

The Role Of Secularism In History: The Survey

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As already discussed, World History has many moving parts. Consequently, there is no single “right answer” to when one period ended and the next began. History is a metamorphosis, with punctuated equilibria—just as with biological evolution. Period divisions may be positioned at key saltations—as is done with chrono-species in zoology. One blends into the next, like colors in the spectrum.

As already discussed, for the purposes of the present analysis, the following divisions make the most sense. The reasons for such divisions will become more evident in the course of the survey.

- PERIOD 1: The Roman Empire (50 B.C. – 450 A.D.)
- PERIOD 2: The Dark Ages (450 – 1,450)
- PERIOD 3: The Renaissance (1,450 – 1,650)
- PERIOD 4: The Enlightenment (1,650 – 1,850)
- PERIOD 5: The Industrial Revolution (1850 – 1950)â€”

PERIOD 1:

The start of Period 1 can be placed anywhere within a 23-year period, from the demise of Consul Pompey in 50 B.C. (the last consul of the Roman Republic) to the official christening of Caesar Augustus as Emperor of the new-fangled Empire in 27 B.C. I choose the former date as the beginning of the present survey. (The so-called “first triumvirate” existed for the last decade of the Republic: Crassus, Caesar, and Pompey.)

Gaius Octavianus (a.k.a. Caesar Augustus) is often considered the first “emperor” of the “Roman Empire”—a reign that did not officially start until 27 B.C. (Julius Caesar’s effective reign was roughly from 50 to 44 B.C.) The intervening period (almost 17 years) between Caesar’s death and the seizure of the throne by Augustus was complicated—including the so-called “Second Triumvirate” (as well as various power-grabs by Mark Antony and others). Be that as it may, the beginning of EMPIRE is most accurately put at the dissolution of the Republic in about 50 B.C. (the demise of Pompey and the concomitant inauguration of a divine dictatorship).

Thus: though the Roman EMPIRE is not considered to have been officially inaugurated until the Battle Of Actium in 31 B.C., Period 1 began with the end of the Hellenistic Period / Roman Republic c. 50 B.C.

When the Roman Empire transplanted the Roman Republic, it ushered in an epoch of dictatorships spanning roughly five centuries. It was during this time that the rise of Christianity took place. This period culminated in the rise of the Byzantine Empire (in the east) in conjunction with the demise of the Western Roman Empire.

There were certainly architects and engineers who made notable advances during the course of the Roman Empire, but their entire *raison d’etre*—as with everyone else—was to serve to the Emperor. So their impact on society was limited to “ordained” projects (enterprises of narrow concern). Some advances were made in civil planning (municipal infrastructure), civil engineering (such as bridges, domes, and high-rises), and

irrigation (notably, the aqueducts and baths). Yet even those achievements were lost in the Dark Ages—as the focus was thereafter primarily on religion.

There were few exceptions to this trend. Most notable were Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus, Galen, Hero of Alexandria, and Hypatia of Alexandria. Yet few such luminaries could be found during Period 2 simply because it was not an environment in which free / critical inquiry was encouraged...or where scholarly pursuit was valued. After all, dictatorship is dictatorship, whether in the name of Zeus or Christ.

Exactly the last quarter of this Period (pursuant to the Council of Nicaea in 325) was defined by the “Holy” Roman Catholic Empire (a new kind of theocracy). This was an established order that would set the stage for the Dark Ages. That is to say, the establishment of Christianity as the State religion inaugurated the conditions on which Period 2 would be based. Such conditions included a centrally-controlled religion (i.e. systematically enforced dogmatism)...replete with draconian enforcement and the strict deterrence of intellectual activity.

The key point here is that, under the aegis of “Catholicism”, the Roman Empire went from one brand of theocratic authoritarianism to another. The transition to State Christianity was simply a transition from the Caesarian form of tyranny to a form in which power was shared between the political leaders and the religious impresarios (most notably, the Bishop of Rome). Religion was still in charge; but thereafter, it was no longer EQUATED WITH the dictator, as it had been with pre-Constantinian Roman Emperors.

In terms of PLACE, the thriving city of Alexandria was the exception that proved the rule. Since Alexander the Great founded the city in the 4th century B.C., it had been a sanctuary of intellectual activity. It was an urban venue where free enquiry and genuine scholarship were actively encouraged. In Alexandria, the cultivation of “new” knowledge was prized over the adoption of received dogmas.

Yet even in Alexandria, free-thought could not go completely undisrupted. The great Library of Alexandria was destroyed by the Roman Empire in about 30 B.C. Why? Because people of “letters” were no longer valued under the new order (in which the Emperor was deified). Christians banished or executed the philosophers, burned the books, and outlawed free / critical inquiry (nay, all intellectual activity). Centuries of wisdom were jettisoned in the name of the newly sanctioned religion—by those swept up in its fervor.

And so it went: Alexandria thrived during Roman Empire...until the Empire became a Christian theocracy. The religious authorities did not approve of Alexandria’s vibrant scholastic culture—for such activities undermined their sacrosanct narrative (and thus threatened their power). In 415, the Bishop of Alexandria, Cyril, who had nothing but contempt for free-thought, called for the death of one of the world’s greatest thinkers, a woman named Hypatia.

Even as Christianity took over the Western world, monarchy would retain significant theocratic elements in both the Byzantine and Western empires...thereby ensuring that institutionalized dogmatism continued to define society (and that progress would be arrested for at least another thousand years). As Tim Ferris noted, “Science fared no better in Christian than in pagan Rome.” For science heeds no authority but that of nature and logic. And Rome’s imperium was predicated on holding its own authority as absolute. (The same would be the case with the Vatican.) Ergo, science was seen as a THREAT—something to be vanquished. In other words, scientific inquiry was COMPETITION—a modus operandi that undermined the dogmatic edifice on which the powers that be depended for their sovereignty.

Thus, it was during the Roman Empire that the world experienced what Charles Freeman called, “The Closing Of The Western Mind”, bringing civilization from where it was during Athens’ heyday and the Roman Republic...through roughly four centuries of Emperor-based theocracy...to a Christian theocracy.

By the end of the 4th century, the writing was on the wall: religion's malignant encroachment on human progress was virtually complete. (For a thorough discussion of this important topic, see my "Vaticanology 4".)

During the 5th century, things became even worse. Pursuant to the Roman Empire becoming a Christian theocracy, all intellectual activity was promptly and decisively arrested—transplanted by the systematic promulgation of spurious dogmas. Calls for probity were thus replaced by calls for "piety". Philosophy was displaced by the metastasization of theology.

The fall of the Roman Empire proper is a complex and messy process. That is to say, it did not take place at any discrete point in time. Due to the convoluted nature of geo-politics, no single year can be pin-pointed as the "official" end of the Empire. I put the transition from Period 1 to Period 2 at 450 for the following reasons.

The beginning of the end was 410, when the Visigoths overtook Rome. But the fall of Constantinople was not until 453. (By then, it had been over half a millennium since Caesar had ascended to the throne.) By 474, when Zeno seized power in the east, the Byzantine Empire (a hallmark feature of the Dark Ages) was fully underway. The Byzantine Empire would last until the end of Period 3 (in 1453, when the Ottomans took over).

In the west, the "empire" actually lingered until 476. (The so-called "Western Empire" had started in 285, when the original empire bifurcated.) However, by 455 (at the end of the Theodosian Dynasty, when the Vandals sacked Rome) the empire was clearly on the wane. The East was no longer operating out of Constantinople.

The final days of the Roman Empire correspond to the incursion of the Hunnic Empire in the mid-5th century. Though the "official" end of the Roman Empire is conventionally put at 476 A.D. (due to the fall of the Western Empire to the Heruli revolt—under the Germanic military leader, Odoacer—during the reign of Romulus Augustulus), c. 450 seems to be a fair termination point.

Indeed, it was during the rule of the "magister militum", Aetius (433-454) that the proverbial "writing" was truly "on the wall". Aetius represented the last glory of the Empire (being, as he was, the one who finally repelled the hegemony of the Huns). He was, for all intents and purposes, the last of the true Romans. Thus, in the decade following 450, the imperial monolith known as "the Roman Empire" was effectively no more.

Technically, the final "magister militum" (Ricimer) ruled the fragmenting "Western Empire" from 457 to 472; but he only maintained control of his realm via a series of pseudo-emperors (proxies who were little other than puppets). Whatever it was, the political status of Western Europe was no longer a bona fide Empire.

In addition to the demise of the Roman Empire in the mid-5th century, Period 1 culminated with the death of Attila the Hun (453) and the subsequent collapse of the Hunnic Empire. The only major continuation between Periods 1 and 2 was that of the Sassanid Empire (in Persia), the religion of which was—like the Achaemenid Empire of 550-330 B.C.—Zoroastrianism (a monotheistic religion that had emerged in Persia in the early 2nd millennium B.C.) The Sassanian epoch is eminently relevant to Persian history, but has limited bearing on the history of Europe per se.

The bottom line is this: By about 450, the Dark Ages were underway. It was a period characterized by rampant violence, disease, famine, illiteracy, and superstition. More to the point, it was dominated by

religion. In fact, the only authority (i.e. source of order) was the Catholic Church—which maintained ultimate command over central and western Europe until the Reformation.

PERIOD 2: “

The fall of the Roman Empire ushered in the Dark Ages: 1,000 years of complete and utter stagnation—riven with impoverishment, tyranny, senseless fighting, ignorance, and sickness. Systematically-enforced ignorance, relentless oppression, and endless suffering were its hallmarks. In short, it was a millennium characterized by both physical and intellectual destitution.

At this point in history, the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Orthodoxy) emerged in Eastern Europe—while Western (Latin) Europe maintained fealty to Roman Catholicism. It was in this context that the eventual rise of Islam took place (from the 7th century onward) in the Middle East. Thereafter, the Middle East / Orient flourished—even as the West became a potpourri of Christian theocracies (and, consequently, a quagmire of abject stagnation).

The intellectual and physical impoverishment that defined this period can be attributed in large part to the systematic imposition of anointed dogmas (and the draconian enforcement of “approved” thinking). This amounted to a routine infliction of intellectual privation on the masses. It is no wonder, then, that the period had no literary masters (barring, perhaps, Chaucer, in the 14th century), no great scientists, and no great philosophers...for an entire MILLENNIUM.

That is to say, there were no Virgils, no Ovids, and no Plutarchs. There was no work that was even remotely comparable to Plato’s “Republic”, Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics”, or Euclid’s “Elements”. Almost nothing of value was produced. There was virtually NOTHING...for a THOUSAND YEARS. Embarrassingly, the most influential work during this entire period was a tract of deranged bullshit entitled “City Of God” by a demented religious fanatic (Augustine of Hippo).

The preeminent figures of this period were tyrants / conquerors (Attila the Hun, Justinian, Charlemagne, etc.), not thinkers / innovators. The late Dark Ages saw the hegemony of the Mongol Empire of the 13th and (most of the) 14th centuries. The Mongols were known for many things (raping and pillaging, razing cities, etc.); but for things like scholarship, intellectual achievement, and the advancement of civil society they were certainly not. Alas, the only “achievement” that really mattered, from the Roman Empire to the onset of the Enlightenment, was CONQUEST.

In sum, Period 2 was mostly characterized by the domination of RELIGION. Throughout most of Europe, this meant the pre-eminence of Christianity. Civilization was thereby afflicted with the caste system / feudalism, egregious levels of ignorance / illiteracy, relentless tyranny / oppression, theocratic authoritarianism, and rampant dogmatism amongst the rabble. The Period culminated with sporadic advances made during the proto-Renaissance. Such inroads were made via secular means (most notably, the printing press)...thereby (eventually) breaking mankind out of the Dark Ages.

Period 2 is the ultimate illustration of what happens when religion rules the world. The thousand years of intellectual vacuum, of plunder and confusion, of horrible disease and widespread misery, was the perfect incubator for the church to metastasize and consolidate its power. (Naturally, the impresarios of the church capitalized on the destitution, desperation, ignorance, and credulity of the masses.)

Due to the fact that Period 2 (what I’ve dubbed “The Dark Ages”) is such a long period (a millennium), it can be (roughly) broken up into thirds. *5

- 2.1 The post-Roman / pre-Holy Roman Empire (a.k.a. the “Dark Ages” in the narrow sense): 450 to 800
- 2.2 The early Holy Roman Empire / pre-Renaissance: 800 – 1100
- 2.3 The proto-Renaissance (a.k.a. “Early Renaissance”): 1100 to 1450

Sub-Period 2.1 is perhaps the least talked about epoch since Classical Antiquity—and not without reason. The Roman Empire had disintegrated, the Hunnic Empire had collapsed, and the Carolingian Dynasty (and the consequent Holy Roman Empire) had yet to arrive. During this time, the most notable things in the world were:

- The Byzantine Empire (of Eastern Europe) was in its heyday
- Islam was born (and promptly proceeded to metastasize) during the 7th century
- The (Persian) Sassanid Empire (which had begun during Period 1, in 224) would endure until 651 (when it fell to the burgeoning Muslim-Arab caliphate)

During sub-Period 2.1 Western Europe was in disarray. The Roman Empire had disintegrated and Charlemagne had yet to consolidate the region. During this “dark” interim, the region was a haphazard orgy of turf wars and power grabs—with zero progress made in any area of note.

It is especially noteworthy that Islam was born and metastasized in EXACTLY the middle of this sub-Period. That is to say: Islam emerged during the deepest depths of the Dark Ages...and would flourish UNTIL the developments that would be conferred on mankind during Period 3. The fact that the religion was spawned (and thrived) when it did, and its hegemony waned when it did, is illustrative of how religion-in-general exists vis a vis genuine progress.

Late in sub-Period 2.1, the Abbasid Empire (750-1258) began, thus succeeding the Umayyad Caliphate. Operating out of Bagdad, it would endure for over half a millennium. (It lasted until the middle of sub-Period 2.3, at which time the Empire fractured—fragmenting into disparate dynasties throughout the middle-east was the domination of Islam waned.)

In Persia, the Sassanid Empire spanned the last two centuries of Period 1 and the first two centuries of Period 2. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the State religion, Zoroastrianism, may have inhibited progress. Zoroastrianism (the first great monotheistic religion) was not nearly as authoritarian as either Christianity was or Islam would later be (as it tended to accommodate pluralism). The Sassanid kings were active patrons of philosophy and education more than they were theocratic enforcers—a fact which probably enabled the limited intellectual activity (and science) that transpired during the course of the empire. (The empire ended in 651 with the installation of an Islamic caliphate by invading Arabs.)

Sub-period 2.2 saw significant geo-political developments. Aside from the inauguration of the Carolingian (and subsequently Holy Roman) Empire, this sub-Period is notable for the resurgence (revitalization) of the Byzantine Empire under the (revamped) Macedonian Dynasty (867-1057). In 800, Emperor Charlemagne (of Gaul, i.e. the realm of the Franks) instigated a new era in Europe. This was done via his consolidation of the European Kingdoms (under the Carolingian Imperium)...as well as his introduction of several bold institutional reforms (including the re-integration of the Roman Catholic Church with political rule across most of Europe).

â€”â€”[Note: I have started the Holy Roman Empire era at 800 (i.e. the beginning of sub-Period 2.2), even though the “Holy Roman Empire” proper was not officially christened until 962 (when King Otto I of Germany, a.k.a. Otto The Great, was crowned Emperor by Pope John XII). One might view the Carolingian Empire, then, as the proto-Holy Roman Empire. From the Treaty of Verdun (843) to the crowning of Otto as Emperor 119 years later, the (gestating) Holy Roman Empire could be said to be in its “embryonic” stage. It was during this pivotal time that the symbiosis between the Vatican and the monarchies of each European kingdom was forged. In an important sense, Charlemagne was (effectively if not technically) the first Holy Roman Emperor.]â€”â€”

Also noteworthy during this time is the emergence of Kievan Rus in 882. (Kievan Rus, essentially proto-Russia, would endure for 401 years, ending in the middle of sub-Period 2.3 when the Mongols invaded from the East.) This influence of this “nation” was primarily limited to the Byzantine region, as it was not hegemonic.â€”â€”

Sub-Period 2.2 was also the heyday of the (Arab) Abbasid Empire (which lasted until the final triumph of the Mongol invasion in 1258). This roughly corresponded with the heyday of Islam, as the religion’s influence pushed from its original stronghold (in Arabia, Mesopotamia, and the Levant) further eastward into Persia and westward into Anatolia, Andalusia (southern Iberia), Egypt and the Maghreb. This dominance lasted from 711 to 1086 in Iberia (before being gradually displaced by Catholic Imperialism, a.k.a. the “reconquista”, which would continue through all of sub-Period 2.3). The epoch is considered the “Golden Age” of Islam, as it was at the height of its prestige and influence (and territorial acquisition). Interestingly, this is also when parts of the Ummah exhibited the most cosmopolitanism.

Indeed, the more cosmopolitan Muslim culture in Iberia (especially Cordoba, Toledo, and Grenada) was a slight exception to the wider trend of the period. During the half-millennium Islamic “Golden Age” (roughly 750-1250), philosophers, scientists and engineers of the Islamic world contributed significantly to technology (by preserving earlier traditions and by adding their own inventions and innovations). Most importantly, Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in relative harmony—especially in pockets of the Iberian Peninsula, which—during times of peace—served as the pluralistic center of intellectual and cultural burgeoning. (The Christian kings and Islamic caliphs were always vying for supremacy in the region, so there were only temporary lulls in the feuding between leaders.)

Another cosmopolitan center during the Islamic Golden Age was Baghdad. From about 800 to 1,100, the thriving city was a place not ruled by religion. That is to say, it was a place where people were free to exchange ideas and engage in free-thought.

The isolated efforts on the part of some Muslim scribes to preserve / transcribe copies of important works (records of knowledge) from the vanquished Roman Republic (and from ancient Greece) were laudable gestures. But the scribes who engaged in the project were, as Tim Ferris put it, “the pallbearers of science, not its torchbearers.” Preserving the achievements of others mustn’t be confused with achieving new things. Curating the wisdom of others and making new headway oneself are two fundamentally different things.

There is a distinction to be made between preserving extant achievements and making new inroads. For the most part, the Muslim world only did the former. (The few isolated cases of achievement in the Muslim world are enumerated in part two of the “Trend Of Secularism” series.)

The downfall of this Mohammedan halcyon era is, in part, attributable to Catholic conquest, the Mongol conquest, and—from within the Islamic world—the stifling of “ijtihad” (independent / critical thinking) in the 12th century—per the demands of reactionary mullahs (who saw critical inquiry as a threat to their power). At this tragic juncture, Muslim culture started to eschew “ijtihad” in favor of institutionalized “tagleed” (imitation and rote learning). Dogmatism thus transplanted free-thought as the prevailing trend within the Ummah, thereby eventually leading to the downfall of the culture.

This phenomenon entailed the (horribly retrograde) hegemony of religion (both Christianity and Islam). So what happened after 1100, exactly? Revelation transplanted investigation; dogmatism transplanted critical inquiry; and theocracy replaced the (partial) separation of church and state that had (temporarily) existed. The imams took over, thereby eradicating intellectual activity. (For more on this point, see “A Trend Of Secularism: Part 2”).

It is no coincidence that the Islamic Golden Age occurred during a time and place where Islam was LEAST theocratic. The moment religion became the sine qua non of the Muslim world, it would deteriorate drastically.

â€”â€”**Sub-Period 2.3**s best known for the (Catholic) Crusades in the Levant. The 1st Crusade was undertaken in 1096 (the culmination of sub-Period 2.2) at the behest of Pope Urban II; the final (10th / Aragonese) Crusade ended in 1285. [Note: There were some sporadic “after-shock” Crusades during the 15th century.] In other words, the (holy) military campaigns to re-establish dominion over the Levant (specifically, the city of Jerusalem) were initiated within a decade of the Abbasid Empire’s demise (pursuant to Turkish Muslims taking over the region).

What was wrong with the Holy Crusades wasn’t so much that they were crusades per se; it was that they were HOLY (thus dogma-based and tribalistic). A “crusade” is merely a grand enterprise; and an enterprise is as laudable as the principles that ground it and the effects that it has on the world. Both parties in the Christendom-Mohammedan feud were engaged in religious / tribal agendas (making BOTH sides in the conflict dysfunctional). Of course, there would not have been “sides” in the first place if religion-based tribalism had not existed.

Sub-period 2.3 involved a transition process, a proto-Renaissance, that “primed” the world for Period 3. This “priming” process (essentially the late “Middle Ages”) started in the mid-1100’s. It brought the likes of Maimonides (Jewish), Mevlana and Avicenna (Persian), as well as William of Ockham, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus (Christian)—each a catalyst for progress in his own right. The key with these quasi-religious figures is that each made progress insofar as he broke from orthodoxy.

(After this period ended, audacious reformers like John Wycliff and Martin Luther bucked orthodoxy / authority in order to jolt the religious community out of hyper-dogmatism, thereby transforming the proto-Renaissance into a full-fledged Renaissance.)

In a sense, each of these figures were able to make positive contributions insofar as they tempered their dogmatism (i.e. marginally secularized their religiosity). For more on this important point, see my essay series, “A Trend Of Secularism”.

During sub-Period 2.3 the inauguration—and subsequent ascendancy—of the Ottoman Empire (beginning c. 1300) occurred in the east. It was a bold (Turkish) successor to the defunct (Arab) Abbasid Empire...not to mention a key geo-political development in Asia Minor directly following the cessation of the Crusades. The Ottoman Empire would peak in the middle of Period 3 (before going into drastic decline as the proto-Enlightenment gathered steam).

The “Hundred Years’ War” (between England and France) essentially corresponded with the final century-plus of the proto-Renaissance—thereby ushering in Period 3. (In other words, the war transpired during the last third of sub-Period 2.3.) At this point, the Ottoman Empire had reached the height of its power (a heyday that would endure for over two centuries). [Note: After waning, the Ottoman Empire itself would endure until World War I.]

Symbolically, the last century of Period 2 was also defined by the Black Plague. Period 3 (the so-called “High Renaissance”) was underway when the plague finally began to dissipate and the Battle of Castillon ended the long war between England and France (in 1453). Europe was primed to emerge from the Dark Ages. (See *1 for an elaboration on this transition.)

PERIOD 3:

“Until the 15th century, things remained relatively dark. It was not until luminaries like da Vinci, Erasmus, Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Bacon, and de Montaigne made their appearance that what I’ve dubbed “The Renaissance” (a.k.a. the “High Renaissance”) went into full swing. This period was, essentially, the proto-Enlightenment—as it served to set the stage for the Enlightenment.

[Ancillary note: Machiavelli mustn’t be counted as a figure in this process. His pragmatism-on-steroids neither advanced human thought nor abetted civil society. What it DID do was offer amazingly accurate insight into how to wield (consolidate and maintain) power and manipulate the masses.]

We should note that the salient features defining the period are based primarily on THOUGHT rather than on ART—though the two are invariably connected. The “Renaissance” in late medieval Italy (e.g. Florence) was initially artistically-based, so does not have a bearing on the period demarcations with which we are concerned here. It was not until the likes of Lorenzo Valla, Pico della Mirandola, Niccolo Perotti, and Matteo Palmieri appeared (icons of the Italian “Humanist” movement) that the proto-Enlightenment was fully underway.

One of the key elements of the period’s evolutionary process was the (Christian) Reformation, inaugurated by Martin Luther in the early 16th century (1517). The Reformation (a sort of proto-Enlightenment in its own right) is perhaps the most obvious illustration of the secularization trend that was to bring mankind completely out of the Dark Ages.

To the degree that certain courageous figures broke free from the incumbent dogmatic systems, progress was made. Such figures included the early icons of heterodoxy (mentioned above). The same trend was seen in the Muslim world (most notably, with the heterodox Persian thinkers Avicenna and Mevlana) and in Judaism (most notably, with the bold iconoclast, Baruch Spinoza). In each case, autonomy (on which religionism does not depend) trumped heteronomy (the very basis for religionism). For each of these luminaries, critical analysis and free inquiry (things that are categorically antithetical to religiosity) trumped credulity and dogmatism (conditions upon which religiosity is predicated). *3

This process of “breaking free” (emancipation from the established order) was essentially a process of secularization—though most people may not have seen it as such at the time. To the degree that a handful of iconoclasts were able to reconcile a (tempered) religiosity with such secular insights, they moved in a secularized direction. That these notable figures did not manage to become completely secular does not detract from this fact. (For more on this crucial point, see “A Trend Of Secularism”.)

The Reformation was an epoch of perturbations—an upsetting of sacred apple-carts. That is to say: it was an awakening that challenged the incumbent power structures. The revolutionary movement did so by asking bold, new questions. In other words, it made the headway that it made by engaging in critical inquiry—inquiries that brought into question the “received wisdom” imposed from on high. This feat could only be accomplished by rising above the ambient cult activity (in which society had been so thoroughly immersed for so long), and thereby exposing entrenched vested interests for what they really were (as opposed to what they claimed to be).

Fittingly, the Reformation culminated in the turbulence of the Thirty Years War—an upsetting of the geopolitical order that changed the balance of power (thereby re-vamped all of Europe and instigating further change).

The perturbations of Period 3 took civilization out of the Middle Ages, thus paving the way for the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, much of the stagnation continued in the West due to the abiding dominion of the (hyper-reactionary) Catholic Church. Indeed, the church persisted in its degenerate operations—thereby fettering progress from Portugal to Italy (including the eviction of Sephardic Jews from Iberia and the inhibition of the incipient cosmopolitanism in the region).

Even more than the end to geopolitical feuds within the Holy Roman Empire, it was the introduction of the printing press, by Gutenberg in the late 15th century, that changed everything. (The printing press was actually invented a few years prior to 1450.)

The dissemination of knowledge was thereby streamlined...and thus made more widely accessible. Literacy became increasingly possible (and relevant!) amongst the rank and file. It makes perfect sense, then, that the proto-Enlightenment went into full gear pursuant to the introduction of mass-printing. For the pivotal development served to undermine the parochialism (and a state of chronic ill-informed-ness) on which religionism was predicated.

The output of printed books was virtually non-existent for the majority of the 15th century. By 1500, 7 to 8 million books (consisting of many thousands of titles) had been printed. Most were either Bibles or theology-related treatises; but secular writing was beginning to emerge as a (viable) alternative.

THEN, during the 16th century, there were suddenly over 200 million printed books being disseminated throughout the civilized world (mostly bibles, but not all). The Reformation was challenging the status quo in almost every way. Indeed, outside of the bible, it was Luther’s and Erasmus’ writings that were best-sellers. These were works that brought into question religious orthodoxy.

During the 17th century, almost 600 million NEW books were printed (still mostly bibles, but a lower percentage than the previous century). Pursuant to this, an Enlightenment almost couldn’t NOT happen. (Meanwhile, in 1616, the Roman Catholic Church issued an edict to burn all books that maintained that the Earth moves.)

With BOOKS starting to proliferate even amongst the rabble, the western world would never be the same again.

In spite of religion’s hegemony (read: straight-jacket on critical inquiry and systematic fettering of intellectual activity), the post-Printing Press period enabled information to be disseminated. This brought the world the tools it needed for a proto-Enlightenment. The primary facilitators of this process were luminaries like Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolas Copernicus, Galileo Galilee, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes,

Michel de Montaigne, and Thomas Hobbes (all of whom were, not coincidentally, primarily secular).

Like the quasi-religious figures of the previous period, Erasmus was a religious figure in a certain aspect—yet contributed to progress insofar as he bucked orthodoxy. In other words, like the few luminaries of the proto-Renaissance, he made headway insofar as he didn't allow church doctrine and sanctified dogma to dictate his thinking. Like Maimonides and Mevlana, he was a humanist, and—like them—made his contributions on secular grounds.

Erasmus' "Christian humanism" was essentially humanism imported into the Christian idiom, not humanism deriving from Catholic doctrine. What made Erasmus' humanism so striking is that he broke from the church (the sanctified dogmatic system) in order to assert what were essentially secular principles—even if sticking with the idiom of the time, and couching his message in terms that made sense to his target audience (just as did later secularists Jefferson, Franklin, Lincoln, etc.)

Meanwhile, even as the Muslim world enjoyed continued flourishing, cultural stagnation started to set in throughout the Middle East / Orient (i.e. the Ottoman Empire). Nevertheless, Islam—even as it calcified—came to dominate the region. However, this happened via military conquest rather than due to cultural superiority. During this time, the only rival to Ottoman hegemony was British Colonialism. *6â€“â€“The Renaissance was a period in which global exploration burgeoned.

The discovery of the two continents of the western hemisphere (a.k.a. "The New World") by the developing world proved to be a windfall for incumbent power structures. Meanwhile, the establishment of new trade routes to Asia transformed "the known world", enhancing mercantilism, commerce, as well as the incentive for the prevailing powers to engage in colonialism. (Indeed, hegemony in the newly-charted Americas defined the governmental policies of the empires of the time.)

Once the Renaissance was in full swing, institutions of higher learning emerged throughout Europe. In the 15th century, SEVENTEEN more universities were founded—most of them under the constraints of the Church. And in the 16th century, TWENTY-THREE more were founded (including the first four in the New World)—most of them under the constraints of the Church. Every one of these universities would eventually secularize (during the Enlightenment). (For more on this fascinating topic, see "Vaticanology 3".)

The stranglehold of religion on the human mind had endured for over a millennium. As the world emerged from this intellectual quagmire, the attitude toward "wisdom" started to come back to what the Ancient Greeks had called "arete" (thereby migrating away from hidebound notions of "piety"). Thus Johannes Kepler wrote, "Let us despise the barbaric neighings which echo through these noble lands, and awaken our understanding and longing for the harmonies" about his endeavor to understand the cosmos.

Vincenzo Galilei (Galileo's father) put it even better: "It appears to me that they who in proof of any assertion rely simply on the weight of authority, without adducing any argument in support of it, act very absurdly. I, on the contrary, wish to be allowed freely to question and freely to answer [others] without any sort of adulation, as well becomes those [of us] who are in search of truth."

Later, in the 18th century, Immanuel Kant put it best when he spoke of being awoken from his "dogmatic slumber" by David Hume's emphatically anti-dogmatic (read: secular) jeremiads. Kant thus explained: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. 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 the courage to use your OWN

understanding!”

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) helped bring an end not only to Thirty Years War, but to the “Renaissance” itself. For it was essentially an announcement that “hereafter, things will be different”. The treaty resulted in a drastic decline in the influence of the Catholic Church (a fitting culmination to the Reformation), the decentralization of the Holy Roman Empire, the dissolution of feudalism, and an erosion of Habsburg supremacy. Effectively, the treaty served as a catalyst that helped usher in the Enlightenment.

â€”PERIOD 4:

Period 4 began with the revolutionary move toward Republicanism in England spearheaded by (the draconian) Oliver Cromwell. This was a symbolic step forward, but one that was to be short-lived (as the monarchy was restored soon after Cromwell’s death). Thus, the onset of the Enlightenment was, in part, triggered by the English “civil war for democracy” in the 1640’s.

Moreover, in 1641, British Parliament passed the Habeas Corpus Act—giving every civilian rights against State prosecution. This Act was a SECULAR act through and through, having no grounding whatsoever in church doctrine.

Due to this perturbation in the status quo, the climate was primed for pioneering thinkers like Nicolaus Copernicus (early 16th century), Michel de Montaigne (late 16th century), Francis Bacon (late 16th, early 17th century), and Rene Descartes (1630’s and 40’s). These key figures were the primary instigators of the Enlightenment. All were primarily SECULAR.

The secularization of Europe was thus instigated about a year prior to 1650, with the Peace of Westphalia—a fitting inauguration for the Enlightenment. By then, Descartes and Bacon had just published their works. Suffice to say, by 1650, the soil was fertile for secularization (read: progress). Therefore one could say that the Enlightenment was “kicked off” in Britain with its Civil War—as it transplanted the monarchy with a parliamentary government—thereby inspiring John Locke to compose his landmark Treatises On Government—a work that, though embracing theism, was predominantly secular in nature. Thomas Hobbes (also secular) would publish his landmark work, Leviathan, at the culmination of the war, in 1651. As if on queue, in 1662, the Royal Society was chartered in London.

Leibniz invented calculus in the 1670’s. Spinoza composed his great works in the 1670’s and 80’s. John Locke composed his Treatises On Government through the early 1680’s. Isaac Newton composed his magnum opus, the Principia, during the 1680’s. Due to all this, the mid-17th century is the time to place the onset of “Enlightenment”.

So it went: The Enlightenment was inaugurated primarily by Spinoza, Newton, Leibniz, and Locke (all of whom were primarily secular). It was then put into full throttle by the marquis de Condorcet, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and Montesquieu in France; (Scots) Adam Smith and David Hume in Britain...then, later, Kant in Germany as well as Jefferson, Madison, Wollstonecraft, and Paine in America: ALL of whom were primarily secular.

ALL these great secular figures carried the torch forward, thereby paving the way for the likes of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Ralph Waldo Emerson, J.W. von Goethe, and Arthur Schopenhauer (to be followed by Karl Marx and Charles Darwin soon thereafter) in the early 19th century. These luminaries were ALSO primarily secular. The secular basis of the progression is impossible not to notice.

After the English Civil War, it took almost a century before the great Scottish Enlightenment thinkers published their landmark works: David Hume's "Treatise On Human Nature" was published in 1740, his "Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" in 1748, and his "Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals" in 1751. Adam Smith's "Theory of The Moral Sentiments" was published in 1749. In France, Montesquieu published his "On The Spirit Of The Laws" (1748), Diderot initiated the Encyclopedie (1751), and Rousseau composed his "Discourse On Inequality" (1754).

By 1750, the world was ready for Immanuel Kant—the thinker who put the Enlightenment into overdrive (his "Critique of Pure Reason" propelled mankind into a new epoch of philosophy while his "Groundwork For The Metaphysic of Morals" established the secular grounds for universal morality). Following 1750, we encounter the writings of Voltaire, the Marquis de Condorcet, Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft, and Thomas Paine. These figures would further push the envelope—thereby facilitating the progress (read: secularization) of human society.

Alas, though marginally enervated, religion still held sway. Even as Enlightenment eroded the domineering institutions of dogmatism, counter-Enlightenment forces reacted with vehemence. Case in point: Prussia's hyper-reactionary Kings Frederick William III (1797-1840) and IV (1840-1861). These men were ardent religionists who longed for the "good ol' days" of the Middle Ages. The two (ardently anti-intellectual) Christian monarchs assiduously sought to reverse any / all progress, every step of the way, in any way that they could. Why? They (correctly) realized that secularism posed a threat to the sanctified house of cards on which their hallowed power structures depended. *3

The primary icon of the counter-Enlightenment was, of course, the ultra-reactionary monarchist, Edmund Burke (Father of Conservatism)—who can fairly be dubbed the anti-Paine. Burke represented all that was retrograde in the world, and can be held in stark juxtaposition to the great Progressive thinkers of the age in order to illustrate the undeniable forward movement of human society.

Naturally, the birth of America (and thus of modern democracy) happened during this period, and was based on the newly-elucidated secular principles (primarily attributable to Thomas Paine). The last few decades of the period saw the proto-Industrial Revolution (sometimes dubbed the First Industrial Revolution), as the development of human thought started to yield material fruit.

Meanwhile, there was continued stagnation in the Middle East / Orient, as it was becoming increasingly dominated by religion (thereby remaining largely uninfluenced by the Enlightenment). Even as it reached its peak, the Muslim world was poised to fall behind. Thus the stagnation of the Ottoman Empire: a diminution of power that began during the so-called "Koprulu Era".

Starting in the 1680's, the writing was on the wall for the Ottoman Imperium—largely due to a series of massive military defeats. During the 18th century, there were various measures of secularization—in addition to further loss of territory (changes that served to further erode the Empire). By the time Period 4 came to an end, the "Tanzimat" (i.e. Ottoman era of modernization and reform) was underway (though the ultimate demise of the Empire would not occur until Period 5, pursuant to the First World War). This process was further testament to the erosion of religionism's role in governing human thought and society overall.

The role of secularism in history is no better illustrated than with the development of medicine—especially the germ theory of disease. In 1668, a physician named Francesco Redi found early evidence against the “received wisdom” of the time (spontaneous generation). Micro-organisms were first directly observed in the 1670’s by Anton van Leeuwenhoek—one of the pioneers of microbiology. In 1700, physician Nicolas Andry posited that micro-organisms were responsible for smallpox and other contagious diseases. And in a series of experiments between 1808 and 1813, Agostino Bassi was the first to prove that a disease was caused by micro-organisms. This paved the way for the likes of Jonas Salk and others, who used scientific thinking to figure out the cause (and prevention) of major diseases.

The progress of medicine during the Enlightenment was astronomical...and NONE of it can be attributed in any way to anyone’s religiosity...or to sacred doctrine / creeds. This has been even more the case SINCE the Enlightenment, as said progress has been exponential...thanks to secular inquiry (i.e. the espousal of the scientific method and the eschewing of antiquated dogmas). No headway was ever made by a cleric more vigorously scrutinizing his holy book.

In England, the Enlightenment encompassed the so-called “Restoration” and “Georgian” periods...and, subsequently, the onset of the Victorian era. However, such demarcations have little correlation with the evolution of human society (i.e. the furthering of human knowledge and development of genuine democracy). Between 1650 and 1850, it was the ENLIGHTENMENT that made all the difference. (In other words, with regards to the progress of mankind during that time, the Enlightenment process was the salient feature. If anything, Victorianism stymied that process.)

During the heyday of the Enlightenment (i.e. the 18th century), the civilized world was filled with almost a BILLION MORE books...most of them NOT bibles. The majority of new books were books of the Enlightenment: from Diderot and Goethe to Kant and Paine. “It should be noted that the Enlightenment process was partially sabotaged by the (retrograde) Victorian sensibilities infecting 19th century Britain (which sought to maintain the sanctity of established power structures via the promulgation of contrived formalities and “etiquette”). Calvinism / Puritanism also fettered the Enlightenment at various times in various places, behooving the credulous to adopt spurious (and sometimes fanatical) dogmatic systems that largely served the interests of those in power (while keeping the rabble “in line”).

The counter-Enlightenment was represented by John Calvin during its proto-Enlightenment phase. Then, at the height of the Enlightenment, the counter-Enlightenment was epitomized by the likes of the unabashed monarchist, Edmund Burke as well as by the fanatical cult-leader, Max Robespierre. This retrograde tide, which was essentially a conglomeration of religious fundamentalisms, was a movement constitutionally AGAINST progress and FOR the hallmark features of religionism: top-down control, command-and-obey, groupthink, hyper-traditionalism, anti-intellectualism, and formalized / sanctified / systematic dogmatism. By stark contrast, ALL of the period’s groundbreaking insights into the cosmos and the conditions for civil society (read: democracy) were categorically secular in nature.

The second half of Period 4 saw the American Revolution, followed shortly thereafter by French Revolution. The latter led to the First “French Republic” (which, tragically, ended up being a false start, and quickly turned out to be a NON-Republic thanks the Jacobanism-gone-haywire). That was followed by the First French Empire (replete with the Napoleonic wars) in Europe and then so-called “Jacksonian Democracy” in America. Europe also saw the transition of the Habsburg Empire to the Austrian Empire (in 1804).

The Holy Roman Empire was (finally) formally abolished in 1806, primarily as a result of the Napoleonic campaign; but also due to a wider trend of secularization that was overtaking Europe. The neo-Habsburg Dynasty (by then, the “House of Habsburg-Lorraine”) survived the demise of the Empire (its heads

continuing to reign as “Emperors” in Austria and “Kings” in Hungary until its final dissolution pursuant to the first World War.) The end of the period saw the beginning of the (short-lived) Second French Republic, as well as the onset of the “Victorian Era” in England. (The Victorian Era skirted the end of Period 4 and the first half of Period 5.)

The Enlightenment culminated with five of the greatest thinkers in history: Arthur Schopenhauer, J.W. von Goethe, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and Karl Marx (all of whom were secular). In important ways, these figures facilitated the key segue from the Enlightenment to the ground-breaking thought that would arise during Period 5. *2

Period 4 corresponded to the demise of the Christian theocracy and the diminution of its retrograde interventions (e.g. the medieval pogroms, the Inquisition, the Conquistadors) that had dominated the last century-plus of Period 1, all of Period 2, and much of Period 3.

It was in 1837, pursuant to his voyage on the Beagle, that Darwin adduced the essential elements of his theory of evolution by natural selection (though he would not publish them until 22 years later). By 1844, he had articulated the theory in a 230 page essay...but was reticent to publish it for the next 15 years largely due to the fear (rightfully so) of the firestorm it would elicit from the clergy. (It wasn't until he heard that Alfred Russell Wallace had stumbled upon a crude formulation of roughly the same idea that Darwin was spurred to finally announce his theory publicly.)

Another salient feature of this period is that it served as the proto-Industrial Revolution. This is best exemplified by what happened in the 1830's: Babbage developed the analytical engine in 1834 and Morse developed the telegraph in 1838. Then, in 1839, the daguerreotype was developed and—appropriately enough—Karl Marx began writing. In other words, the Enlightenment was segueing into the Industrial Revolution. By the middle of the 19th century, the western world was ripe for the next period. The Enlightenment had done its work:

- With regard to political theory, Mill was taking the baton from Locke, Rousseau, Paine, and Bentham
- Kierkegaard was ready to hand the (existentialist) baton off to Nietzsche
- In science, the foundation was in place for Darwin's and Maxwell's contributions
- In philosophy, the stage was set for Peirce and Frege
- And the climate was primed for the progenitors of modern sociology: Karl Marx and Max Weber

∞ In a nutshell, the Enlightenment could be said to have taken mankind from the Peace of Westphalia to Marx and Darwin: two centuries of explosive progress / secularization. Mankind had come much, much further in 200 years than it had in the previous 1,700 years. More than anything else, secularism had made the key difference.

PERIOD 5:

Period 5 was an industrial revolution in the same way that the previous period was a philosophical / scientific revolution. The period started out with the Victorian Era (and British colonialism in Asia/Africa) already in full swing. The Victorian Era roughly coincided with the formation of the (quasi-democratic) parliamentary system in England (under the auspices of the new-fangled “United Kingdom”).∞

There were a few significant geopolitical developments early in Period 5: the demise of the (short-lived) second French Republic (replaced by the second French Empire), the American Civil War, and the transition of the Austrian Empire to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in 1867). *4

As already mentioned, 1850 to 1950 is the most appropriate period to dub “The Industrial Revolution” for various reasons—among them the introduction of Taylorism (followed by Ford’s assembly line) and the use of electrical power for practical purposes. Also—for better or for worse—the monopolies (esp. Carnegie Steel and Standard Oil) formed. Metallurgy progressed and railroads proliferated. Vanderbilt’s railroad empire entered its heyday.

Meanwhile, scientists Charles Darwin and James Clerk Maxwell, proto-sociologists Karl Marx and Max Weber, writers R.W. Emerson and Johann von Goethe, philosophers C.S Peirce and Friedrich Nietzsche, and mathematician / logician Gottlob Frege (all of whom were secular) provided the world with desperately-needed insight. These luminaries carried the Enlightenment legacy into the late 19th century. That is to say, they helped lead the world into the post-Enlightenment phase of human progress. (Nietzsche turned existential and moral philosophy on its head, Frege set the stage for modern logic, Peirce inaugurated pragmatism, and Maxwell helped usher in modern physics.)

[Ancillary Note: The most notable anomaly in the secularization trend was James Clerk Maxwell (after Darwin, arguably the most important scientist of the 19th century), who was religious. The key point to note about Maxwell, though, is that his contributions happened IN SPITE OF, not because of, any religiosity he harbored. The same might be said of Faraday.]

“Period 5 proceeded through the robber-baron era (replete with its trusts and tycoons), American “Reconstruction”, and the THIRD French Republic—all key developments of the late 19th century. Industrially, the world exploded. Train increasingly became the norm. Indeed, after 1850, railways proliferated throughout the developing world, inter-connecting hitherto distant locations—thereby facilitating commerce. The Industrial Revolution was fully underway.

In 1856, Bessemer invented the modern steel process; in 1858 the internal combustion engine was developed; in 1863 the first subway system (in London) was opened (soon to be followed by New York City’s subway); the American Civil War introduced metal war machines for the first time, including the rapid-fire gun; in 1876 the telephone was patented; in 1879 the light-bulb was invented; in 1895 the cinematograph was developed; and in 1901 Marconi sent the first radio message (across the Atlantic)—thereby introducing instant, long-distance communication. (All this was far more integral to an “industrial revolution” than anything that occurred prior to 1850.)

[Note: Not all parts of the industrial revolution were good; even secular developments are rife with dysfunction. The introduction of the robber-barons entailed systemic dysfunction (including corporatism and the emergence of the first “trusts”) as well as investment banking (usury) replete with war profiteering (pioneered by the Rothschild’s in Europe). But in spite of such stains on societal development, mankind was moving forward.]

The second half of Period 5 (the first half of the 20th century) saw the first World War (after which the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires dissolved), the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (ending the Russian monarchy), the roaring 20’s (replete with hyper-speculation / hyper-financialization), the ensuing Great Depression, and the Spanish Civil War (i.e. the transplanting of Spain’s brief exercise in anarcho-syndicalism with fascism). The period thus culminated with the rise of Nazism in Germany (and other fascisms throughout Europe)...and the subsequent (second) World War.

Unsurprisingly, the demise of the Ottoman Empire occurred during this period (pursuant to World War I), as the Muslim world—still highly religious—started to fall further behind the ever-secularizing (i.e.

advancing) West. Of course, that is precisely what we'd expect to happen to a culture that failed to undergo a Reformation.

Unsurprisingly, then, the last quarter of the period saw the “Kemal-ization” of Anatolia (re-conceived as “Turkey”) via the secularization measures of Kemal (a.k.a. Ataturk). This process of de-Islamization helped bring the region out of the Dark Ages and into the modern age.

In 1903 the first airplane was flown. In 1908 the first Ford Model T was produced. Meanwhile, Tesla figured out how to harness, store, and control AC electricity. In the 1920's, the first televisions were devised. During the 1930's, radio broadcasts became increasingly popular.

Pursuant to the Second World War, France, Italy, Austria, and Western Germany would become Republics. Meanwhile, soviet Russia, East Germany, and Europe's “Eastern Bloc” countries would proceed under communism (while Spain would persist under fascism). Religion was playing less and less of a role in society as secular values (democracy, the scientific method, cosmopolitanism) became increasingly prevalent. The clout of the Catholic Church waned, and the authority clerics had over daily life continued to deteriorate...as “modern” civil society emerged (replete with its own dysfunctions and mis-steps).

The Industrial Revolution culminated in the initial stages of the Computer / Information Age—largely catalyzed by World War II. During the early 40's, the Turing Machine was developed, spurring the computer revolution. In 1947, Bell Labs created the first transistor, ushering in the electronics revolution...and, the next year, cable television debuted, inaugurating the TV era. Right on queue—as if to officially begin in the Information Age—the structure of DNA was discovered in 1953.

In sum: Period 5 involved the development of the modern world. It was a time in which the secularization of Western civilization proceeded in fits and starts—often in good ways, sometimes in bad ways. With the help of such great minds as Nicola Tesla, Bertrand Russell, and Albert Einstein (all secular), mankind was brought into the 20th century. The progress continued with the likes of W.E.B. DuBois, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, John Maynard Keynes, Alan Turing, and Eleanor Roosevelt (all secular). The period culminated with World War II (instigated, as it so happens, by the most destructive religion ever formed)...as well as with the beginnings of contemporary science.

The Post-Industrial / Post-War Era:

That concludes the 2-millennium span of time with which we are concerned. We are now in the Computer / Information Age, which began following World War II. This is the latest stage of the modern democratic epoch—which started during Period 4.

The present era began with the Cold War (lasting four decades), followed by the last decade of the millennium, followed by the U.S. government's declared “War On Terror”. This last “war” defined the first decade-plus of the new millennium. As with each other period discussed, the biggest problems during this period can (generally) be attributed to cult activity. We had the Catholic Church, Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism; then we had Juche, the Red Cambodians, Salafism, Revisionist Zionism, and America's post-70's G.O.P.

Domestically (here in America), the last four decades have been (tragically) dominated by Neoliberal economic ideology (based on a new religion: free-market fundamentalism). In terms of international relations, the post-War era has been (tragically) defined by American Imperialism (economic and military hegemony, epitomized by Neocon foreign policy ideology). This new form of imperialism is based on the

metastasization of financial power structures (rather than the territorial expansion indicative of conventional colonialism). It is impelled by a product of the Industrial Revolution: the promulgation of corporate power (as opposed to territorial expansionism).

As with the icons of the original movement for human rights and liberal democracy (Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine, Ben Franklin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Robert Ingersoll, etc.), the civil rights movement in this era was driven by SECULAR values. Any Christians involved, such as M.L. King Jr. (through whom the movement was partially associated with Christianity via the SCLC), were involved in spite of their religiosity, not because of it (just as happened in the 19th century “abolitionist” movement).

We should be reminded: Just because activism is couched in a religious idiom does not mean its objective basis is religion. At each pivotal juncture, for every “Christian” advocating progress, there were several Christians fighting vociferously against progress. Therefore, any progress on this matter cannot be attributed to religiosity.

The U.S. remains the most religious nation of the developed world. Not coincidentally, it is the most religious who tend to support right-wing economic policy (right-wing libertarianism / free market-fundamentalism / Neoliberalism / corporatism) and right-wing foreign policy (hyper-nationalism / American Imperialism) while fighting against measures to effect social justice and civil rights (nay, human rights in general). Here, essentially, is the lingering residue of elements that characterized the Dark Ages.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

“So what was the point of this brief overview? Was it just an overly-terse survey of events between 50 B.C. and 1950? That is: Was this catalogue of civilization’s highlights just an egregious oversimplification of world history? (A pointless exercise in pedantry, perhaps?)” Any summary of 2,000 years of Western History that devotes only a sentence to the Black Plague and relegates British colonialism to an end-note is, of course, open to such allegations.

Here’s the point: Patterns can be discerned from the broad strokes provided in this survey. After having made the above historical outline, we can now pose queries—queries, that is, that can be answered simply by looking at said patterns. The survey was not intended to be a “history lesson”; it was intended merely to be a concise distillation of two millennia of events...from, as it were, a bird’s eye view.

As there was nil progress made during Period 2 (and very limited headway made during Period 3), we can ask (and answer) some simple questions: During Periods 4 and 5 (1650 to 1950), did any of the advances in democracy that occurred occur thanks to people’s religiosity? No. How about any of the advances in, say, medicine? No. The ability to deliver humanitarian aid? No. To overcome tribal divisions? No.

Let’s inquire further: Since Classical Antiquity, did mankind’s understanding of the world increase as a result of the promulgation of religion? Did society at any point become more civil due to the influence of religious institutions? Can ANY progress that was made at ANY point in history be attributed to people’s strict adherence to a religious doctrine? No, no, and no. Religion has played almost no role in any improvements that have occurred since Period 2 (i.e. since the time when religion had dominion over almost all of the “Western” world). Not with public health, not with public education, not with social justice, and CERTAINLY not with science.

As we’ve seen from the historical highlights in the survey, significant progress has been made since the Dark Ages. So we might ask: Can we attribute any of that progress to more people becoming more

religious? The answer is loud and clear: Of course not.

The unavoidable conclusion: There was something else going on. If not institutionalized dogmatism, then what? If not systematically-enforced groupthink, sanctified dogmatic systems, formalized tribalism, top-down authority, and hidebound reactionary mindsets, then WHAT CAN we thank for the positive developments?â€”

The answer, in brief, is: The overcoming of such things. â€”That is to say: Over the long, arduous, meandering course of history, any progress that did somehow manage to happen happened not from transplanting one brand of cult activity with another, but instead by replacing cult activity ITSELF with the ABSENCE OF cult activity. “Secularism” is the label we give to such an absence.

Thus, in almost every case, the degree to which people were SECULAR roughly corresponds to the degree to which progress was made (and how healthy a society became). Note, for example, the symbiosis between dictatorship and cult activity. We saw this with Nazism in Germany and Stalinism in Russia earlier in the 20th century...and then with a host of vile cults later on (from Maoism in China and Juche in North Korea to Wahhabism and Arabia and Revisionist Zionism in Canaan). â€”

For much of Western history since the Roman Empire, this symbiosis has been in the form of that between monarchy and the Catholic Church, but that is only one of many forms it can take. We saw what happened with Jacobin-ism when it became a cult in France following the first Revolution. More recently, we saw what happened in Europe with fascism and what happened with Soviet-style “communism”. All of it cult activity. All of it horrific. â€”

The degree to which religion (qua cult activity) dictated human thought / action has been roughly proportional to the degree of dysfunction (and impediment to progress). The degree to which mankind managed to overcome this condition has been roughly proportional to the degree to which society became healthier. Throughout human history, we find that this pattern to be glaring and consistent.

â€”Starting with Julius Caesar, there has been a clear trend whereby degree of secularity is correlated with degree of progress. It is since the era when religion started to be put aside (the proto-Enlightenment, then the Enlightenment) that a few bold thinkers began to explicitly put forth the argument that the rank and file should govern themselves—and that EVERYONE “matters”. At long last, humanism steadily began to transplant religionism as the paradigm for human thinking and conduct. Consequently, society was finally able to advance.â€”

It was only then that people began to recognize that society should be steered by a democratic / humanist modus operandi. It was only then that people saw that there were ethical principles that existed independently of some “received” dogmatic edifice. None of these insights came from religion...simply because none of them COULD have come from religion. (Name a single noble insight from any holy book that could not be gleaned independently of that holy book.)â€”

Further entrenching oneself in religion was never the explanation for any advance in human knowledge—or for any advance in civil society. Ever. On the contrary, such advances were almost always a matter of secularization. It was freethought—to some degree—that fostered progress at each pivotal juncture.

â€”As Jeffrey Taler of The Atlantic put it: “The Industrial and scientific revolutions, modern medicine, political pluralism, freedom of speech and even freedom of religion, equal rights, and all sorts of movements aiming to ameliorate humankind’s lot came about in the West after it smashed the shackles of religion, and those governing in its name, imposed on [mankind] for centuries. We should not shy away

from declaring this truth loudly and forcefully, and from defending it whenever and wherever it is necessary to do so.”â€”â€”History has taught us that religion is consummate with human dysfunction. Hopefully, we will learn from our mis-steps.

POSTSCRIPT:

To supplement the bibliography provided in the analysis portion of this essay, I recommend Beckmann’s “History Of Pi” for the history of mathematics and Ferris’ “Coming Of Age In The Milky Way” for a history of astronomy / physics. Meanwhile, Jonathan Israel’s books provide a vital commentary on the emergence of Enlightenment thought.

***1**

It was roughly the last third of Period 2 (after 1100) that saw the initial rumblings of the coming Renaissance. Alas, the Renaissance (per the present treatment) couldn’t really get going until after the religious Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries (1095 – 1272). Nevertheless, the first glimmerings of the long process of emerging from the Dark Ages could be seen during this time (a.k.a. the “High Middle Ages”). Such glimmerings came from the likes of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus...as well as with revolutions in art / architecture.

Thus, from 1300 to 1450, the proto-Renaissance (a.k.a. the “Late Middle Ages”, a.k.a. the “Early Renaissance”) occurred. It was then that the seeds of progress were sown. Most notably, this was facilitated by the likes of William of Ockham, John Wycliffe, and other revolutionary thinkers from within the religious community.

And so it went: sub-Period 2.3 showed signs of progress. The first glimmerings of secularism occurred during the proto-Renaissance in the form of institutions of higher learning. Indeed, the emergence of the “medieval university” in the 12th and 13th centuries played a key role in lifting society out of the Dark Ages. But these schools merely resumed what had been started in the Roman, Athenian, and Alexandrian salons over a millennium earlier. (Indeed, Da Vinci essentially picked up where the likes of Hero of Alexandria and Archimedes of Syracuse had left off.)

By 1100, the first two universities had opened: Bologna (Spain) and Oxford (England). By 1200, the second two universities had opened: Paris (France) and Salerno (Italy). Then, in the early 13th century, SEVEN more universities were founded (four of them in Italy alone): Cambridge, Salamanca, Padua, Naples, Vercelli, Toulouse, and Siena. All were primarily secular—though the last two were supported by the Church. In the 14th century, FIFTEEN more universities were founded...though under strict constraints imposed by the (dominant) Roman Catholic Church. Meanwhile, there were harbingers of the coming societal maturation throughout Europe.

Period 2 ended with the culmination of the Hundred Years’ War (which actually lasted for 116 years, officially ending in 1453) and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II (the same year). From that point on, the power of both the Catholic and Islamic monoliths would gradually erode—steadily deteriorating from their respective pinnacles (as mankind emerged from the Dark Ages). The “High Renaissance” had begun.

***2**

It is not uncommon for people to put the end of the Enlightenment at either the French Revolution or the

Napoleonic Wars. Neither of these episodes is appropriate for such a terminal point. Neither event had anything whatsoever to do with the development of thought. (If anything, they were DISRUPTIONS IN that development.) Shall we assign the end of the Enlightenment to the Parisian Jacobins turning the Rights Of Man on its head...and with Thomas Paine being thrown in jail?

Certain things ended at Waterloo; the Enlightenment was not one of them. Even more importantly, the two primary figures at the height of the Enlightenment, Kant and Paine, were STILL PUBLISHING after 1800. To arbitrarily assign an “end” to the Enlightenment when it was IN FULL THROTTLE would not make any sense.

Bentham (the inventor of Utilitarianism), Schopenhauer (a philosopher who took the baton directly from Kant), Emerson (the consummate New England Transcendentalist), von Goethe, and Kierkegaard (the progenitor of Existentialism) were clearly Enlightenment thinkers. Moreover, Thoreau, Mill, Marx, and Darwin—each of whom started writing in the first half of the 19th century—were clearly “sons” of the Enlightenment. The beginning of their careers is properly put at its last stage. In other words, these men could be seen as the Enlightenment’s culmination...and as a segway to the next period. Thoreau’s renown “Civil Disobedience” (1849) was an Enlightenment piece, a continuation of Thomas Paine, as was Marx’s landmark essay, “On The Jewish Question” (1843). Thus, the 1840’s can reasonably be considered the last decade of the Enlightenment.

*3

As the Enlightenment took hold, the ersatz virtues of religionism were all found to be unnecessary—nay, fraudulent...and often quite deleterious to the weal of society. These ersatz virtues included: “piety”, conformity, supplication, submission, subservience, obedience, compliance, false hope, false certainty, and loyalty to designated authorities.

There was also a waning of the faux virtues of tribalism: false pride, tribal honor, and super-patriotism. As history has taught us over and over and over again, such ideals are nothing but a recipe for disaster. At best, “imposter” virtues such as these provide dubious reasons for doing good things when good reasons are eminently available. (Probity, we’ve discovered since Hume, requires no dogmatism.)

The Enlightenment was—by its very nature—a process of secularization. The most notable “hiccup” during the Enlightenment was the tragic incidence of Jacobinism-gone-haywire following the French Revolution. This unfortunate development was further corroboration of the present thesis, as it was an matter of regression back into (fanatical) cult activity.

Cult activity is characterized by institutionalized dogmatism, a reactionary mindset, groupthink, top-down control, highly-concentrated power, demands for “loyalty” / “fealty” (read: conformity, submission, and obeisance), intolerance of dissent, as well as systems of domination and exploitation. These were the hallmark features of the Parisian “Committee Of Public Safety”, of Nazism (nay, of ALL fascism), of Leninism and Stalinism (nay, of all Soviet-style “communism”), of Maoism, of Juche, of the Khmer Rouge...and continue to be the hallmark features of all right-wing movements to the present day.

*4

NONE of this had to do with religion. Almost all of it had to do with IGNORING religion. The progress of mankind is a story of its steady emergence from entrenched, institutionalized dogmatism...and the rise of free-thought. (We can only pray that the process of secularization continues.) The events listed here are all important developments.

Though no SINGLE reason can be given for any of these events (as geo-politics is highly complex), the most significant reasons for their occurrence can be ascertained. That is: What was a good development and why; what was a bad development and why; and to what factors each can be attributed. We need not indulge in gross generalizations in order to discern a consistent pattern throughout history.

*5

Note: The first half of Period 2 is sometimes referred to as “The Dark Ages”. By contrast, I treat the entirety of Period 2 as “The Dark Ages”...even though some proverbial light was beginning to show during the proto-Renaissance.

Another way of breaking down Period 2 would be as follows:

- The so-called “Early Middle Ages” accounts for roughly the first half (450-1000)
- The so-called “High Middle Ages” accounts for roughly the second half (1000-1450)

Also note that the two centuries following 1300 are sometimes referred to as the “Late Middle Ages”, a taxonomy that blends the “Early Renaissance” into the “High Renaissance”. This is deceptive, as it overlaps what is called the “High Middle Ages” by 150 years...and does not begin until three centuries after the end of the “Early Middle Ages” (thereby leaving an un-labeled gap in the historical progression). Such taxonomies lead to confusion, which is why they have been eschewed in favor of the period divisions explicated here.

*6

The British Empire emerged during Period 3 (along with the inauguration of Anglicanism and the Elizabethan Age), spanned Period 4, and ended as Period 5 came to a close (with the end of old-style colonialism). The Dutch, French, Spanish, and Portuguese Empires (read: colonial enterprises) rose and fell during this time as well. The last two were synonymous with the forced / violent spread of Catholicism—an imposition that in no way helped the native populations (i.e. victims of colonial domination). Indeed, like every other place and every other time, Catholicism sabotaged the societies’ ability to evolve. (Are we to think that the infection of Catholicism HELPED the Philippines or Brasil or Haiti or the Dominican Republic?) God willing, these former victims of colonialism will continue to secularize.

It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which each colonial enterprise was affected by (or influenced) the advance (or lack thereof) of human thought / civil society. Roughly, it seems, monarchy and colonialism were sporadically disabled as civilization matured (secularized). Traditional empires dissolved as society became more democratic. A pattern is quite apparent: The incidence of imperialism seems to be inversely proportional to the degree of civil society. The imposition of religion on subordinated / subaltern populations only contributed to the hinderance of progress...an effect the residue of which we can still see today.

Monarchy was always intertwined with religion; colonialism was always based on tribalism. Free-thought was shown to be antithetical to BOTH dysfunctions. This antithesis may help explain why neither institution dominates the world stage any longer—though religionism and its symbiote, tribalism, still remain. We can only hope that free-thought continues its ascendancy. As history has clearly demonstrated, human progress can take place no other way.

APPENDIX:

Following is a list of what are arguably the most important non-fiction works of the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and years directly following the Enlightenment. (I list 115.) Barring perhaps Kierkegaard's, none were works affiliated with religion. Save for Kierkegaard and de Tocqueville, all were written by secular thinkers.

19th Century:

- Disquisitiones Arithmeticae –J.C.F. Gauss
- Suicide –Emile Durkheim
- On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection –Charles Darwin
- The Descent of Man –Charles Darwin
- On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason –Arthur Schopenhauer
- On the Basis of Morality –Arthur Schopenhauer
- On the Freedom of the Will –Arthur Schopenhauer
- The World As Will & Representation (volumes I & II) –Arthur Schopenhauer
- Value, Price, & Profit –Karl Marx
- Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 –Karl Marx
- Das Capital (volumes I, II, III) –Karl Marx
- Theories of Surplus Value (volumes I, II, III)–Karl Marx
- Either / Or (volumes I & II) –Soren Kierkegaard
- Philosophical Fragments –Soren Kierkegaard
- The Sickness Unto Death –Soren Kierkegaard
- The Present Age –Soren Kierkegaard
- Concluding Unscientific Postscript –Soren Kierkegaard
- Fear & Trembling –Soren Kierkegaard
- The Birth of Tragedy –F. Nietzsche
- Human, All Too Human –F. Nietzsche
- Daybreak –F. Nietzsche
- The Gay Science –F. Nietzsche
- Beyond Good & Evil –F. Nietzsche
- The Genealogy of Morals –F. Nietzsche
- Ecce Homo –F. Nietzsche
- The Will To Power –F. Nietzsche
- Twilight of the Idols –F. Nietzsche
- The Antichrist –F. Nietzsche
- The Essence Of Christianity –Ludwig Feuerbach
- Principles of Philosophy of the Future –Ludwig Feuerbach
- Concept Notation –Gottlob Frege
- On Sense & Reference –Gottlob Frege
- Concept & Object –Gottlob Frege
- On Liberty –John Stuart Mill
- Utilitarianism –John Stuart Mill
- Considerations On Representative Government –John Stuart Mill
- The Subjection of Women –John Stuart Mill
- A System of Logic –John Stuart Mill
- Principles of Political Economy –John Stuart Mill
- The Collected Papers –Charles Sanders Peirce
- Pragmatism –William James
- The Phenomenology of Spirit –G.W.F. Hegel

- The Philosophy of Right –G.W.F. Hegel
- Mutual Aid –Peter Kropotkin
- What Is Property? –Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
- Confessions of a Revolutionary –Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
- Statism & Anarchism –Mikhail Bakunin
- Essays –Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Walden –Henry David Thoreau
- Theory of the Leisure Class –Thorstein Veblen
- General View of Positivism –August Comte
- Course in the Positivist Philosophy –August Comte
- Social Statics –Herbert Spencer
- First Principles –Herbert Spencer
- Democracy In America (volumes I & II) –Alexis de Tocqueville
- On War –Carl Von Clausewitz
- Celestial Mechanics –Pierre-Simon Laplace
- The System of the World –Pierre-Simon Laplace

18th Century:

- On the Limits of State Action –Wilhelm von Humboldt
- The Federalist Papers –Hamilton, Madison
- The Critique of Pure Reason –Immanuel Kant
- The Critique of Practical Reason –Immanuel Kant
- The Critique of Judgment –Immanuel Kant
- The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals –Immanuel Kant
- The Metaphysics of Morals –Immanuel Kant
- Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics –Immanuel Kant
- Religion Within The Bounds of Reason –Immanuel Kant
- Common Sense –Thomas Paine
- The Rights of Man –Thomas Paine
- The Age of Reason –Thomas Paine
- The American Crisis Papers –Thomas Paine
- A Vindication of the Rights of Women –Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft
- A Vindication of the Rights of Man –Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft
- On The Spirit of Laws –Montesquieu
- Discourse On the Origin of Inequality –Jean-Jacque Rousseau
- The Social Contract –Jean-Jacque Rousseau
- Emile / On Education –Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- Confessions –Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding –David Hume
- An Enquiry Concerning The Principles of Morals –David Hume
- A Treatise On Human Nature –David Hume
- The Natural History of Religion –David Hume
- Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion –David Hume
- The History of the Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire –Edward Gibbon
- Enquiry Concerning Political Justice –William Godwin
- The Theory of Moral Sentiments –Adam Smith
- An Enquiry Into the Nature & Causes of the Wealth of Nations –Adam Smith

- Philosophical Dictionary –Voltaire
- A Treatise On Toleration –Voltaire
- Pensees Philosophiques –Denis Diderot

17th Century:

- (Two) Treatises On Government –John Locke
- Essay Concerning Human Understanding –John Locke
- Ethics –Benedict Spinoza
- Tractatus Theologico-Politicus –Benedict Spinoza
- Discourse On Metaphysics –Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz
- Monadology –Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz
- New Essays Concerning Human Understanding –Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz
- Theodicy –Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz
- Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica –Isaac Newton
- Optics –Isaac Newton
- Pensees –Blaise Pascal
- Discourse On The Method –Rene Descartes
- Geometry –Rene Descartes
- Meditations on First Philosophy –Rene Descartes
- Principia Philosophiæ –Rene Descartes
- Essays –Francis Bacon
- Novum Organum –Francis Bacon
- Leviathan –Thomas Hobbes
- Dialogue Concerning Two Chief World Systems –Galileo Galilei
- Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences –Galileo Galilei
- The Harmony of The World –Johannes Kepler
- Petition of Right –Edward Coke
- Conversations On The Plurality of Worlds –Bernard de Fontenelle
- Essays –Michel de Montaigne
- On the Revolution of the Celestial Orbs (“The Revolutionibus”) –Nicolaus Copernicus