sense of Beauty. One sentence by way of example should give a flavor for much of Esolen's writing, I have seen beautifully tiled floors, their intricate cruciform patterns bespeaking careful and devoted craftsmanship, covered over with a plush red carpet, wall to wall, such as might be used in a whorehouse down on its luck. Here Esolen particularly focuses on music, noting the neutering and watering down of traditional hymns, and calling for the restoration of their publication and performance. And not just hymns, of course, but the churches themselves—we should restore them from the metaphorical and often actual plywood that has been laid over the beauty of old churches, and create beautiful new ones. Esolen returns to this theme later in the book, with a call to once again surround ourselves with beauty, in part by returning to craft ourselves, to work that is good for man and in part by getting rid of middlemen rent-seekers, like colleges and government regulators, to allow the raising and employment of skilled craftsmen once again. How this is to be done is not clear, since those craftsmen first have to live, and demand for their services has disappeared, so there is a real chicken-and-egg problem. Esolen cares little for economics and has

no interest in maximizing GDP per capita, but ignoring the importance of practical economy does not lessen its importance to daily life, and to the difficulties inherent in changing ways of making a living. Esolen next decries the current state of education, both in schools and in colleges. As to schools, he parades the known horrors—lowest common denominator teaching; radical leftist indoctrination; failure to teach any morals or anything about human nature or virtue, all of which he contrasts to an idealized one-room schoolhouse of the past. Esolen is, of course, correct that the common inheritance of the West, mostly based on religion and wholly dependent on religion for its idiom, is gone, and it would be impossible to teach the "Canterbury Tales" in schools without first imparting an endless litany of facts that used to be common knowledge, from what a pilgrimage is to who Thomas Becket was. He calls for more homeschooling. Esolen is correct that complete catechization of children requires homeschooling. He is not correct that this is necessary to prevent total indoctrination, since he ignores that despite the horrors we all know, there are actually many public schools where, at least at the elementary level, things are not that bad in the actual teaching, and a parent's main job is managing the social milieu, not the classroom instruction. Colleges are worse, of course. Esolen notes the mottoes of various famous colleges and their utter inapplicability to the institutions that occupy the physical locations of those vanished halls of learning, such as Dartmouth's "Vox clamantis in deserto": "The voice of one crying in the wilderness." I am certain that only a handful of Dartmouth students could correctly delineate the meaning, derivation and weight of that phrase, and none without importing hackneyed political commentary at the same time. Here, Esolen's recommendations become more concrete. "We must build new colleges. This is an absolute necessity." He cites exemplars such as Christendom College and Hillsdale. I think this is absolutely correct, but of course the purpose of the higher education complex in America today is not education, but indoctrination while acting as gatekeepers, offering at tremendous cost of money and time a credential that allows easy entrance into the meritocratic clerisy that governs America. Creating what is in essence a parallel higher education system would create educated human beings. But existing alternatives (e.g., Christendom) are not just a parallel education system; they are also an alternative means of obtaining that necessary credential, perhaps at the cost of making it not as effective a credential, but one nonetheless. If they could not do that, very few parents would make the choice for their children of wholly foreclosing entrance into the clerisy. And, of course, as is common with conservative writers, Esolen fails to appreciate the destructive force that will be aimed at such new institutions if they gain enough traction to become a threat to the existing higher education complex and to the lock the Left has on indoctrination. Already the



power of accreditation is used to force ideological conformity; in a future Democratic administration we can expect vicious, concentrated attacks on any set of colleges that seem to be attaining critical mass as a parallel system. (Though, I must admit, the success of homeschooling in the United States over past decades suggests I may be wrong about this. Forty years ago homeschooling wasn't even legal in many states; now millions of students are homeschooled without any widespread attempt by the Left to suppress the practice, despite that it comprises a bulwark against Leftist domination. Why this is deserves further analysis.) Later chapters issue uncompromising calls for restoring traditional views of men and women, and rejecting masculinizing women and feminizing men, as well as homosexuality and gender fluidity. This is, of course, merely recognizing reality and human nature, which show us that men and women are different and complementary, an obvious truism that now is radical even to utter. Esolen also calls for restoring the sense of play among children, rather than pushing sports as chore and accomplishment. Esolen ends his book by a call for subsidiarity—the revitalization of the middle, non-governmental structures of society, and the devolution of as much power as possible, now ever more concentrated at the top, to those structures. Social concerns should be left to the smallest group that can reasonably deal with them, the group that is nearest the concerns in question. Although this is certainly true, it seems to me that this by itself, even if could be accomplished, will not produce the society Esolen wants. As Yuval Levin notes in "The Fractured Republic", Subsidiarity means no one gets to have their way exclusively. On Esolen's own premises, of the nearly complete degradation of society, subsidiarity would mean some progress, but not over-much, if the vast majority of the individuals who make up society are already so far gone from the path of virtue. Esolen also (briefly) calls for us to revive our own social life, and to resist the ever-greater encroachments of the federal government. Together these things, if successful, might make subsidiarity possible, but doing all this is a tall order, and, unfortunately, not one Esolen has any concrete suggestions how to accomplish. Esolen in more than one place in this book touches on a topic that has bothered me for a long time, which is the habit in certain Christian churches to not, whenever possible, use a pronoun to refer to God. This practice is typically referred to with the euphemism "gender-inclusive." Thus, "God took his . . ." becomes "God took God's . . ." Of course this sounds unnatural, a very bad beginning for any sentence that involves God. The standard rejoinder is, perfectly accurately, that God has no sex and is, obviously, neither a "he" nor a "she." This rejoinder is a cover for the real reason, that those pushing this new usage regard it as degrading or disempowering to women to refer to God as "he." However, as Esolen points out, in

English this usage necessarily sends the message that God is not personal at all, but a concept, a thing. This is what I had not seen before dropping the pronoun as a matter of course is theologically unsound for precisely this reason. Whatever today's grammar radicals may say, in English *he* is and should be the generic pronoun, and has always been understood to encompass all humanity. It is *she* that is limiting, because it is artificial and forced, and conveys a political message distracting from the meaning of any sentence in which it is used. More than that, Jesus instructed us to call God *Father* and, of course, Jesus is male in his human nature, suggesting certain masculine characteristics are emblematic of God. Using *she* for the generic pronoun for God would therefore not just be jarring because of its political overtones, but it would be theologically dubious as applied to the Trinity, and merely false as applied to Jesus in his human nature. Rather than being apologetic about it, we should therefore reject any other usage but *he* as the pronoun for God. Finally, I think that Esolen errs by repeatedly comparing the best possible of the past to the worst possible of the present. This is a propaganda technique unworthy of a serious call to social action. Yes, jeremiads are, in essence, propaganda. But it is still a distorted vision, and clarity of vision is important if strong, consistent action is to be taken. Esolen conveys with multiple examples that he would be happy, on most levels, with the American life of the late 19th or early 20th Century. Not only is this unrealistic, but I think Esolen overstates the virtue of the past. You can't go back, and we need a moral sense and moral actions that can take root in today's world as it actually is, not paeans to one-room schoolhouses, as good as they may have been at their best. I am hoping Dreher's "The Benedict Option" will be the clear path to action that this book is not.

Esolen is one of the most brilliant, incisive, and erudite essayists in the world today! His books are gems of crystalline clarity.

This is a "must read" book. Esolen is brilliant. He wades through the shallow swamps of contemporary culture to offer some suggestions about how we might be able to lead truly worthwhile lives again.

Once again, Dr. Esolen has challenged me, made me laugh out loud, kept me awake (because I either can't put it down or can't stop thinking about his message), made me cry, and given me hope. Brilliantly written and as profound as always, I whole-heartedly enjoyed every moment. One need

not always 100% agree with Dr. Esolen to enjoy his writing. As magnanimous as he is wise, his prose draws you into an intimate conversation... one that you perhaps hadn't expected, but one which you will welcome with open arms (and one for which you will yearn long after you've read the last page). Read everything he has written.

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