

By Murray Rundus

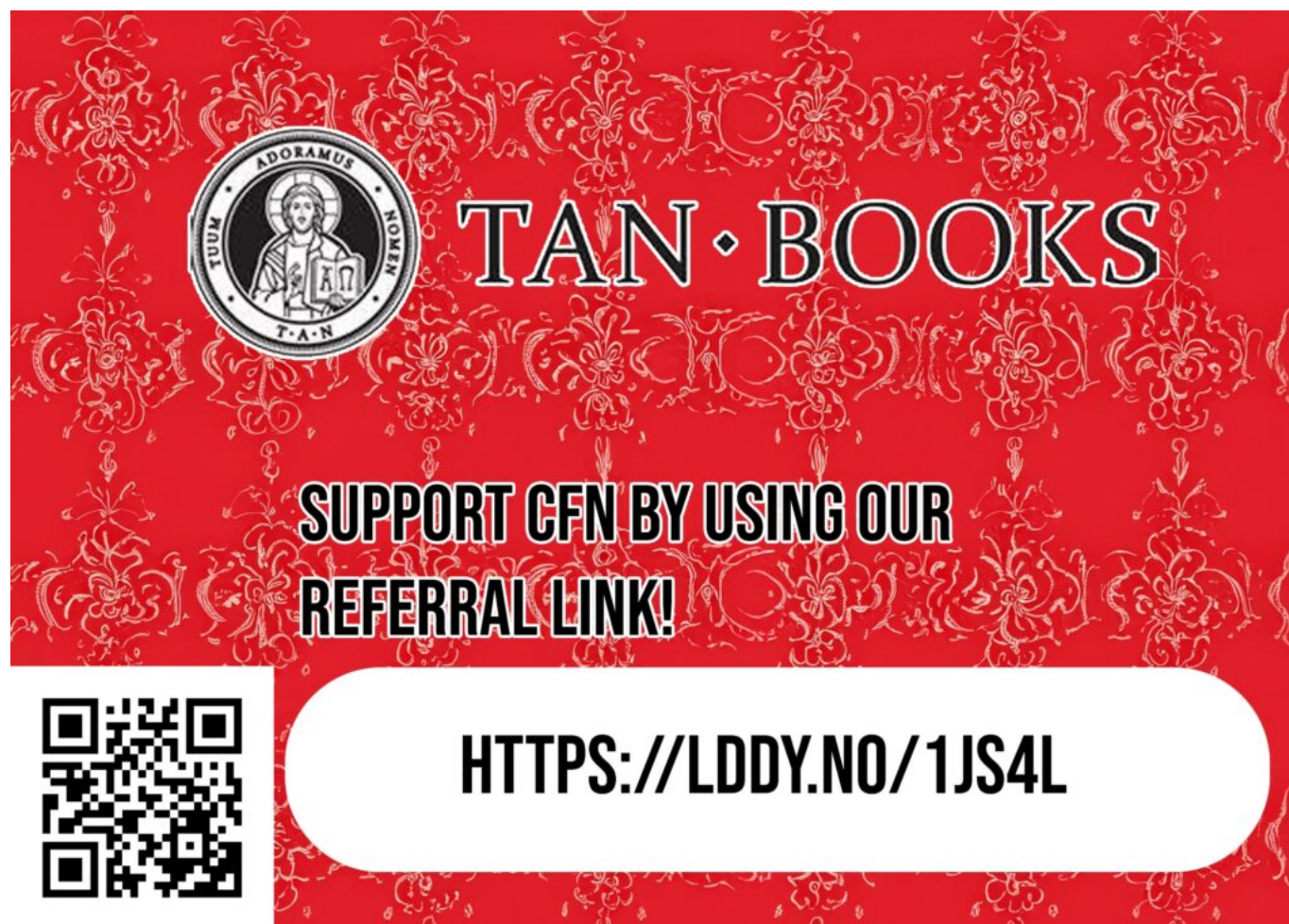
One of the greatest artistic works produced by Western Civilization is Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung or the Ring Cycle). It is a series of operas that takes over fifteen hours to complete and is typically packed with spectacular on-stage effects and stunning music such as the well-known *Ride of the Valkyrie*. But arguably the most important part of this work is actually the story that drives the whole point. It's a story that inspired Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and has inspired thousands of pages of scholarship from philosophers, writers and psychologists trying to gather as much fruit as possible from the series.

Wagner had a lot to work with, as the Ring Cycle is really his own take on the great tales of German folklore and mythology. A tale of gods rising to power, growing in lust for power, coming into conflict with love, dying and starting over again. It's a tale almost instinctive within the Western mind, and we have seen it in our history play out over and over again, albeit with men rather than gods and demigods. Here, I do not want to engage with all the particulars of what Wagner was working with, but rather to focus on the fact that when Wagner uses gods to express his message, he demonstrates how these once-feared objects of pagan worship have been reduced to mere myths, tools for our cultural expression. This transformation, whether Wagner acknowledged it or not, is due entirely to Christianity's triumph over paganism, exorcising the West of any fear of these false gods, reducing them to powerless symbols. However, if we are not vigilant, our growing culture of anti-Christ will seek to do the same thing with Christianity itself, turning what is sacred into mere cultural artifacts.

We can already see this happening today, as churches, once the beating heart of communities, are increasingly repurposed for secular or even anti-Christian uses. [One prominent Catholic church](#) had been sold to Muslims and is likely to become one of the largest Islamic Centers in the region. [Another 19th century Neo-Gothic church](#) in New York went semi-viral for being converted into a gym, the intricate stained-glass now being ornamentation for treadmills rather than a high altar. [Earlier this year](#), Canterbury Cathedral held "A Rave in the Nave", something reminiscent of many events held in Catholic churches as well. If one has ever been to Europe, something immediately stands out about each village or town you enter. The church is almost always at the center, they represented the central spirit of Catholicism within the people. If these centers are now used as the epicenter for a culture foreign to Catholicism, are we to be deceived into thinking this just shows that modern Christian culture is reimagining itself? No, rather, it shows that modern Christianity is racing towards its own twilight. But the worst part of this whole ordeal is not that our buildings are being lost, it's that the people have forgotten what the churches were

originally even for. One of the great parts of the latest installment of the [Mass of the Ages](#) characterized this well, showing a repurposed church where the tour guide had no earthly idea...what any of the basic Christian symbols of the stained glass could possibly be referring to.

This should not be foreign to Catholics, though it should terrify us that we are on the opposing end of this phenomenon. When Catholicism triumphed over paganism, our fathers happily used the pagan style of art. They made the Roman and Greek myths staples of our education. They romanticized Thor, Juno and Prometheus, all of this not because these gods were the objects of their worship but because there were no pagan priests demanding incense be offered to the gods, Christ had risen from the grave and the pagan world tree had been cut down and reduced to ash.



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Wagner was right in his operas to say that man does create his own gods; he cannot live without them, and like all earthly things, they come and go. There is an instinctive fear in all of us that prevents having our values remain *ideas*. They must be substantiated and made

into realities. For fallen man detached from revelation, he does this through idolatry, his values respected out of superstition. His lust he makes into an Aphrodite, his love of war into a Mars, his desire for fatherhood into a Wotan. The modern man is no exception, though he calls these things by different names. And so, the modern man will say that Catholicism is just more of the same, it is this supposition that gives him no scruple in turning God's house into a brothel. Where our world has gone wrong, and what Wagner perhaps foresaw in his portrayal of the gods, is the modern tendency to reduce all religions to mere relics of cultural expression, subject to the whims of human invention. Wagner's gods, like the pagan deities they represent, rise and fall with the tides of human belief. Yet, unlike these ephemeral creations, Catholicism does not need to be made into a reality: it already is one, grounded in the historical and divine truth of Christ's resurrection. Our own problem is that we have the reality in front of us but have failed to internalize the idea inside of it. Christ has risen from the dead, the Church civilized and evangelized much of the world, working miracles through the Saints in deeds too many to number. And yet, many Catholics in the past century have thought nothing of this, and reduced their faith to merely a routine while the temples of our own souls have been refashioned into secular spaces. I propose that we all start there, as a man who holds his own soul to be a sacred place is much more likely to assert that his church must be one as well. And so, in treating our souls as sacred spaces and preserving the sanctity of our churches, we do more than resist the secularization of our world—we affirm the eternal truth of the Resurrection. Unlike the fleeting gods of mythology, whose stories fade with the passing of generations, our faith is anchored in the everlasting victory of Christ. This is not a story of gods rising and falling, but of the one true God who conquered death to offer us eternal life. We must stand firm in our faith, ensuring that both our inner lives and our sacred churches reflect the glory of this divine truth, now and unto the ages of ages.

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