

CHAPTER EIGHT: ENLIGHTENED HUMANISM AND REVOLUTION

The seventeenth century brought with it an emphasis upon human reason as the most important source of truth. This “Age of Reason” or “Enlightenment” was a major turning point in the history of the West, an era which has significantly influenced the assumptions many have yet today.

The Enlightenment: Positive Aspects

We can certainly applaud the value placed upon reason by those of the Enlightenment. They began by explicitly stating their assumptions, then attempted to reason through to consistent conclusions. In contrast, many today try to use their reasoning powers without identifying the assumptions they began with.ⁱ

This is one reason why some lose their faith in college or seminaries--they have never identified the unspoken assumptions of their teachers. The most “objective” scholars begin with certain ideas taken for granted, and their conclusions (as well as their methods of research) depend upon the presuppositions they begin with.

Those assumptions may be warranted, perhaps even beyond dispute (for example, the assumption that there is a real world), but sometimes assumptions are very anti-Christian (for example, the idea that miracles do not and never have occurred). When the beginning framework is in error, the conclusions that follow are likely to be in error. When people presuppose God to be irrelevant, His exclusion will influence everything else they do and think. Real honesty demands a stating of implicit assumptions in a given academic discipline.

Sometimes we moderns do not consider our assumptions, instead we say “if it feels good, do it.” My pastor speaks of a friend who saw a bumper sticker with that slogan. He responded

by crashing his car into that bumper--there was no reason why anyone should object who genuinely follows that reasonless philosophy! We can applaud the Enlightenment emphasis upon assumptions and reason.

Those of the Age of Reason also held to the orderliness of knowledge, an idea forgotten and even denied today. As mentioned previously, we study bits and pieces of knowledge today, rather than systematically develop ideas from a foundation. Perhaps, as Francis Schaeffer has stated,ⁱⁱ it is because we lack absolutes upon which to base a systematic world-view, instead we live in a raging sea of ever-changing relativism.

Most of the Enlightenment scholars assumed that God existed and that He even created the universe, as evidenced by its orderliness. However they held to a deistic religion in which God is not personal or involved in everyday life; God created and then took an extended vacation. This is far from the biblical picture of God, although it is dangerously close to what a great many Christians seem to live out: placate a distant God on Sunday morning, but do not let Him influence how life is lived everyday. But at least the Enlightenment deists saw the creative hand of God in the universe.

The Enlightenment: Negative Aspects

With the enthronement of reason, people assumed that people could solve their own problems without help from God. As Alexander Pope stated, "the proper study of mankind is man," which is quite the opposite of the biblical statement that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Prov. 9:10). A better world, would be possible if people would only use their reason, they thought.

There were many, such as Voltaire, who saw the church as a vehicle of evil (e.g. the

Thirty Year's War)ⁱⁱⁱ and sick thinking, and therefore the church should be crushed. We see the remnants of such thinking in some of today's psychologists who feel the best answer to mental illness is getting rid of the client's religion, which is a crutch that is no longer needed.

While religion was believed by some to be the downfall of the human race, people were thought to be ultimately perfectible. A perfect society, utopia, would be possible if people's thinking could be changed. Ironically some even wrote about such perfectibility as they waited in prison for the guillotine! Utopianism, even though it is contradicted by the failure of hundreds of sincere attempts, was an influence in producing the bloody French revolution, and is a working assumption of communists and other Marxists.

Locke's Philosophy

As but one example of an extraordinary Enlightenment thinker, Lock endorsed the concepts of the separation of powers in government and the rights of individuals.^{iv} These ideas, which were underscored in the Bible long ago, were used by Jefferson in his writing of the American Declaration of Independence.

Locke also wrote about an assumption held by a number of contemporary psychologists and sociologists. His philosophy was that human nature was essentially a "tabula rasa," a blank slate, and our experiences are like chalk that writes upon that slate. That we are completely determined by our environment flies in the face of freedom and genuine choice-making assumed by most Christians, although we certainly must acknowledge that we are powerfully influenced by our past experiences. The blank slate theory lies behind B. F. Skinner's radical behaviorism as well as a great deal of sociological thinking today.

Government of Law Versus Government of Man

In England, James II was deposed in 1688 through the “Bloodless Revolution” (also called the “Glorious Revolution,” although it was neither glorious nor a revolution). A new Declaration of Rights was signed into law, which equalized the power of Parliament and king. Thus they now had a government of law rather than a government of man.

In contrast, Peter the Great of Russia visited England about this time, and wondered aloud who all the men with wigs and gowns (the garb of lawyers) were. When told they were lawyers, Peter responded “Lawyers! Why I have but two in my whole dominion and I believe I shall hang one of them the moment I get home.”^v Thus is the rule of a government of man.

While some during the Enlightenment spoke of a need for a “benevolent despot,” despots are rarely benevolent historically. Instead, limitations upon the king’s power, illustrated by the British government of law, are more likely to produce freedom and democracy. We tend to take these for granted in our age, but actually they are a rare exception in history. With totalitarian communism increasingly taking over the world, some believe that genuine democracy may soon be a thing of the past.

Peter the great was interesting in another respect as well; he produced dramatic changes in Russia in a short period of time. Because of his travels in Europe, he introduced European fashions to his country. The Russians shaved and began to wear clothes from the West; in fact Peter was in some ways more Western than the West! One is reminded of the Romans who conquered the Greeks, yet in turn were mentally conquered by Greek philosophy and political thinking.

God-Centered Versus Man-Centered Economics

The late 1600's were economically very complex for people in Europe, with excessive

restrictions on people and production. One could even get executed for not weaving a certain pattern correctly! There were also many complex restrictions upon trade, sometimes referred to as “Mercantilism.”⁴ Much like today’s complex government regulation, the French rule book for the textile industry alone was 2000 pages long!

The assumption was that with the right legislation and rules, justice and prosperity were assured. We make the same assumption today in our economic planning, but it did not work during the Enlightenment (the French economy was devastated) and it doesn’t work now. The solution offered by most legislators--even more of the same--only makes things worse, stockpiling problems for future generations.

Without God in control, man-controlled economics seems the only answer. As the novel Brave New World indicates, horrible manipulation follows when submission to God’s principles is abandoned. The thinking seems to be “If God isn’t in control, get someone in control of this mess.” That someone tends to be a person or set of rules, either of which is a poor substitute to the Creator of the world.

How to Make (or Lose) a Fortune

One of the world’s biggest swindles surfaced in England in the year 1720, although the French had a similar scandal about the same time. The get-rich-soon scheme produced a wild boom of interest and investment, followed by disaster, a phenomenon called a “mania” by sociologists. A few took all the profits while the majority of investors lost everything. A similar “bubble” took place in Holland almost a century before, the well-known “tulip mania” (Holland is still known for its tulips).

What usually happens is that people get unrealistic ideas about some project or company

and bid the stock higher and higher, going deeply into debt to pay for the investment. As the paper value of the stock grows, people seem to get richer and richer until a few get scared, pull out, and the bubble bursts. The few who leave early gain a fortune, but most lose their shirts and have huge debts to pay.

When an entire society does this, you have a widespread catastrophe that can ruin an economy, which is precisely what happened in the 1930's depression in the United States. What is frightening is that the United States is in such a bubble today--if you total all of the debt owed by everyone (including the government), it exceeds the value of all American property.⁵ While the government maintains an all time high indebtedness, the stock market continues to set records far in excess of the highest levels prior to the depression. The most commonly offered solutions are spend more or tax more, either of which would only compound the problem.

What is the alternative? Evangelist John Wesley advised that people live within their means and avoid credit, which works well for both individuals and governments. Some counter that such old advice, as old as the Bible ("be a debtor to no man"), would not work because we are now in a different, more complex age. The people involved in the South Sea Bubble thought the same thing, as did people during the Roaring Twenties.

The South Sea Bubble brought England into a depression. Some thought at that time that it was a judgment from God, and perhaps so, but it was definitely the result of foolish spending and speculation. Lord, save us from another bursting bubble!

Roots of the American Revolution

Problems with excessive taxation and restrictions on trade were at the root of the American Revolutionary War. Yet it was also unique in history, based upon a blend of

Enlightenment philosophy and concepts indirectly taken from the Bible. While other revolutions, then and now, promise much and produce little but tyranny, the American revolution produced one of the most stable and free countries in history. What made the difference?

One factor was that the founding fathers had realistic goals; they did not expect perfection. They were aware of people's weaknesses, as well as the limitations of any government, and thus felt that government should be (in Jefferson's words) "a simple, frugal affair." What a vivid contrast to the faith in government to correct all wrongs, held by many today.

One must not overlook important Christian influences in the founding of our country. "The Great Awakening" earlier in the eighteenth century emphasized the inner experience of faith, and although there were excesses, there was a renewed interest in Christianity. Though not everyone attended church (in fact church attendance was lower than today), biblical principles were popular among the population and thus reflected in the leaders and documents of the new country. Our land is relatively free because our forefathers realized that people are sinful, but "one nation, under God" and His law can provide the context for freedom. How very different from the romantic assumption held by some that democracy is only the result of giving a country a ballot box.

Certainly the founding fathers were not all Christians. Tom Paine, for example, was called a "filthy little atheist" (actually he was a deist,) as were many of the founders. Yet even those who were not Christians made use of biblical concepts, such as the separation of powers and the idea of a higher law. The latter was borrowed from Blackstone's great Commentaries on the Laws of England which stated that "no laws are of any validity . . . if contrary to the higher

law . . . dictated by God himself”⁸

The Protestant work ethic was also an important foundation used by the early founders of our country. Simply stated it says “if you don’t work, you don’t eat” (II Thes. 3:10). As noted before, the Puritans certainly found that principle to make good sense in America. Today, on the other hand, we almost consider the work ethic a joke; most people want to do the least amount of work for maximum pay. Perhaps this is why our country has declined--selfishness and laziness have hardened our consciences. In contrast Japan, following a philosophy that includes a similar work ethic, has made stunning progress.

Back to Nature with Rousseau

While he doesn’t really belong to the Age of Reason, but more to the forthcoming Romantic period, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an important figure at this time.⁹ Like many Enlightenment writers, he dismissed the idea of God and exalted the supposed inherent goodness of humanity. In Rousseau’s opinion the best education is virtually no education, instead you should discover the self and the world around you, getting in touch with your feelings and experiences rather than discovering objective truth. He would have felt comfortable with the “do your own thing” pseudo-philosophy.

He applied this concept to government by stating that the majority is always omnipotent and good, while civilization was a big mistake. Extolling the “noble savage,” he believed that in a more natural environment, away from modern restraints, the inherent goodness of people would come out. A modern application of Rousseau’s philosophy is the “back to nature” buffs who want to leave the restraints of civilization and find their naturally good selves. In contrast, Hobbes described life apart from civilization as “poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

Another area of application was child-rearing. Rousseau was one of the first of a long line of book-writers who extolled the virtue in raising children unrestrained and free. Today we still have many who advocate permissive child-rearing, although an increasing number of psychologists have come to question this idea--"budding flowers" left to themselves tend to end up more like weeds!

Indeed, a personal look at Rousseau's life would make one question his philosophy. His own children were known to be the terrors of the neighborhood, and he ended up having them committed because of his inability to control them. He was very undisciplined in his personal life, and never bothered to marry the mother of his children.

Liberty, Equality and . . . Napoleon

Accepting Rousseau's humanistic philosophy, French officials tried to develop a utopian state in which the good nature of people could emerge freely. They developed the slogan "liberty, equality, fraternity," referring to their quest for freedom without any restraints, the equality of everyone, and the brotherhood of mankind.

Enthusiasm for the new movement abounded. People were tired of the old regime which had spent itself silly,¹⁰ as well as the overwhelming number of restrictions that had been imposed by the government. In the name of freedom, a freedom from all restraint including God's law, the French stormed the Bastille (a prison) and the French Revolution began in 1789.

The French revolutionaries were idealists who wanted to remake the world. The means to that end was grizzly, including torture and widespread executions. They thought the best way to make Frenchmen into secular saints was through force, and those who did not wish to join lost their heads over it. The same idea was behind the attempt to change Russians a century and half

later under Stalin and Lenin; utopia comes at the expense of many lives and a great deal of literal pain.

During the revolution the French also had to battle wild inflation. To illustrate, a pound of candles in 1790 cost an equivalent of eighteen cents in American currency, five years later they cost eight dollars, and one year after that forty dollars! A bushel of flour went from forty cents to forty-five dollars from 1790 to 1795, while a cart load of wood went from four dollars to five hundred dollars!

Such wild inflation always hurts the poor the most. Part of the problem was the use of paper money, and as evil as he was, Napoleon saw the error and insisted upon a gold standard. That decision minimized the financial distress to the country, even when Napoleon met his Waterloo.

In the middle of chaos the French called upon a man to save them, much as the Romans did Julius Caesar and the Germans Hitler. Napoleon, who had read his Machiavelli,¹¹ took on that task, as well as taking on nearly all of Europe. His expansion finally came to an end when he attempted to invade Russia in the winter, and three years later (1815) he was defeated in Waterloo, Belgium. The Enlightenment, with its trust in human reason, thus finally came to an end.

Chapter Eight

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- i. Archeologist William Albright describes the difficulty scientists have in doing this in *Eternity*, Feb. 1959, p. 8.
 - ii. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*.
 - iii. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 4, pp. 141-155.
 - iv. F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization*, vol. 2, pp. 548, 550.
 - v. Brendon Brown, ed., *Natural Law Reader*, p. 115.
 6. Henry Weaver, *The Mainspring of Human Progress*, pp. 67-68, and Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, vol. 1, pp. 201-202.
 7. *Christian Economics*, March 7, 1967, p. 1.
 8. Brown, op cit, pp. 105-106.
 9. Willis, op cit, p. 549
 10. C. Northcote Parkinson, *The Law and the Profits*, pp. 31-35.
 11. Hendrik van Loon, *The Story of Mankind*, pp. 349-360.