

Enlightenment From What?

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I. Let there be Light

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night."¹ Thus the notion of light was known from the very Beginning. For more contemporaneous purposes of this paper, the Age of Enlightenment is an intellectual movement that began in late 16th century Europe and which reached its apex in the 18th century, but which arguably, continues to the present. But few can argue that the Enlightenment was indispensable for the advent of modernism and in due course post-modernism. The impact of the Enlightenment on Christian² theology is palpable.

But, what is Enlightenment? A latecomer to the Age, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in the opening paragraph of his essay bearing the same title, wrote:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (*Sapere aude.*) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.³

Who then is the "another" from whose guidance that according to Kant must be

¹ Genesis 1:3-5.

² Within Judaism, one can also discern an impact the Age of Enlightenment. The *haskalah* was the intellectual movement among Jews in Europe toward adopting values of the Enlightenment. The salient feature of the *haskalah* was the erosion of the authority of the Torah and the Talmud in Jewish community life. The most well known philosopher among the *maskilim*, the Jewish adherents of *haskalah* was Moses Mendelsohn.

³ Translation by Peter Gay, from Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West, 2 vols., 2nd Ed. (1954), I, 1071; reprinted in Gay, The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 384.

abandoned by those seeking maturity? Is this “another” God? Or merely the Church? I submit that no philosopher of the Enlightenment was so bold as to claim the ability to completely to break away from tutelage of God as God even to this day is understood as representing the infinite and therefore unfathomable by the human mind. Indeed, they all strove against the tutelage of the church and of religion, both finite and fallible human institutions. The Enlightenment has certainly weakened the authority of religion, but the authority of the personal God remains as strong as ever within those who choose to embrace faith. Inevitably, Christian theology, being the rational inquiry for knowledge into the nature of God and of religion by humans, is changed by the Enlightenment.

This paper discusses two great changes in Christian theology that is caused by the Enlightenment: (1) The separation of science from religion, and (2) The separation of the state from the church.

II. The Separation of Science from Religion

During the decline of imperial Rome⁴ and the struggle of Rome against invasion, the Church has sought to preserve and was successful in preserving classical knowledge (mostly Roman as much of that of ancient Greece was lost) against the unlettered hordes. This daunting task first fell on the monasteries, the perseverance of which ignited the golden age of monasticism (the 8th century and through the 12th century). During this time, the monastic sanctuaries attracted the most talented students who created a virtual monopoly on knowledge in general; the monasteries shone with glimmers of light in a

⁴ Notwithstanding the sack of Rome in 410 A.D. by the Visigoths, 476 A.D. is commonly accepted as date of the fall of the Western Roman Empire and Romulus Augustus as its last emperor. The Eastern Empire struggled on and was not extinguished until 1453.

period of time in Europe that came to be called the Dark Ages.⁵ Beginning in the 11th century, the supremacy of the monasteries began to be challenged by scholastics who sought knowledge from outside the rustic monastic walls in schools in rising cities which also became known as universities. The early universities were fully sponsored and controlled by the Church and the knowledge generated within inevitably reflected the religious doctrines of the benefactor. The application of empirical observation was unknown because scholasticism as a discipline focused on the analysis of existing texts, the foremost being the Bible and the second being the writings of the Greek philosophers (which after being lost was re-introduced into Europe through the efforts of Islamic and Jewish scholars). During the time known as the Middle Ages, Scholasticism held sway as the preserver, but not quite the creator of knowledge until the late 13th century when it, in turn, gave way to the Renaissance. The leading figure of scholasticism is Thomas Aquinas, doctor of the Church and patron of universities.

The Renaissance⁶, which began in Italy in the 14th century and enveloped northern Europe by the 16th, initiated much disquiet for the Church as this period marked the popular dissemination of knowledge to the masses, while monasticism and scholasticism had sought its conservation under the tutelage of religious authority. From the standpoint of technology, the advent of the printing press in Europe was the chief reason for the explosion of knowledge. This was a double edged sword for the Church: the Renaissance

⁵ This rather uncomplimentary phrase is attributed to Petrarch, the 14th century Italian humanist of the early Renaissance and considered a father of that Age.

⁶ Renaissance literally means rebirth and is attributed to French historian Jules Michelet and expanded upon by Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt of the 19th century.

celebrated the pinnacle of Roman authority and prestige⁷, but also heralded the decline the Church as it became more difficult to control the proliferation of knowledge, some of which contradicted the Papal understanding of the Scriptures, including a new look at the ancient Classics. The Renaissance saw the rejuvenation of humanism with the works of Francesco Petrarch (1307-1374), who revitalized the Greek philosophical premise that man as a rational and sentient being with the ability to decide and think for himself. He together with Dante Alighieri (1264-1321) are considered the patriarchs of the Renaissance. The emphasis on philosophy, art (including sculpture, painting, and architecture) and literature notwithstanding, the Renaissance is also a time of infancy for empirical science. The reverence for classical sources further espoused the view of Aristotle and Ptolemy on the universe. Humanism saw nature as the source of spiritual creation that was not governed by laws or mathematics and the term did not have the overt anti-religious connotations of contemporary usage, but subtlety was the this gestation. But that baby called empirical reasoning after berthing quickly turned into an adolescent. The Church was confronted with a rebellious and uncontrollable youth.

The Enlightenment is simultaneously the Age of Reason (or Rationalism) and the Age of Empiricism. It enshrined the scientific method, that is the use of simplifying experiments and the observations of these experiments to demonstrate the repeatability of physical relationships. A few representative scientist luminaries of the Age include Copernicus (astronomer 1473-1543), Bacon (1561-1626)⁸, Galileo (1564-1642), Kepler

⁷ The Papacy returned to Rome in 1378 from the Avignon Captivity, but actual revival of that once imperial seat began with Pope Nicholas V who became pontiff in 1447.

⁸ Francis Bacon, who is generally considered the founder of the modern scientific method, and not to be confused with Roger Bacon, (1214-1294), also known as Doctor Mirabilis (astounding doctor), was an English scholastic who had a precocious appreciation of empiricism, and is thought of as one of the earliest

(1571-1630), Descartes (1595-1650), Pascal (1623-1662), Newton (1642-1727), Leibniz (1645-1716) and Kant (1724-1804). The struggle between the scientists of the Enlightenment and the Church is epitomized by the trials and tribulations of the Tuscan astronomer and mathematician Galileo Galilei, a landmark example of the tension between religion and the pursuit of intellectual freedom that the Enlightenment came to stand for. In the case of Galileo, he was prevented from publishing his observations of the solar system but personally escaped death, corporal punishment and even imprisonment. It was an empty victory for the Church was only successful in suppressing the public dissemination of Galileo's ideas. The ideas of Galileo and others, aided by the political climate of the Reformation and struggle for freedom of worship, nevertheless spread rapidly throughout Europe and ushered in the Age of Science.

III. Separation of the State from Church

Appreciation of the idea of the divergence of church and king preceded the Enlightenment notion of separation of church and state by many centuries. The two greatest historical examples involve (1) Pope Gregory VII and the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, and (2) Thomas Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, and King Henry II of England. These early confrontation between lords spiritual and lords temporal involved the struggle of the Church to be supreme over a powerful secular ruler.

Pope Gregory VII is known as the reforming pope who challenged the temporal authority of Henry IV over the Investiture Controversy. The principle at issue is well framed by Cardinal Humbert, a supporter of the pope:

The priesthood is analogous to the soul and the kingship to the body, for they cleave to one another and need one another and each in turn demands services and

proponents of the scientific method.

renders them to another. It follows from this that, just as the soul excels the body and commands it, so too the priestly dignity exceeds the royal.⁹

On the other hand, since the days of the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne, as Frankish (800-814), kings have sought to subordinate church authority and promote secular rule. In 1075, Henry took the bold move of demanding the power, as the secular authority to invest, that is to appoint and confirm to office the clergy, especially bishops. This did not comport with the clerical reforms which had roots in the 10th century in the monastery of Cluny which envisioned a church freed from the corrupting influence of laymen. The popes eventually embraced the position that they had the right to appoint all clergy in the Empire, but they had authority to select and remove the emperor himself. Thus Gregory opposed Henry's ambition and in the same year issued his in the *Dictatus Papae* which formally prohibited the emperor to appoint bishops. The disagreement escalated: Henry declared the pope unseated whereupon the pope on February 22, 1076 excommunicated the emperor, thereby depriving him of the support of the Christian feudall lords. A crises was at hand – in 1077 Gregory, journeying to a Diet at Augsburg, upon receiving news that Henry was approaching, hastily sought protection in the castle of Canossa near Parma which was a keep of Matilda, Countess of Tuscany and strong supporter of the papacy. Gregory underestimated his own power for Henry had come to do penance and to ask for the lifting of his excommunication. Henry stood in cold or knelt in the snow, as the case may have been for three days (January 25-27, 1077) until the clergyman relented though not before exacting strict terms from the emperor, promises which Henry soon breached. Thus the Investiture Controversy continued and

⁹ Humbert, *Three Books Against the Simoniacs*, quoted by Placher, *A Hisotry of*

was not formally resolved after both men had passed from the temporal scene. On 1122, at Concordat of Worms (also known as *Pactum Calixtinum*), Pope Calixtus II and Holy Roman Emperor Henry V agreed to end the matter by compromise. This emperor guaranteed bribe-free election of bishops and abbots and renounced the imperial claim to invest them with ring and crosier, the symbols of their spiritual authority. The pope in turn granted the Holy Roman Emperor the right within his realm to be present at elections and to invest those elected with their lay rights. In the following year the Concordat was ratified by the First Council of the Lateran, but the tension of dual authority remained.

A similar confrontation later occurred in England between King Henry II and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas Becket started his relationship with the King as the king's sporting companion and then served as chancellor. In 1162, he was made reluctantly made Archbishop by the king who wanted a trusted friend in that office. Becket, to the surprise and chagrin of the king took his appointment seriously and became an unyielding defender of the prerogatives of the church. In 1166, Henry enacted the Constitutions of Clarendon which bolstered the authority of the royal courts at the expense of the ecclesiastical. In addition of the jury trial, Clarendon also subjected the clergy accused of a secular crime to be brought into the royal courts. Becket to the great disappointment of his former friend, insisted on the right of the church to try and punish her own "criminous clerks." As the confrontation escalated, Becket was convicted on spurious charges and was exiled from England in 1164 whereupon he solicited the support of the Pope in Rome and King Louis VII of France. In 1170, after a brief reconciliation that was brokered by the pope, Becket once again opposed the King, this

Christian Theology, (Westminster John Knox Press 1983) p36.

time over the coronation of Prince Henry at Canterbury by the Archbishop of York. The king was exasperated and in his ill-tempered fashion posed to his Christmas court in Normandy this fateful question: "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" Four knights took the king's fitful question literally and hastened to Canterbury Cathedral. When the Archbishop refused to return with them to Normandy, they killed Becket with their swords on December 29, 1170. Overnight, Becket became a martyred saint and opinion turned against the king. Henry swore an oath affirming that he had not intended the death of Thomas à Becket, and had himself publicly flogged at Canterbury.

In contrast to the unyielding archbishop, Pope Alexander III, after prohibiting Henry from mass until he had made reparation, sought the middle path of compromise. In 1172, Henry did public penance at Avranches Cathedral and promised to provide money for the crusade in the Holy Land, to restore all property to the church of Canterbury, not to obstruct any appeals to Rome by the clergy, and to abolish all customs antagonistic to the Church.¹⁰ An uneasy truce descended between crown and cross in England.

Due to space, we must necessarily take a quantum leap to North America and the clock is advanced to 18th century. The medieval tension between Pope and Holy Roman Emperor and Archbishop and Plantagenet King were given another twist by the leading thinkers of the new America; Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Thomas Paine (1707-

¹⁰Despite the penance and the leniency of the pope, Henry continued to suffer particularly in dynastic succession. Henry the Young King though crowned, died prematurely in 1183, never having ruled and never to appear in the list of English Kings. Henry's ambitious Queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, turned her sons Richard and John against the father. The "Devil's Brood" intrigued and made open war against the old king. Henry died in 1189 after a humiliating defeat at the hands of Richard. Henry's illegitimate son Geoffrey (1151-1212) and alone among his sons attended at his death-bed. Richard ascended the throne and entered history as the Lion-Hearted. John "Lackland" had to wait his turn, all the while engaged in conspiracy against his brother.

1809), George Washington (1732-1799), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), James Madison (1751-1836) were largely influenced by the English, and to a smaller degree the French Enlightenment. As the Reformation had split organized religion into many contentious factions in Europe and ever mindful of the destructive nature of religious conflict of as recent memory as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), these men were determined to ensure that no single denomination dominated the young state. They were determined to avoid bloodshed in the name of religion. James Madison drove this point home, writing:

The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries.¹¹

At the time of the American Revolution, organized religion had a tendency to support the monarchies of Europe. The American motive differed greatly from that of Pope Gregory IV who sought to gain supremacy for the Church over the emperor and from that of Archbishop Becket who sought to dominate the king's conscience on behalf of Rome. The medieval struggles were between the champions of theocracy and monarchy and the American issue was between the advocates of democracy over monarchy - of independence over colonialism.

By the time of the drafting of the United States Constitution, the more theocratic Roman Church had already fragmented into many competing schools of Christian theology, some puritanical and others more indulgent. The concern of the drafters, while seeking to break free of British domination, also aimed to keep the peace among the more irascible co-religionists and to secure religion from being part of political ambition. This sentiment is well summarized by Benjamin Franklin when he wrote:

¹¹ James Madison, 1803.

When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself, and when it cannot support itself, and God does not care to support it, so that its Professors are obliged to call for the help of the civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being bad one.¹²

This desire dovetails into the issue of imposing a religious test as a prerequisite for political office. The various Test Acts¹³ were penal statutes which sought to preserve the supremacy of the Church of England and to ensure the Protestant faith of the English monarch who is also head of that established church. After the restoration of the monarchy, Charles II began to show a leaning towards Roman Catholicism and an alarmed Parliament sought to show the king and his court the correct path.¹⁴ This coercive legislation was also directed against Nonconformists. The founding fathers of the American republic took particular umbrage against the Test Acts and specifically prohibited any religious tests for office through Article IV of the U.S. Constitution:

The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but *no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.* [Emphasis added].¹⁵

This was followed by the First Amendment which provides:

¹² Letter to Richard Price (a Friend, or Quaker), 9 October 1780 (B 8:153-4).

¹³ The Test Acts were preceded by the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity which with the Tudor monarchies of Edward and Elizabeth, had mandated English worship to conform to the Book of Common Prayer.

¹⁴ For example, the Test Act of 1673, the full title of which was “An act for preventing dangers which may happen from popish recusants,” compelled all persons accepting any office, civil or military, the obligation of taking the oaths of supremacy and allegiance and renounce the Doctrine of Transubstantiation and to receive the Protestant sacrament from the Church of England within three months after admittance to office. Specifically the oath contained this recital: *I, profess, testify, and declare, that I do believe that in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper there is not any Transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever: and that the invocation or adoration of the Virgin Mary or any other Saint, and the Sacrifice of the Mass, as they are now used in the Church of Rome, are superstitious and idolatrous...*

¹⁵ Article IV, U.S. Constitution.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;¹⁶

Enlightenment has dawned in the new world in the form of the Age of Democracy.

IV. Conclusion

The Enlightenment has a wide impact on the modern view of Christianity and religion in general. Prominent among the impact are the separation of science from religion and the separation of the state from the church. However the controversies are not fully resolved and we live in a time when these issues continue to be debated and even warred over by individuals of faith, within whom God is present.

Charleston C. K. Wang 2005

¹⁶ First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1791.