

2016 SERMON

A funny thing happened after I finished graduate school. I found that the paradigm had shifted. I had been studying theology and the underlying assumption was that we should try to make theology keep up with the modern world. And then I discovered that we had moved past the modern world. We were in what---for want of a better word---some people called the “post-modern world.”

I think that the birth of the post-modern era and the struggle between the new and the old ideas is one of the key issues shaping our current world.

This morning I would like to give you my view of the situation. This will be a personal perspective and yet I believe that it is an accurate portrait.

(SLIDE I) Let me start by giving an overview of the past few centuries. This is a bird’s eye view which ignores the details and exceptions.

There was a time when we were governed in our thinking by tradition. So lets call that the Age of Tradition. Then came what we often call the Age of Enlightenment in Europe. This was roughly the 17th and 18th centuries. There was a high value placed on the use of reason. Many people came to feel that we should do things rationally and not just because it was the tradition.

Later on, near the end of the 18th century, there came a reaction against the Enlightenment. Many people, including Emerson came to think that the Enlightenment was one-sided and that there should be a larger room for feeling and emotion. We call this the Age of Romanticism---roughly the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century. And in religion I

would include the development of Pietism and revivalism, of Methodism and the tent meetings on the American frontier along with Romanticism.

Then along came three critics: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. These were three controversial thinkers and we are still living in their aftermath. Even though many of their ideas were wrong, they still have a big influence. I have lumped these three together under the label: "The hermeneutics of suspicion." Hermeneutics is a term referring to the art or method of interpretation. The key point here is that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud raised suspicions about the pretensions or abilities of reason. Marx pointed out that many a person's ideas are not valid, not based on logic and facts, but on that person's place in the class struggle. In more contemporary terms, social location determines a person's thinking. Nietzsche interpreted all of our thinking as masks for our will to power. FREUD thought that our conscious thoughts were masks for our irrational instincts, especially libidinal ones. The ideas of these three critics are very debatable, but I mention them because, along with Romanticism, they led to the end of the Age of Enlightenment.

. The Age of Enlightenment is over. We are in the Postmodern Era. However, remnants of the Age of Enlightenment are still with us. I call these remnants the legacy of the Enlightenment.

And my summary of today's culture is that we are in the midst of an uneasy tension and sometimes a conflict between Postmodernism and the legacy of the Enlightenment.

(SLIDE 2) However, in order to understand where we are today, we need to take a fuller look at the ideas of the Enlightenment. It is in the contrast between these two Eras--- Enlightenment and Postmodernism---that we can see our present day world in sharper focus.

As I examine the Enlightenment period, I find 6 common themes shared by many people. The first of these is reliance on reason and the importance of mathematics and science. Second, the results of the use of reason should be expressed in clear and unambiguous language. Metaphor and poetry should be avoided, or else indulged in as mere play. Third there is a strong emphasis on human rights. The Declaration of Independence is one of the greatest writings to come out of the Age of Enlightenment. Note the declaration's language: "We hold these truths to be self-evident"—just like the axioms of mathematics---"That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

I might add that in science Newtonian physics helped to undergird Enlightenment thinking. The universe now seemed governed by rational laws, mathematical laws, which we could understand. In the witticism of the poet, Alexander Pope, "Nature and Nature's laws were hid in dark night. God said: 'Let Newton be!' and all was light." Note the imagery of light and enlightenment here. REPEAT COUPLET

The Enlightenment was a great encouragement to democracy. Perhaps we could apply the lessons of Newton to human affairs. However, we should not over-simplify. Many advocates of Enlightenment thinking placed their trust in so-called enlightened monarchs, like Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great.

A fourth theme of the Enlightenment was the Grand Narrative of Progress. As we leave the Age of Tradition behind and become more rational and enlightened, humans will progress toward a better and glorious future.

Now there was a dark side to all of this. It was very easy for Englishmen and Western Europeans and white Americans to assume that they were enlightened and rational and were superior to the backwards and primitive people. This fed into the growing racism, since the Enlightened people were white. So even though the Enlightenment tended to encourage democracy, it also fostered prejudice and racism and even genocide.

Interestingly, one of the strategies sometimes fostered by the Enlightenment was that the so-called “backward” peoples should imitate, if they could, the manners and values of the Enlightened peoples. This was the strategy of assimilation, favored by the French colonial system and by American liberals.

A last theme of the legacy of the Enlightenment which has come into play in more recent years, is to say that race doesn't matter and that we should all be color-blind.

(Slide 3) Now we come to the influence of Enlightenment thinking on religion. I will quickly say that there were three chief approaches to enlightened religion. One was to eliminate religion altogether like some of the French atheists. A second was to search for a reasonable and moral religion (don't forget—reasonable and moral) such as we find in the Deists like Jefferson and Franklin. And the third was to develop a more rational Christianity such as Channing and the early Unitarians and soon the Universalists advocated. And I might add that many humanists continue enlightenment thinking. So the legacy is still with us. Now I am really simplifying here. If you would like more details take my class on this next year.

(Slide 4) SKIP A lot of things happened to bring the Age of Enlightenment to a close. Besides Romanticism, Pietism, the raisers of suspicion Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, there were other

events which challenged Enlightenment thinking: two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. In science Darwin had a mixed influence. On the one hand Darwin's theory could be thought of as a continuation of scientific thinking and it could be extended to undergird the Grand Story of Progress. But it challenged the argument from design and it made some forms of rational religion harder to maintain. And it raised the question as to whether contingency played a larger role in human civilization than we had thought. Note the title of Darwin's book: "The Origin of Species." In traditional logic the basic tool is a group or set, called a species. So the very idea that species could change was a jolt not merely to Biblical fundamentalism, but even rational thinking likes to have its categories permanent. It is hard to talk about the essence of a pigeon hole when the pigeon hole keeps changing.

Furthermore the rise of Post-Newtonian physics in Einstein and quantum physics challenged the science which had undergirded Enlightenment thinking. The theory of relativity was extended—wrongly I think—to moral and political ideas. We discovered that elementary particles were both waves and particles, challenging the notion of clear and distinct language. And Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty seemed to make the Enlightenment's quest for certainty a dubious enterprise. An important book some of you may remember, *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS*, by Thomas Kuhn, was published in 1962. Kuhn's book helped popularize the notion of paradigm shifts first into the history of science and then into popular culture generally. Thus Kuhn's book helped dispel the idea of straightforward scientific progress which was a major foundation of the Grand Narrative of Progress.

The final nail in the coffin of the Enlightenment was the end of colonialism. The great colonial empires of England, Spain, France, and Germany as well as Portugal, Belgium and the

Dutch in Asia, Africa and Latin America (and let's not forget the United States in the Pacific) had been justified, when an attempt was made to find an excuse for them, by the civilizing influence of the Euro-Americans. It was, to use the poet Rudyard Kipling's phrase, "the White Man's Burden." Even the great proponent of democracy and women's rights, John Stuart Mill, was an official in the British East India Company. And when the end of the colonial period came after the end of World War II, the civilizing pretensions of the colonial powers were seen through. Thus another aspect of the dark side of the Enlightenment was exposed.

(Slide 5) Now we come to the themes of Postmodern Era. In my portrait I find six themes. Not everyone, of course, embodies all six of these themes. But they are fairly common ideas today.

MENTION MUSIC

First there is a skepticism about reason and science. For the extreme postmoderns, and I emphasize extreme postmoderns, science has no privilege as a way of knowing. In the words of the philosopher Richard Rorty, science is just another one of the stories we tell ourselves, and has no more truth than any other story. Notice the difference between the opposition to vaccination in colonial America, when we were emerging from the Age of Tradition, and the current opposition to vaccination from people who should know better. Also note carefully that it was Cotton Mather, the Puritan preacher, who was one of the chief proponents of vaccination. You see the details are often more complicated than our stereotypes. Cotton Mather was, after all, a member of the Royal Society, the foremost scientific organization of its time.

A second postmodern theme is that of moral relativity and tolerance. The Enlightenment period generally advocated tolerance, of course, but generally they held that the discovery of

correct moral values was possible. But along with the relativity of knowledge, postmoderns generally advocate relativity of knowledge. A shrinking world, travel, education, study of other religions and cultures all feed into this. But note that it is harder, at least in theory, to justify toleration if there are no moral foundations. After all, why be tolerant, if any moral idea—including intolerance--- is as good as any other?

Incommensurability is a third postmodern notion. The idea of Incommensurability is that what a term means in one culture cannot be translated into that of another. A friend of mine, Professor Thomas Norton-Smith of Kent State, a Shawnee American Indian philosopher, is a strong advocate of this notion. I sent him a chapter from a book I am writing, a chapter in which I commented on what I thought the dominant American culture might be able to learn from American Indian spirituality. In his very thoughtful reply to me Professor Norton-Smith, or Owl Listening to use his Shawnee name, said that it was inaccurate to speak of indigenous Americans as having many gods, because the spirits they revered were not gods. At this point, Professor Norton-Smith was combining a traditional viewpoint with a postmodern viewpoint, something which happens a lot. The philosopher on which he was drawing was Nelson Goodman, an American philosopher whose book, *Ways of Worldmaking*, could be interpreted as saying that different cultures create different worlds, and you cannot translate from one into another. Norton-Smith's own book, *The Dance of Person and Place* is itself an excellent exposition of native American thought.

A fourth postmodern idea is that language is vague and open to a number of interpretations. In its most extreme versions this means that any interpretation is as good as any other. A fifth postmodern theme is the distrust of Grand Narratives of the Progress of Mankind,

what the French writer Lyotard calls “metanarratives.” What we have instead is lots of small, local stories. And there is good reason, say these advocates, to get rid of Grand Narratives, because it always turns out that in these stories our group is always superior to all of the rest.

The final postmodern notion is that the Enlightenment had a dark side, that slavery, colonialism, even the burning of witches, reached their peak during times when we were under the spell of Enlightened thinking. A more recent example of this dark side is the compulsory sterilization of women deemed feeble-minded by the eugenics movement, the classic case being that of a woman who was probably not feeble-minded but uneducated.

(Slide 6) Now this conflict between the Enlightenment or, as I call it, the legacy of the Enlightenment, and Postmodernism, is played out today within the Unitarian Universalist congregations. Especially to the point, we value both religious diversity (a post-Modern theme) and reason (an Enlightenment theme). But, if push comes to shove, which is the priority? I guess that part of the issue is what we encourage, what we teach the children.

For me, the issue is whether we shall think of these two as a healthy tension or an inevitable conflict. When I retired 17 years ago I made a wager. That wager was that the country needed UU values, indeed that I needed UU values. And a further part of that wager is that the UU's can hold it together. How long we shall be able to hold it together, we don't know. But my guess, my hope and my wager is that we shall be able to for a long time.

(Slide 7) OK Lets have a drum roll now. We come to the solutions. First of all we need more and better reason and science, not less. I repeat. We need more and better reason and science. Can I get an amen from somebody?

Right after the service this morning I am flying to Manchester, New Hampshire. I am going to attend a conference at Star Island, the UU and UCC conference center off the coast of New Hampshire near Portsmouth. Dan Solomon and I and Bill Irons are members of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science. Some of you have heard me speak of one of the Pope's astronomers who is also a member. The topic this year is whether there are any methods of gaining knowledge other than science. Well, I don't need science to tell me whether my wife of 62 years loves me. But my knowledge is based on empirical evidence, broadly construed. My knowledge is based on appropriate and sufficient evidence, which is akin to science.

In the second place we need a doctrine of fallibilism. By this I mean that the conclusions of all of our reasoning are fallible, subject to error and correction. I think that John Dewey in his book, THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY, was correct: the basic error of philosophy since the time of Descartes has been to assume that when we know something, we know with certainty. But this is the basic root of the arrogance of the enlightenment. Now some things we know for pretty darn sure. I know my wife loves me and I know where babies come from. And I know that if I fall from a tall building I will not survive. But when the stakes are high, when people's lives and autonomy are at stake, we need to inject a note of caution. That is what in environmental studies we call the Precautionary Principle. And that, of course, is also good science.

A third point which is a corollary of this is that we should search for good reasons, not necessarily conclusive proof. I taught ethics for 35 years, and I learned very quickly that it is very difficult to prove a point in ethics. But you can offer good reasons, and often these will do the job. That is why in a court of law there may frequently be room for doubt. Conclusive proof may

be difficult. But you better have good reasons for your verdict. The mistake of many postmoderns is this: sensing that proof is often difficult, they gave up searching for good evidence.

The fourth idea is that we should avoid the false dichotomy of either Enlightenment or Postmodernism. Or in other words, “Don’t throw out the Baby of Rationality with the Bathwater—the bad things done in the name of rationality.” Don’t give up on the use of reason even though it has roots in our instincts. Let’s not stop trying to overcome our prejudices just because we have learned how deep rooted they are. Don’t give up on human rights, even though human rights slogans have been used to demean and oppress. Surely I can get an amen here!

There is a philosophical point behind all of this. In this list of solutions I have been drawing upon the American traditions of pragmatism and process thought, as well as my friend the Princeton theologian Wentzel van Huyssteen.

So just because the arrogance of some Enlightenment thinkers got it wrong, let us not repudiate the legacy of the Enlightenment. We shall not solve the tensions between the Enlightenment and Postmodernism with a simple slogan, but we can move in the right direction. Let us not turn our discovery of how hard it is to be rational into despair or a nihilism of values. We need more and better reason, not less.