THE LOU CHURCH MEMORIAL LECTURE

THE COST OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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It is broadly accepted that out of Enlightenment thinking came many of the “goods” of our society; goods economic, political, and social. Goods ranging from the material wealth and the technology we enjoy to classical liberalism and libertarianism. It is on the latter that I will focus.

An exhaustive discussion of the connection of Enlightenment thought to Classical liberalism and libertarianism is not necessary for this audience, so I will summarize: reason, the individual, equality, property rights, the separation of church and state, and science and politics freed from religious dogma. These pillars underlie the classical liberalism that many point to and exclaim: here, we finally found freedom! Instead, what if these have cost us our freedom?

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What is Enlightenment? Immanuel Kant gave his answer:

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another.... "Have courage to use your own reason!" That is the motto of enlightenment. (Kant 1784)

There is Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, considered "one of the greatest cultural and intellectual achievements of the Enlightenment;" (Champion 2012) a 20 million word man-made blueprint for the creation of a rational, improving and cultivated society.

Theology is kneeling, subordinate to reason. Diderot explained: "in countries enlightened by the light of reason and philosophy... the priest never forgets that he is man, subject and citizen." (Champion 2012) Or as Steven Pinker proclaims: *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. In other words, the case *against* tradition and religion—and by "religion," read "Christianity."

Yet who can deny the progress? It is easy to identify the many "goods" we attribute to Enlightenment thinking—the acceleration of trade and the drastic improvements in the economic standard of living. Political concepts such as classical liberalism are developed, and therefore—we believe—our freedoms.

Well, maybe. As Hans Hoppe (2018) offers, "According to the proponents of this theory," of which he mentions Francis Fukuyama and Steven Pinker, "what makes the present age so great and qualifies it as the best of all times is the combination of two factors." Hoppe offers first, the highest levels of technology and natural science in human history—to which he raises no objection; and second, the highest level of human freedom—which Hoppe considers "a historical myth."

N. T. Wright offers: "Any movement that gave us... the guillotine as one of its first fruits and the Gulag as one of its finest cannot simply be affirmed as it stands." (Wright 2008)

The "bads" of the Enlightenment are not so readily admitted by its proponents: communism, eugenics, racial purity, selective breeding, National Socialism, Fabianism, Progressivism, fascism, egalitarianism, modern democracy, freedom from all intermediating

governance institutions, the ineffective separation of church and state, the American Revolution, the French Revolution.

Regarding the two revolutions: The America that came out of the Revolution is described by Ralph Raico as "...the model liberal nation, and, after England, the exemplar of liberalism to the world." This "exemplar of liberalism" didn't survive four-score-and-seven years, ending in 1861—and if you prefer to make a case for 1846 or even 1812, you will get no argument from me. Whatever one believes regarding liberalism, staying power certainly cannot be considered a meaningful characteristic.

But this example is much more successful than what came shortly thereafter: from his magnum opus, *From Dawn to Decadence*, Jacques Barzun offers (2000): "...the French Revolution of 1789 must be called the Liberal Revolution." What does Barzun mean by "liberal"? He offers as an example a law passed two years after the outbreak: there are to be no interests other than the interests of the individual and the general interest of all; no intermediate interests are permitted.

An attack not only on tyrannical authority, but also on guilds, associations, universities, and especially Christianity—every intermediating institution that provided decentralization in governance and stood against the monopoly authority of a centralizing state; every intermediating institution that Robert Nisbet suggests offered the individual room and cover for his freedom.

Simon Schama (1989) offers that such an attack on intermediating institutions was welcomed by the elite; the people—powerless without these intermediating institutions or the king to turn to—saw it another way.

Not all Enlightenment thinkers wished for the guillotine or the gulag, as we certainly know; many sincerely held man's liberty in their sights. John Gray (2018) offers that the asserted universal truth of the link between the Enlightenment and liberal values is tenuous; it was strongest in Enlightenment monotheists and weakest in those thinkers hostile to monotheism.

Yet a generic "monotheism" offered no sustainable foundation. Our liberties were born well before the Enlightenment in a specific cultural and religious tradition; those who lived in and developed this tradition would not refer to themselves blandly as "monotheists."

Let's look at this history. Barzun offers:

The truth is that during the 1,000 years before 1500 a new civilization grew from beginnings that were uncommonly difficult.... showing the world two renaissances before the one that has monopolized the name. ...the Germanic invaders brought a type of custom law that some later thinkers have credited with the idea of individual freedom....no rule was held valid if not approved by those it affected. ...Anglo-Saxon law... defined crime literally as breaking the peace.

This era was born after the fall of Rome; Germanic tribes mixed with Christianity to create a culture that valued Christian ethics and German honor, resulting in what Fritz Kern describes as the old and good law; law of custom and good tradition. A man's oath made his law. Any noble could veto the king if he could demonstrate his right in the old and good law. A law regime about as libertarian as has ever existed for an extended period in the west—and even the world.

Neither the Church nor the king held sovereignty. If anything held "sovereignty," it was the law. Each of the Church and king competed with the other, in different yet overlapping circles; with one or the other taking a stronger or lesser role over the years. In the space between Church and king, freedom blossomed; in the space between Church and king, numerous meaningful intermediating governance institutions took root, giving the individual both the room and the means to exercise his freedom.

It was a time when the Church could reprimand the king despite having no army and no physically coercive means other than what the king provided. Libertarians speak approvingly about the use of shunning when dealing with non-aggressive trespasses. Well, try the eternal shunning of excommunication.

In Ecclesiastes we read of the meaninglessness of life when weighed against the eternity that God has placed in the hearts of men. In the Europe of the Middle Ages, the noble was concerned with his eternal life and God's eternal kingdom and this concern shaped his behavior; no longer the case since the Enlightenment. The common motto for today's enlightened "nobility" is "he who dies with the most toys wins." This is reflected in our time: corruption, lust, and greed define the new nobility.

During much of the Middle Ages, there was a meaningful and functional separation of Church and king, each superior in its realm, neither with sovereign power or authority. Each offering an avenue for appeal if one felt his liberties were unfairly compromised by the other.

Today we have the *subordination* of church to state. One recalls the exchange between the Jewish priests and Pilate regarding Jesus' fate. Pilate asked: "Shall I crucify your king?" and in reply, the priests shouted "We have no king but Caesar." Sounds like a typical Sunday morning in America.

With the Enlightenment, the idea of leaning on tradition and custom was thrown out. The most important tradition to remove was Christianity. Not necessarily its ethics, just the supernatural history, the theology, and the church—as if the ethics could exist for long without God and an institution behind these. Barzun offers, "The Bible must be shown to be a set of fables invented by ignorant or designing people."

What was a generally accepted belief in Christianity throughout the population began to dissolve in the eighteenth century. N.T. Wright (2018) points to the earthquake in Lisbon on All Saints Day in 1755 as a key event in this regard. A massive earthquake and calamity that completely shook Christianity; man's reason could not accept that a good and wise God would allow such terrible tragedies.

Drop the ritual and prayers, ignore the priests and monks. "Wipe out the disgrace!" Voltaire said of the Roman Catholic Church. Voltaire—"the Enlightenment illuminated" according to Schama—did his part to make this so, through a series of four and five page pamphlets, consolidated into *A Portable Philosophic Dictionary*. Who needs 1700 years of scholarship and tradition to shape your philosophy when you can have a portable dictionary?

No more of this God of the Bible; Deism became the religion of "reasonable" men. God did create the universe, but the story of Genesis is a fable. God did set the rules – the laws of science; He has no reason to interfere thereafter. Jesus? Sure, He was a wise and good man; but out with the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection.

The road from Deism went through a revived Epicureanism and ended in Nietzsche's infamous "God is dead," to be found in "The

Parable of the Madman,” published toward the end of the nineteenth century. After all, how big a leap is it from Deism’s “watchmaker” to Epicureanism’s gods that don’t care to “God is dead”?

“Where has God gone?” [Nietzsche’s madman] cried. “I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. We are his murderers. ...Whither are we moving now? ...Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” (Nietzsche [1974] 1882, 1887; 181–82)

The madman found that no one would listen; he lamented that he came too early. The Great War, the suicide of the west, was still a few years away.

What did Nietzsche see as replacing God and His moral law? Man-made ethics would be at the top of the pyramid; the enlightened elite were happy to comply. They would be the “superman,” establishing a “new ethos”: new standards of right and wrong, replacing Christian virtues.

Each of us using our own reason, making our own compass, creating our own definition of true north. One cannot even claim the “non-aggression principle” in such an environment. On what basis?

Well, we do have Hoppe and his argumentation ethics. But not so fast! From his radio broadcasts during World War Two, C.S. Lewis (1941) offers that two people properly argue on the basis of some *standard*. Frank van Dun (2018) offered a similar comment at last year’s Property and Freedom Society conference. To summarize: argumentation ethics is constantly appealing to the other person’s conscience—the things we already share; literally, common knowledge.

But the ideas of the Enlightenment—Liberty, Equality, the individual, patriotism, and Progress—are all abstract ideas, large buckets that can be filled with a wide variety of contents. We complain that these terms don’t have the meaning that we intend, or the meaning as originally intended—just as socialists complain the same thing.

Who is to say how and with what these buckets should be filled? Based on what foundation? Based on whose reason? Without a

common conscience, who—or what—will arbitrate? Voltaire has said “commonsense is not so common.” Well, without *sense* that is *common*, on what basis do we live peacefully—in a state of conviviality, as van Dun puts it?

We can’t, and we have proved it. Barzun describes the Great War as “the blow that hurled the modern world on its course of self-destruction.” Yet this blow was struck in the west at the time we consider to be the most enlightened, peaceful and free. The decades before the outbreak of the war are known as *La Belle Époque*: “the beautiful era.”

It was an optimistic time, born after the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Regional peace, political stability, passport-free travel, material prosperity, technological and scientific innovations, literature and music. The height of what we might consider classical liberalism and freedom.

Certainly there was regional peace in Europe. But there was much violence between and among these same actors (and against the native populations) in the battle for colonies around the world. The art of violence was practiced and perfected; arms were developed in order to ensure victory. This art would soon be turned inward.

The Great War—perhaps alone among all substantial human conflicts—remains almost unexplainable. Why and how could such a thing have happened when and where it did—in this “beautiful era,” among the enlightened people? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1983) offered an answer: “Men have forgotten God.” Nietzsche’s madman would agree.

In the Great War’s wake, western culture and society were transformed in speed and magnitude perhaps unknown in history: family life broken, careers ended, government allowance in the place of productive work, and a tide of egalitarianism; in other words, the perfect cultural soil for the expansion of monopoly state power.

War became total war, in large part driven by another gift of the Enlightenment, modern democracy. While Lincoln established the precedent fifty years earlier, it was finally in the Great War when war of all against all became generally accepted throughout and within Europe, an event for the nation and not merely the combatants—an “Advance to Barbarism,” as offered by F.J.P. Veale (1953). Poison

gas, air raids over civilian populations, submarines destroying ships regardless of flag or purpose, the blockade of civilian food and supplies, even peace not leading to relief.

And church towers used as observation posts, leading to their destruction; painting a picture of the cost of the Enlightenment far better than my few-thousand words.

The war shattered the utopian visions of these students of Enlightenment, leading to the change from what we now call Classical Liberalism to its modern incarnation. Barzun describes this transition as the Great Switch; a switch from the idea that the best government is one that governs least to the best government is one that will give us liberty, good and hard. The “deplorables” are not capable of liberty; it must be forced upon them.

At the time, the transition was barely noted, except by authors such as Chesterton and Belloc.

This new liberal now had nothing standing between him and the individual—all intermediating institutions, especially Christianity and the Church, had been stripped of any meaningful role. Each individual was standing naked, to be molded like clay by these progressive, enlightened, “reasonable” intellectuals. Legislation would solve every problem in life. Every need and want would be met, all bestowed via government largesse.

Barzun describes these naked individuals as impotent: the receivers of benefits, victims, lacking room to breathe, oppressed by his fellows and the state alike. This naked individual now had but one objective: the Unconditioned Life—emancipation from the realities of this world; nothing to stand in the way of every wish; expecting no rebuffs. Life with no conditions; anything goes, and you can’t stop me. My pleasure is my highest priority; the highest goal in life is to be happy.

Enlightened man, like his forefathers after the flood who attempted to build a tower to heaven in order to be like God, found—as Paul VanderKlay says—that when you try to bring heaven down to earth, you bring hell up with it. We need not even look to the “isms” of interwar Russia, Italy, or Germany for examples of this; it is sufficient to look to the social justice liberalism and grievance studies curriculum of America today.

Barzun concludes his magnum opus with a listing of the decadence found in the west over the last century; man's liberation from all norms, traditions, and customs; nothing left to provide governance except the state—and a state happy to oblige.

What happened to the promise of the Enlightenment? We consider the individual and reason as born in the Enlightenment to be key foundations of liberty. As the meaning of these concepts has been divorced from God, these have actually brought on liberty's downfall. Without God, the Enlightenment's liberty is a house built on sand.

The individual was discovered not in the Enlightenment or even in the Renaissance. Anselm of Canterbury offered us the individual in the eleventh century, with roots to be found even centuries before. Anselm's individual had a sense of self-awareness and personal identity; an individual with a moral responsibility; an individual requiring spirituality.

This was an individual who found his freedom within the cultural and religious context of the time, free to live according to and within this tradition. This individual found and was able to maintain his freedom via the many intermediating institutions of the time—most importantly the Church, which could stand against the king.

The Enlightenment's guillotine killed all intermediating institutions, thus killing the freedom of this individual. We now have an individual freed from such troublesome burdens as truth, justice, and mercy; an individual freed from any moral responsibility; an individual standing naked and impotent in front of the state; an individual living free... in a gulag.

Meanwhile the state pushes further division—ever-more *individualized* individuals. The state encourages and subsidizes culture-destroying behavior, as absent governance provided by custom and tradition, governance will be provided by the state.

As the Enlightenment freed our reason from revelation and tradition, the result should be no surprise. Just because *your* reason has been freed doesn't mean that the strongman's reason will leave you alone or that your reason will convince him. As his reason is no longer bound by anything *other than his reason*, it will not be your reason that governs but his. To what higher authority can you

appeal? There is no authority higher than man's reason, and the strongman's reason has bigger guns than does your reason.

Recognizing this "strongman's reason," John Gray (2018) offers:

What if the Enlightenment's future is not in the liberal West, now almost ungovernable as a result of the culture wars in which it is mired, but Xi Jinping's China, where an altogether tougher breed of rationalist is in charge? It is a prospect that Voltaire, Jeremy Bentham and other exponents of enlightened despotism would have heartily welcomed.

Maybe God knew what He was doing when he warned Adam off of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, with death the consequence of man's reason without God.

The Hoover Institution's Peter Berkowitz offered a five-part challenge to Patrick Deneen's recent book "Why Liberalism Failed." While suggesting that Deneen has gone too far and attributed too much fault to the concepts of the Enlightenment, in part four he does recognize the detrimental features of contemporary society:

...the scorn for inherited wisdom, the demotion of duty in favor of personal preference, and the obsession with material goods and superficial amusements at the expense of citizenship, friendship, and love—promoted by the individualism and statism that arise from taking the principles of freedom and equality to an extreme. (Berkowitz 2018a)

Jordan Peterson asked regarding the postmodernists: What from the Enlightenment do you toss out the window before things get ugly? Jonathan Goodwin (2018) suggests that this is the wrong question if one's objective is liberty. The question should be: what is required to be reintroduced that the Enlightenment destroyed?

In part five of his critique of Deneen's book, Berkowitz aims at answering this question. To this end, he cites Edmund Burke. From Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France," written in 1790:

History consists, for the greater part, of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites.... These vices are the causes of those storms. Religion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, rights of men, are the pretexts. (Berkowitz 2018b)

It is worth noting: none of the vices identified by Burke violate the non-aggression principle—except maybe revenge, depending on how cold the dish is when served. Yet, perhaps, recognizing these vices as dangers to liberty—and incorporating this recognition into their work—is an appropriate task for libertarian thinkers of tomorrow. Continuing with Berkowitz:

[Burke] rebuked the French revolutionaries for supposing that “the rights of men” authorized the blanket repudiation of inherited faith, the established regime, and the country’s settled laws and their replacement with new modes of moral judgment and political order derived from pure reason.

Given the cost to liberty of this repudiation, perhaps libertarian thinkers might incorporate something of the inherited faith and tradition when considering liberty as the objective.

Further, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, from his Harvard University commencement address in 1978. Having lived under a communist regime his whole life, he understood that a society without an objective legal scale is a terrible one, but a society with *only* an objective legal scale is as well. In such a society, man has been given freedom for good and evil—and such a society has no defense against the decadent abyss.

He suggests that for a thousand years man had freedom within a framework of his religious responsibility, but no such responsibility attaches today. Solzhenitsyn offers:

This means that the mistake must be at the root, at the very basis of human thinking in the past centuries. I refer to the prevailing Western view of the world which was first born during the Renaissance and found its political expression from the period of the Enlightenment. ...the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him.

Nietzsche ([1998] 1889) offered the consequences of killing God in *Twilight of the Idols*: despite the wishes of many Enlightenment thinkers—the “English Flatheads” as he describes them—when one gives up the Christian faith one also loses the right to Christian morality.

What is this moral Christian “right” if not, at minimum, the non-aggression principle? This is what man has given up in the

Enlightenment. We have traded Christian morality—and therefore our liberty—for the enlightened super-man’s reasonable right to decide what is moral.

Libertarians point to many Enlightenment thinkers and their theories and concepts that freed the individual and empowered reason; concepts that we believe offer the foundations for liberty. But we knew all of this before the so-called age of reason; we did not need the Enlightenment to become enlightened.

Hans Hoppe has made it acceptable, at least in these circles, for me to cite as foundational for liberty the Decalogue—certainly the portion of it that related to man’s relationship to man: honor your father and mother; do not murder, do not commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness; do not covet your neighbor’s wife or his possessions.

As Hoppe offers, “Some libertarians may argue that not all of these commandments have the same rank or status.” Quite true. In some cases, we see non-violent trespasses. The question for the libertarian as libertarian: does the violation rise to the point of requiring formal, physical punishment?

Jesus answered this question. We read in John chapter 8 of the Pharisees bringing to Jesus a woman caught in adultery—certainly not an offense that libertarians would view as rising to the level deserving of physical punishment. The law commanded stoning for such an offense. The Pharisees asked Jesus what should be done with this woman.

His reply: He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone. Yes, it was a sin; but it was not a violation worthy of physical punishment. One by one, the accusers left. Jesus then admonished the woman, “go, and sin no more.” Advice and counsel, not punishment, is the example Jesus gave us regarding what we would describe as non-violent trespasses.

Libertarians lament our inability to convert the masses. “Who can disagree with the logic and purity of the non-aggression principle?” we cry, while pouring ashes on our head. Maybe we should consider this lack of a common conscience; maybe we should consider that for us to move toward liberty, this cultural and religious tradition must be the foundation.

Goodwin recently asked: is libertarianism sufficient for liberty? Is our objective to purify libertarian theory, or is it to find *liberty*?

Maybe we should consider what it means to have lost the right to Christian morality when it comes to moving toward liberty. If our objective is liberty, maybe we should consider the necessity of regaining this lost right.

Paul offered the consequences of discarding the knowledge of God by the enlightened of his generation in Romans 1, beginning with verse 18 through to the end of the chapter. We read of God's wrath against those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. From Paul:

...just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ...Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Paul could be writing to our generation. From the seventh of his eight-part Gifford Lectures, Wright (2018) offers: "To be an image-bearer is more than just behavior; otherwise we put the knowledge of good and evil before the knowledge of God."

By not keeping the knowledge of God *before* individual reason, good stands no chance against evil. As good loses to evil, we most certainly lose our liberty. This, ultimately, is the cost of the Enlightenment.

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