The Age of Reason

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Answering the Enlightenment

Our worldview is that lens of unquestioned beliefs through which we view everything. Individuals have a worldview, but so does society. It may be referred to as the Zeitgeist or Spirit of the Age. If our individual worldview is shaped by our upbringing, then it is equally true that the worldview of society is shaped by the events of history. A history that frequently repeats itself, and nowhere more than where we fail to learn from it.

The First Thousand Years

From the time of Christ the church expanded. First as a Jewish sect, then as an independent, illegal underground movement. The persecuted church had no political power, only the gospel: the power of God for salvation. The Church grew because the gospel made a difference in people's lives. The Roman Empire, with its excellent infrastructure and common language, ensured the church's expansion, even under persecution. Then, in 313AD, Emperor Constantine unbanned the Church, and in 380AD, Christianity was made the religion of Rome.

The following centuries saw the decline and fall of the Roman empire, but Christianity survived.

The Frankish and Anglian kings converted. Then others, Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, Vladimir of Kiev, also introduced their people to Christ. By the second Millennium, Western Europe had emerged as a significant power and the church was well established as the mainstay religion of the area. The former Roman empire had endured 400 years of Islamic Jihad. Two-thirds of the Christian world had fallen under Muslim rule. Now, finally, Europe responded. From 1095 to 1291AD, the Crusades focused on trying to regain the Holy Land. Ultimately, that failed. But with the Crusades over, war continued in the West. It was another 300 years before the Church reclaimed Europe and secured her borders.

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These were times of important changes in Europe. Tribal culture and feudalism gave way to market capitalism, a rise in international trade and the emergence of a merchant class. With prosperity came increased corruption. Popes, priests and princes took advantage of people's ignorance to exploit Christ's Body for power and profit. However, God was never without a core of individually faithful Christians.

One of these individuals was Martin Luther. In 1517, he presented his 95 Theses, speaking out against corruption and abuse within the church. This small step was the catalyst to a chain reaction now known as the Reformation.

The Reformation

The Reformation was a good thing for the church. It brought the focus back to the gospel, the simplicity of faith in Jesus, and the truth that '…there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Luther's intent was reform not revolt, and with the benefit of hindsight, we rightly celebrate the Reformation. But, at the time, it led Europe into yet another season of brutal conflict. This time, not Christian against Mohammedan, but now brother against brother. Rulers who had exploited the church exploited the Reformation too. What started as skirmishes between Catholics and Protestants culminated in the Thirty Years' War, which left over 8 million dead. When the dust settled, the face of European politics had changed forever.

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Christ never intended the church to be weaponised against the world, or used politically to

manipulate or rule it. While teaching us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come”, Jesus made it clear, ‘My kingdom is not of this world’ (John 18:36). His intent in building the church was not a government for men, but ‘…that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places’ (Ephesians 3:10). Those who desire Christendom have missed the point of the Gospel: that we are to be in the world but not of it; as a sign, pointing to another time and place.

During the 1600s, years of Christian in-fighting, untold civilian casualties and continuing corruption within the church paved the way for new, more harmful ways of thinking. Martin Luther told the world they didn’t need the church to talk to God. The message they took away was that they didn’t need the church.

The Scientific Revolution

In the previous ages, illumination came through Scripture and Christian doctrine. This included the explosion of scientific discovery. As C.S. Lewis wrote, ‘Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a law giver.’

William Turner, the father of English Botany, was a reformer who, at the age of 31, was arrested for preaching and spent many years in exile due to religious persecution in England. Francis Bacon, the father of Empiricism, who practically invented modern science, came from a Protestant family. His first published work was a defence of the persecuted puritan church. Alexandra Volta, who invented the electric battery, wrote, ‘I am not ashamed of the Gospel, may it produce some good fruit!’ His fellow electrical pioneer, Michael Faraday, one of the greatest scientific discoverers of all time, was also a devout Christian, a deacon and later an elder in his local church.

In the words of Francis Schaeffer, not all the early scientists were individually consistent Christians. Many were, but all of them were living within the thought forms brought forth by Christianity.

The Enlightenment

However, the church’s pride and folly created opportunity for the secularists to meekly inherit the earth. The next hundred years saw a gradual rejection of God and a move away from Christian influence. As Solomon wrote, ‘…there is nothing new under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The new thinking was actually a move back towards Materialism, taught by the Greeks 600 years before Jesus.

René Descartes, father of modern philosophy, saw God as creator, but that was where his god ended. His contemporary, Blaise Pascal, said, ‘In all his philosophy, Descartes did his best to

dispense with God'. To Descartes, 'cogito ergo sum (I think; therefore, I am)', was the key to explaining the natural world. He saw deductive reasoning, rather than Divine revelation, as the only way to arrive at sure knowledge. By changing the question from, 'What is true?' to, 'Of what can I be certain?', Descartes shifted final authority from God to man.

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The Enlightenment saw man again fall prey to the serpent who once told Eve, '…you will be like God' (Genesis 3:5). Writing at the time, Immanuel Kant, described it as, '…man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.' Man believed himself to be maturing from an obedient child into a reasoning adult. If God was Our Father, it was time to leave home.

The Overthrow of Kings

But it was not only God who was rejected. It was Enlightenment thinking that inspired The American Declaration of Independence. Its appeals to 'Nature and Nature's God' may sound Christian, but its exalting 'the pursuit of Happiness' is pure Greek philosophy. That Governments 'deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed' may be a principle of democracy, but the teaching of Jesus and Paul was to obey your rulers, not alter or abolish them. Democracy may be desirable, but Scripture does not paint it as an unalienable right.

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The French Revolution, with its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, made no such appeal to God. With the Divine Law Giver removed, blood once again flowed in the streets. The King and Queen were brought to the scaffold as rational man sought to remodel society by making himself judge, jury and executioner. Within one year, there were 16,594 official death sentences, and thousands more died without trial. This 'speedy, severe and inflexible justice', known in history as the Reign of Terror, was rationalised by revolutionary Robespierre as 'a consequence of the general principle of democracy'. As usually happens, the tyrannical revolutionaries had only succeeded in becoming the very thing they sought to overthrow.

We Need God Over Our Reason

God created us with rational minds and the desire to discover and create. But God did not just create us and then leave us to fend for ourselves. He is a personal, loving God, intimately engaged with His creation, every moment of every hour. Philosophers may have relegated Him to a God of the Gaps, used only to explain what cannot be understood, but He is not only needed for those things we do not understand. Often, we need God most in the things we think we do understand. There is a way that seems right to us, but in the end, it leads to death. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so are Gods ways and thoughts higher than our own.

Man sought to elevate reason. To raise it above God and the authority of Scripture. Today, many continue to pursue this wrong thinking. The Bible encourages us to study and show ourselves approved; to apply our minds and to use reason. There is a place for reason, but that place is alongside, and a little beneath, faith and obedience to God.

Also in this Series: Dark Age or Golden Age?