



Advent 2020

Dear listener,

One of the most striking and disturbing aspects of public life in the past year has been the increasingly irrational character of public speech. Many commentators have been wringing their hands while urging for a recovery of the Enlightenment's noble respect for reason. But what if the real goal of the various intellectual and political movements we call "the Enlightenment" was to amplify the significance of the human *will*, not of the human *mind*? What if the growing, power-hungry irrationality evident in today's public life is actually the *fulfillment* of the modern view of reason as simply an instrument that enables us to get what we want? (If you question this description, compare the masses of mental energy devoted to devising new technologies — digital genies awaiting our commands — with the amount of thought dedicated to theological and philosophical reflection.)

What we seem to be witnessing is the rise of a critical mass of the population — Left and Right, highly educated and functionally illiterate — who are embracing a more direct and speedy route to getting what they want, who regard reasonable discussion and debate as a waste of time when power is up for grabs.

Colin Gunton, in his little book *Enlightenment and Alienation*, described the *cast of mind* of the Enlightenment as one of *supreme human self-confidence*. He contrasted this mentality with an earlier one. St. Augustine insisted that "unless you believe, you will not understand." The Enlightenment regarded belief and knowledge as *antagonists*: If you believe, you will *not* understand. To enter the realm of reason, one must check one's faith at the door, which implies that faith is irrational or arational, having nothing at all to do with reason. Reason meanwhile has nothing necessarily to do with God.

Gunton concluded: "The Enlightenment's programme is to replace God with the individual as the source of all authority." Gunton is signaling here the fact that the Enlightenment's view of reason was actually a by-product of what was — and still is — a much more compelling concern: the pursuit of human freedom, understood as the power of unlimited choosing.

Immanuel Kant wrote a famous essay in 1784 called "What Is Enlightenment?" There he argued that enlightenment was "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." And why was man immature prior to the late eighteenth century? "Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: '*Sapere aude!*' Have courage to use your own understanding." And so, as Gunton concluded: "Reason's function is not to discern what is imposed from outside" (including what is really the case in a world ordered by God). "Reason must arrogate to itself the function of legislating." If reason is to be free — *enlightened* — it must not submit to anything.

This confidence in human autonomy, in the rightness of being a law unto oneself, has long been a more urgent guiding concern in contemporary Western culture than any view of reason. The arguments about reason that are passionately defended are a necessary tactic in defense of the modern view of freedom and authority. To be modern is to embrace suspicion of authority, a suspicion which has become even more pronounced in our society since the

1960s. If, in the 1950s, you had a bumper sticker on your car reading “Question authority,” you would have created a scandal, and probably invited the scrutiny of law enforcement agencies. Today, that bumper sticker gets no attention at all. In fact, if you had a bumper sticker proclaiming “Submit to proper authority,” you might be pilloried for not having first issued a trigger warning, if not investigated for committing an act of hate speech.

Across the entire cultural landscape of modern society, as theologian John Betz puts it:

the imperative to ‘question authority,’ especially that of religious tradition (and to replace it with the authority of one’s own opinion as an infallible guide, regardless of one’s moral formation), is a matter of uncritical acceptance. All of which is given its philosophical mandate in Kant’s revolutionary essay from 1784, which hails the Enlightenment as an unprecedented advance in the history of the human race: the advance of reason beyond ignorance, superstition, uncritical deference to authority, and the immaturity of ‘self-incurred guardianship.’ And so it was marketed, as successfully as any ideology ever has been: rational persons (and who would not want to be numbered among them?) no longer need to be guided by . . . faith and tradition, but can be guided by — and place their trust in — reason alone.

The separation of reason and freedom from the guidance of faith was a decisive step in what C. S. Lewis called the “un-christening” of the West. Unchristened societies came to extoll reason without the *Logos*, freedom apart from the liberating work of the Redeemer. The result of centuries of effort to reimagine Earth without Heaven is that authority in any form — most recently, the authority of reason — is regarded as a mask for raw power.

The mutually reinforcing views of reason and of freedom inherited from the Enlightenment are both fatally false. Americans conventionally and blithely embrace an irrational view of freedom and an enslaving view of reason. The modern pursuit of freedom — a “freedom from reality,” as D. C. Schindler characterizes it (cf. *Journal*, vol. 142) — typically and deceptively deters its devotees from the Truth. Modern instrumental reason, by serving our unsubmitive wills, tightens our bondage to passions and prejudices.

I think that we’re living in a time when the assumptions undergirding modern institutions are increasingly recognized as morally unintelligible. The fractiousness and barely contained violence of public life is a symptom that — the Center having been banished — things are falling apart. The misguided foundations of modern societies, laid out to marginalize the place of Christ and the Church in public life, are revealing their flaws. There is a logic to the crack-up that has been recognized and mapped for centuries by wise observers. Among these surveyors are theologians, poets, historians, painters, philosophers, composers, and others whose vocations are less easily categorizable. They see signs we should learn to heed.

Listeners to the programs of **MARS HILL AUDIO** regularly enjoy the company of such perceptive thinkers and their heirs. Among our guests are scholars dedicated to discerning the logic of the modern *Zeitgeist*. The diagnostic service they offer is complemented by the efforts of many thinkers who have tried to reflect on the consequences of Christian faithfulness, imagining how we might lean into the winds that drive the un-christening. We believe that the service we provide in assembling a unique and compelling chorus of thoughtfulness is worthy and increasingly urgent. I hope you will agree, and can help us continue in the coming year by making a generous year-end contribution.

Gratefully,



Ken Myers
Host and Producer