The Role Of Secularism In History

“The true object of history is the story of the mind, not the tale of facts which are forever being distorted.” â€¨–Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy Of The Enlightenment

â€¨**“All religions bear traces of the fact that they arose during the intellectual immaturity of the human race—before it had learned the obligations to speak the truth.”** –Friedrich Nietzsche

â€¨**“When I think of all the harm the Bible has done, I despair of ever writing anything to equal it.”** –Oscar Wilde

The thesis of the following disquisition is the following:
â€¨**Throughout human history, secularism has consistently been consummate with progress; while its antithesis, religionism, has consistently been consummate with stagnation (or even drastic regress) and dysfunction. That is: the progress of mankind (advances in knowledge and in the bringing about civil society) is not just correlated with, but attributable to, the secularization of society.**

OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS:

During a period ranging approximately from 510 to 50 B.C., something fortuitous happened.For the first time in recorded human history, civilization saw a surge in wisdom.It was an epoch where free-thought was given wings, (marginally) nurtured, and (sporadically) allowed to take flight…on a scale that had not ever been seen before…and would not be seen again for roughly 1,700 years.

This age of “early democracy” ceased with the demise of the Roman Republic and the ascension of a totalitarian dictatorship (under Julius Caesar—who strictly enforced fealty to an imperialistic, theocratic order).That crucial pivot in human history (at about 50 B.C., give or take) will serve as the point of departure for the following survey.The survey will culminate with the onset of the post-war era (beginning just after World War II)…thereby covering two millennia.

Evaluating the historical record between the age of “early democracy” and the present age (the computer / information age) is an important project.A survey of human society from 50 B.C. to 1950 illustrates—in surprisingly stark terms—a salient trend that should be recognized without reservation: Religion is deleterious to the weal of society…while civil society is predicated on secularism.The record is quite clear on this point.

The 2-millenium time-span with which we’re concerned can be divided into five key periods.Each period is demarcated by a set of defining characteristics.These characteristics entail key transition points at the beginning and end of each period (so as to form a seamless continuum).In other words, each period has certain hallmark traits that define it AS a distinct period in human history, while showing how it **emerged from** the previous period and **led to** the next.What are those traits?What explains them?

By answering these important questions, we may draw conclusions about the nature of secularism (i.e. absence of religion) vis a vis religionism (i.e. institutionalized dogmatism).(By “institutionalized dogmatism” it is meant a canon of **sanctified** dogmatism that is **systematically enforced** by the powers that be…replete with the penchant for **tribalism** endemic thereto.)

The trend over these five historical periods will show not merely a correlation, but a clear **causal connection**, between secularism (vis a vis religionism) and the incidence of what we now recognize to be civil society (what Aristotle would have called human flourishing and the formation of a just society).

To wit: Surveying the metamorphosis of Western Civilization in this way, an undeniable pattern is discovered between the periods as well as within each period.The pattern is relatively straight forward: Insofar as society accommodated secularism, it progressed (most notably, the age of early democracy, Periods 3, 4, and 5, and the present age).Conversely, to the degree that society was dominated by institutionalized dogmatism, it stagnated—or even regressed (most notably: Periods 1 and 2).The “exceptions” WITHIN each period serve to corroborate the thesis due to how very exceptional such aberations truly were.In sum: By undertaking a survey of the hallmark traits of society over 2,000 years, we discover a clear trend. That trend is shown to be a function of the prevalence of religiosity.

Tragically, Periods 1 and 2 (the Roman Empire and the Dark Ages) together accounted for 1,500 years—a hiatus in progress that (to put it mildly) is NOT accounted for by some kind of surge in philosophy, science, and liberal democracy.Save for a few very isolated instances of progress (advances in engineering / architecture which were enabled by limited windows of liberation from the status quo), these Periods did not offer an environment hospitable to vibrant, free inquiry.But why not?That massive lacuna in the progress of human wisdom—and thus of human civilization—has a clear explanation. **The eras were characterized by institutionalized dogmatism.**

Put another way: The long span of stagnation can be almost entirely attributed to the prevalence of religion.

The inauguration of the present age (a.k.a. the computer / information age) can be attributed to various societal factors, including key figures (the likes of J.M. Keynes, Alan Turing, Eleanor Roosevelt, Noam Chomsky, and other great minds: ALL secular)…in unison with the (continued) rise of cosmopolitanism, liberal democracy, civil rights movements, humanism, and contemporary science—ALL inherently secular phenomena…and, it is crucial to note, each of which was impeded by religion every step of the way.

All of the progress in the post-modern era has been built on the progress made in the previous three periods (progress, that is, that was entirely characterized by secularization).Indeed, the headway made during the Enlightenment (by definition, a process of secularization) and the Industrial Revolution (a process driven by scientific advance) was **categorically secular** in nature—with institutionalized dogmatism fighting the process almost every step of the way.

WHY was there almost no democracy nor civil rights nor scientific advance nor genuine philosophy between the rise of Julius Caesar and da Vinci?The answer to this question isn’t simple, but it certainly is not: Because there wasn’t enough religion.

Correlation doesn’t NECESSARILY mean causation, but in this case, we can elucidate the salient causal links for the historical correlations outlined below.Indeed, the CAUSAL explanations speak for themselves.The verdict is undeniable: At no point in human history can anything conducive to human progress be attributed to religion.

METHOD:

It should be noted (as a disclaimer of sorts) that any survey entails some sort of deliberate, strategic **simplification** of highly complex phenomena.The point of any model is, of course, to undertake PRUDENT simplification—so as to highlight salient factors.Of course, there are many other factors that played a role in the metamorphosis of human society over the course of those two millennia.So the key is to distill what is probably the most relevant factor.It seems obvious that the most relevant factor is religionism vis a vis secularism.

That this essay simplifies things, then, is obvious.The question, therefore, is whether it is a PRUDENT simplification.I hope I make the case that the distillation of religion's role is warranted. It does not follow from this analysis that history should be understood in the terms I'm highlighting here.

A possible criticism: "You are force-fitting world history into a pre-established framework."

The accusation reflects a valid concern, yet it doesn't hold water. What I did was opt to look at world history through a certain lens (an approach that I openly acknowledge). Specifically, I evaluated historical periods in terms of a secularism-religionism dichotomy (vis a vis progress-regress). Here, progress is simply defined by the advance of human knowledge / civil society. I would never claim that this is the ONLY way (or even the BEST way) to view history.

I then simply surveyed the most palpable correlations between the prevalence of religionism / secularism and epochs of progress (vs. epochs of stagnation / degeneration). Doing so entailed first demarcating epochs, then noting whether religiosity or secularity happened to be the prevailing m.o. during each epoch. Admittedly, I made this assessment using broad strokes. I contend that this approach is unproblematic due to the fact that I was merely looking to elucidate salient trends over long periods of time.

Finally, I explored reasons why the (glaring) correlations were indicative of a CAUSAL connection. I concluded that the consistent correlation between secularism and progress could be explained using the barometer I selected. In other words: There was demonstrable causation between where society was on the secularity-religiosity spectrum and the degree to which it progressed / regressed (i.e. was healthy vs. dysfunctional).

As usual, I ask that any incident of "confirmation bias" be brought to my attention.

5 PERIODS OF WESTERN HISTORY: A SURVEY

In reviewing the dawn of human civilization, we move from the earliest stage of human society, during the Bronze Age (the Mesopotamian / Sumerian era)…through the Egyptian, Canaanite / Hittite, Phoenician / Assyrian / Akkadian, Babylonian, and Persian / Achaemenid Empires…to Ancient Antiquity: the "Hellenistic" era of Ancient Greece (including the city-state of Athens and the Macedonian Empire) and then of the Roman Republic. Let's call this last era, "The Age of Early Democracy" (roughly 510 B.C. to 50 B.C.) We will take the end of that 460-year era as our point of departure: about 50 B.C.E.

Fast-forward exactly two millennia. We are now in "The Information / Computer Age" (i.e. the post-War / the post-Industrial era), the start of which I put at just over four years after the end of WWII: 1950.This is the latest phase in what could be deemed the epoch of **modern** democracy–the result of a process inaugurated during the Enlightenment.As will be shown, the modern epoch of democracy (Periods 4 and 5, on through the post-war era) has continued the ideals first championed in the "early democracies" of antiquity. It has done this by building on what had been started in Greece (most notably, Athens) and the Roman Republic. This was accomplished by incorporating the insights garnered during the Enlightenment. As we shall see, this epoch was essentially a process of secularization. The Age of Early Democracy and the Information / Computer Age thus serve as book-ends for our story. (The focus will be on trends during the intervening two thousand years.)

Our survey begins with the terminus of the age of "early democracy" and culminates with the beginning of the current age: a span of two millennia.Between the two points in time, the five intervening periods are as follows:

- The Age of Early Democracy (i.e. the era of the Roman Republic / Ancient Greece)

1. A 500 year period (The Roman Empire)
2. A 1,000 year period (The Dark Ages)
3. A 200 year period (The Renaissance)
4. A 200 year period (The Enlightenment)
5. A 100 year period (The Industrial Revolution)

- The Information / Computer Age (i.e. the "post-war" era)

A BRIEF OVERVIEW:

The age of early democracy was defined significantly (though certainly not entirely) by burgeoning intellectualism (philosophy / science) and vibrant free inquiry.We have more than Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to reference: Euclid, Hippocrates, Pythagoras, and Archimedes of Syracuse embodied the (secular) intellectualism of classical antiquity throughout the Greco-Roman world.The Stoics, the Cynics, and the Epicureans were also a crucial part of this era. Such philosophical contributions illustrate the culture of human thought that thrived prior to Period 1…especially in places like Rome, Athens, and Alexandria.

During this era, the environment was conducive to critical inquiry. So it should come as little surprise that many notable thinkers (some better than others) emerged during this era. In addition to those just mentioned: Pericles, Thucydides, Democritus, Scipio, Cato, Tacitus, Sallust, Cicero, Livy, Virgil, Plutarch, Aristedes, Diogenes, Zeno of Citium, Seneca, Epictetus, Epicurus, Lucretius, and on and on. Compare this with the glaring paucity of notable thinkers during Periods 1 and 2. (When Augustine of Hippo–a charlatan by any reasonable standard–is deemed the most significant “thinker” during a 1,500-year period, we can be quite sure that intellectual impoverishment reigned supreme.)

The fact of the matter is that there was a drastic alteration of the climate from the “early democracy” era to Periods 1 and 2. The aforementioned icons flourished in the former environment, yet could never have thrived in Periods 1 and 2. They could not have thrived for very clear reasons. Most notably: these were periods defined by institutionalized dogmatism and authoritarianism…and thus by a **lack of** active, robust, free inquiry. And so, predictably, no such icons existed during that time.

Though vestiges of “Classical” culture persisted (in a diluted form) during the pre-Christian Roman Empire (a.k.a. “late antiquity”), the era truly ended with the inauguration of the Roman Empire (i.e. Julius Caesar).This can be considered the point where the development of human civilization “left off”…until the Enlightenment.That is to say, there was a 1,700-year intellectual recess (after which it was **the Enlightenment** that resumed human progress).

During this long hiatus, the rare exceptions proved the rule (e.g. Avicenna in the 11^{th} century). The major anomalies occur during the Renaissance (Period 3) (most notably Thomas Aquinas, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rene Descartes)…which is

precisely what makes it the proto-Enlightenment. My contention is that this sustained suspension of progress can be primarily attributed to the prevalance of religion in human society. In other words, the “heyday” of religion on the planet not only perfectly corresponded with, but was clearly at the root of, the 1,700-year lacuna in societal progress.

This is not to romanticize the “early democracy” era; surely it had plenty of faults (entrenched tribalism, glorified militarism, preposterous superstition, relentless barbarism, widespread ignorance, etc.)The point is that the time was ripe for the further evolution of human society **had things not gone awry during Pompey**.If things had progressed, the next step would surely have been a Locke-like or Montesquieu-like advance in democratic thinking (and Enlightenment-like progress pursuant thereto).Point in case: Hero of Alexandria (the da Vinci of his time, 17 centuries before da Vinci), who lived at the end of the “early democracy” era, was at a point in wisdom that would not be seen again until the Renaissance. In other words, mankind was primed for the Renaissance **before the common era**. Then things went horribly awry.

Note that this 17-century hiatus (Periods 1, 2, and 3) corresponded to the domination of religion in the Western world.Period 3 acted as a “jolt” to the established religious order, and therefore served as a segue from that long hiatus to the resumption of human progress.That is to say, the Renaissance was an emergence from the 1,700 years of stagnation into the Enlightenment (Period 4). It “set the stage” for the Enlightenment. It was a catalyst, a wake-up call.

Period 3 essentially brought civilization back to where it had been when the “early democracy” era had been terminated.Period 4 was thereby able to **pick up** where the “early democracy” era had **left off.**The process of secularization thus started with Period 3, and went into full-throttle during Period 4. There is a palpable causal connection between these two occurances.

The conclusion can be drawn:If the Roman Republic (roughly 510 to 50 B.C.) had continued past Pompey (carrying on the legacy of Ancient Greek philosophy and Roman / Athenian democracy) instead of setting Rome up for Empire / dictatorship / theocracy, then human society would have probably progressed much sooner.Indeed, what we now call “the Enlightenment” may well have started **before the Common Era** (instead of almost 17 centuries later).That it took almost 17 centuries for societal progress to **RESUME** can be blamed largely on entrenched religion.The contention, then, is that religion was largely responsible for the

aforesaid stagnation. (Couple this with a hypothetical continuation of Athenian democracy / Roman Republic, and the case becomes even stronger.) From the Stoics, Epicureans and Cynics to Bacon, Copernicus, Spinoza, Locke, Liebniz, Newton, et. al. is not an unreasonable leap. Thus, Hume, then Kant and Paine, then Darwin may well have had their equivalents over a millenium earlier.

This is not to place blame for the arrested development on Pompey's demise per se. The world is a huge place and human events are highly complex. It is simply to say that what transpired during Pompey's regime lead to Julius Caesar's usurpation of power (and thus the inauguration of five centuries of dictatorship, followed by over a millennium of stagnation).

Looking back, it is quite clear that the progress (that was arrested following Pompeii and that resumed only with the proto-Enlightenment) has corresponded with the degree to which human society was secular (i.e. not dominated by religion).Though correlation doesn't necessarily entail causation, there are palpable causal links between these two features.

Even as superstition abounded in "classical antiquity" (including during the age of early democracy), it existed primarily in the context of free-thought—and so allowed philosophy and democracy to emerge.Since that bygone era, stagnation has strongly correlated with times in which **institutionalized** dogmatism prevailed (and may be attributed to that very dogmatism).Thanks to a few bold iconoclasts, the Enlightenment resurrected what had been lost 17 centuries earlier–thereby enabling human progress to resume (and modern democracy to metastasize).

Since the Enlightenment, set-backs can be almost exclusively attributed to cult activity: Robbespierre in France, Germany's Third Reich, Soviet-style "communism", Maoism in China, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, North Korea's Juche, the Judean Settler Movement in Canaan, etc.Meanwhile, Canada, Switzerland, Netherlands, post-war Germany, and all of Scandinavia tell a different story: the story of secularization.The juxtaposition of the consequences of religionism vis a vis secularism couldn't be clearer.

Throughout human history, the most religious periods were consistently defined by the following five traits: epidemic ignorance, chronic violence, relentless political oppression, disease, and widespread impoverishment. This is no coincidence. A religious environment is an incubator for such social dysfunctions.

In the contemporary world, the most religious PLACES (both globally and within the United States) are consistently the places where we find the most ignorance, civic unrest (e.g. crime), lack of opportunity, public health problems, and destitution. By contrast, the most secular places (internationally AND domestically) tend to be the most healthy (using every possible measure of social weal). Also: The most healthy places tend to be the most secular. This is also no coincidence.

In other words, both temporally (over the course of history) and geographically (throughout the world today), religion is consummate with societal dysfunction. This conclusion is impossible to avoid–especially when we see that religionism corresponds with provincialism / parochialism, groupthink, systematically-enforced dogmatism, systematized subjugation, and lack of education.

The more profound insight, though, is regarding the positive feedback loop involved: Religion facilitates all the societal dysfunctions enumerated above WHILE those societal dysfunctions set the stage for the metastasization of religiosity. Upon surveying the world (now and over the course of history), the SYMBIOSIS between the degree of societal dysfunction and the degree of religiosity is undeniable.

A NOTE ON PERIOD DIVISIONS:

There are no discrete boundaries in the continuum of societal progress—any more than there are in the color spectrum.Based on the nature of advancement in human knowledge / activity, I've opted to employ divisions that make sense for didactic purposes. It should be understood that within each period is the seed for the following period: the last third of Period 2 was essentially the proto-Renaissance, Period 3 was essentially the proto-Enlightenment, and Period 4 was essentially the proto-Industrial Revolution. Because progress is a jittery continuum with jerks, lulls, and starts, one is forced to divide it in a way that makes the most sense pedagogically. Following are the reasons I've chosen the key transition points.

Regarding what I've labeled the "proto-Renaissance":This refers to the activities that transpired within what scholars sometimes refer to as the late "High" to the "Late" Middle Ages.This is also known as the "Early Renaissance".In my estimation, this was the lead-up to, not the full-fledged, Renaissance.As I conceive it, the Renaissance proper was essentially the proto-Enlightenment, which didn't really get going until the mid-15th century. Ergo the division between Periods 2 and 3.

The proto-Enlightenment went into full gear with Guttenberg's printing press in 1450. Just as the Renaissance was the proto-Enlightenment, the Enlightenment was the proto-Industrial Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution was the progenitor of the Information / Computer Age. Because history is a continuum, each stage of development possessed within it the seeds for the next stage.

Regarding what I've labeled the "Enlightenment", I started Period 4 in the conventional position (roughly, in the mid-17th century, with the contributions of Descartes, Spinoza, Copernicus, Newton, Leibniz, Locke, Bacon, etc.) Yet I have seen fit to make a correction to where the end of the **Enlightenment proper** is typically positioned.In my estimation, Marx represents the last great Enlightenment thinker… while Darwin and Maxwell were the first great post-Enlightenment thinkers (i.e. the inaugurators of modern science).During Period 5, Peirce and Nietzche were post-Enlightenment philosophers…while Frege, Whitehead and Russell inaugurated modern logic in a post-Enlightenment phase.The Enlightenment proper had run its course by the time Darwin and Maxwell emerged onto the scene.

I've never encountered compelling reasons to terminate what is called "The Enlightenment" at the French Revolution or at the Napoleonic Wars. Either end-point is arbitrary and groundless.Both occur during a time when the Enlightenment was still clearly IN PROCESS.(Certainly, the Great Terror was not the culmination of the Enlightenment!) Assigning the year 1800 to the end of the Enlightenment just because it's a round number is also absurd. Would the Age of Enlightenment END within six years of Paine publishing The Age of Enlightenment?

So when did the Enlightenment end? Terminating Period 4 at the French Revolution makes no sense, as the Enlightenment was still at the peak of its process.(Madison, Paine, and Jefferson were still writing at the turn of the century.)The second volume of Schopenhauer's World As Will & Representation wasn't published until 1844 (the same year of Marx's Economic & Political Manuscripts, and the year after On The Jewish Question).Marx's Wage Labor & Capital and The Poverty of Philosophy weren't published until 1847. (Marx's later writings [post-Manifesto] could be considered post-Enlightenment works.)John Stuart Mill—an Enlightenment thinker—wrote in the 40's, 50's, and even into the 60's.Goethe, Feuerbach, and Kierkegaard were early 19th century thinkers who were integral to the Enlightenment process (during its final stage).Charles Darwin formulated his theory of evolution by natural selection in

the 1840's (after first postulating it in 1838). Meanwhile, the Napoleonic Wars had nothing whatsoever to do with the Enlightenment per se. Therefore, if the new labeling scheme bucks academic orthodoxy, so be it.

In sum: The initial phase of the Enlightenment was essentially the 50 years leading up to the 18th century.The heyday of the Enlightenment was during the 18th century.The last phase of the Enlightenment was the 50 years following the 18th century.Therefore, 1850 seems to be a reasonable temporal boundary for Period 4. In this way, Darwin and Marx can be viewed as the segue from the Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution (in which modern science took its form).

Regarding what I've labeled the "proto-Industrial Revolution": This refers to the activities that transpired within what scholars sometimes refer to as the "First Industrial Revolution".What I've labeled the "Industrial Revolution" (Period 5) is what scholars sometimes refer to as the "Second Industrial Revolution" (a.k.a. the "Technological Revolution").I eschew the alternative nomenclature because it is somewhat misleading.It only makes sense that the first major "industrialists" emerged during what should be properly called the "Industrial Revolution".

Anarchists like Proudhon, Krapotkin, and Bakunin were Industrial Revolution thinkers.The introduction of Taylorism and, later, Henry Ford's industrial innovations were the epitome of this revolution, and so occur within what we consider the salient period.The formation of corporations, the metastasization of railroads, the implementation of assembly lines and mass production, the emergence of the oil industry, the initial use of steel mills, the development of the automobile and the airplane, as well as the development of electrical power, the telegram and radio: these were all integral parts of a **revolution in industry**.What is this period, then, if not the industrial revolution? Needless to say, it is a process that culminated in the lead-up to World War II.(After all, it was the War that put the application of mass production into full throttle and ushered in the computer / information age.)

All these ways of parsing the progress of human knowledge are, ultimately, a matter of perspective.Da Vinci could be said to have started the modern revolution in **technology**…while Henry Ford can be said to have revolutionized **industry**—thereby putting the beginning of the technological revolution prior to the industrial revolution.So—invariably—the labeling schemes are marginally arbitrary.I've done my best to capture each phase in a manner that best serves a didactic approach.

To reiterate: History is a continuum, an on-going metamorphosis that is punctuated by “landslide events” (a.k.a. “saltations”). Thus, each period flows into the next, and flows from the previous, like colors in the electromagnetic spectrum—without any discrete boundary between them. (This is why, in evolutionary biology, we wouldn’t try to pinpoint the exact date at which Homo heidelbergensis transitioned to Homo sapiens. For purely taxonomic purposes, we quasi-arbitrarily establish a rough point in time, as though to say: “THIS is where the yellow ends and the green begins”…though no such point really exists between the nominal colors on the electromagnetic spectrum.)

â€¨This is why I wp;p;as careful to point out that the mid-1100’s to 1450 (a.k.a. the “Early Renaissance”) was essentially a proto-Renaissance…and why what I call the “Renaissance” (a.k.a. the “High Renaissance”) was essentially the proto-Enlightenment…and why the Enlightenment (which included the “Early Industrial Revolution”) was essentially the proto-Industrial Revolution…and why the Industrial Revolution was essentially the proto-Information / Computer Age.

â€¨These transitions are important to understand in order to grasp the stages of human progress. Designating “periods” is a purely pedagogic exercise. Each period was parlayed from the preceding period…and set the stage for the next period. Progress doesn’t happen according to a calendar, but it is according to a calendar that we may come to understand how it unfolded.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS:

I will now address a few arguments leveled against the present thesis.

Some find framing world history in terms of a religionism-secularism dichotomy to be problematic. The first indictment one often hears after elucidating a trend is a laundry list of real or apparent anomalies…as if the anomalies disprove the trend. So the question becomes: Are such cases genuine counterfactuals or anomalies? If the former, then the apparent trend is not really a trend. If the latter, then the exceptions prove the rule. My contention is the latter.

â€¨We should recall the nature of the thesis. Obviously, all of world history can’t be encapsulated in a single book, let alone in a single essay. (Indeed, it is impossible to capture the key nuances of each period in just a few paragraphs!) But that’s not the point. As the bibliography below clearly shows, for even a rudimentary grasp of such nuances, several volumes are necessary for each period. But this essay doesn’t pretend to be what it is not. It is not an exhaustive historical account of the

things that it mentions. It is merely a distillation of a larger pattern. Its aim is to highlight salient trends that can be elucidated by abstracting from such nuances. Those trends include the incidence of systematically-enforced dogmatism, authoritarianism, and epidemic ignorance…vis a vis the incidence of scientific / philosophical progress and the successful promotion (development) of civil society.

â€¨ Tragically, the mindset of command-and-obey has existed throughout history—largely due to formalized systems predicated on the notion that obedience to authority is the essence of morality / righteousness. In such systems, it is held that loyalty / subordination to the incumbent power structure (typically, oligarchic in some way) was the “right” way to be. As a matter of course, this involved inculcating the masses with the desired dogmatic system and a tribalistic mindset. (I discuss the symbiosis between religionism and tribalism elsewhere.)

â€¨History has shown us: Indoctrinating the masses has always been the key to maintaining such regimes. Once a doctrine was deemed sacred, it became a crime to question it (heresy, sacrilege, blasphemy, subversion, etc.) In any command-and-obey scheme, obeisance, conformity, and submission, then, are the basis for “right” (i.e. acceptable) thinking / behavior. This has been proven to keep everyone “in line” and thereby sustain the established order.

â€¨An authority-based, tribalistic society is—ipso facto—religious in nature…and vice versa. Indeed, command-and-obey is the modus operandi of religiosity taken to its logical conclusion…just as cult activity is the ultimate consequence of a command-and-obey mentality. A survey of history reveals the following clear trend: Insofar as society operated in this (dysfunctional) way, progress was largely precluded, impeded, and/or subverted. By contrast, insofar as free inquiry and vibrant intellectualism (vis a vis entrenched dogmatism) was allowed, progress was able to occur. This pattern is so consistent as to be virtually irrefutable.

â€¨In order to recognize the salient pattern here, it is important to define what is meant by “religionism” (i.e. cult activity)—something I have gone to great lengths to do. Once the definition is established, we see that the categorization is not binary, but a matter of degree (i.e. a spectrum). From Ancient Athens to the present day, it has consistently been secularism that fostered progress. Take, for instance, the 20th century: Beyond the post-war civil rights movement (a categorically secular movement), we see that all genuinely democratic thought has come from secular

places, from John Dewey and Eleanor Roosevelt to John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. Dogmatism / ideology (be it religious or political in nature) has always stood in the way of such progress.

â€¨This crucial point has been addressed in my essay, “A Trend of Secularism”. In that essay, it is pointed out that roughly 95% of the greatest minds in history were (primarily, if not entirely) secular—a trend that is made even more striking by the fact that most of those people lived in a time and place in which religion was overwhelmingly prevalent.

â€¨“But,” comes a typical response, “Free / critical inquiry and intellectual integrity / curiosity are not CATEGORICALLY antithetical to religiosity.” True enough. Indeed, it is perfectly possible to incorporate such things into a religious context. Ergo the spectrum. It is precisely this incorporation (i.e. infusion of a secular modus operandi) that accounts for any and all liberal / reform movements that have occurred within religion: movements toward the secular end of the spectrum. Again: One need not become completely secular to illustrate this point—as Martin Luther clearly demonstrated.

â€¨With this in mind, we may proceed with our survey. Doing so, we find that history’s most despicable movements were instances of (extreme) cult activity: from Nazism and Maoism to the Red Cambodians and Juche…to Revisionist Zionism and Neoliberal ideology (i.e. free market fundamentalism). It quickly becomes clear that never has a society been dysfunctional BECAUSE it was secular. Meanwhile, in almost every instance that a society has been horribly dysfunctional, it is largely (if not entirely) attributable to the prevalence of cult activity. There are almost no anomalies.

â€¨A NOTE ON DEMOCRACY:â€¨

Democracy is—virtually by definition—a secular ideal. Its greatest advocates have one and all been secular—from Kant and Paine during the Enlightenment to Eleanor Roosevelt and Noam Chomsky in the post-war era. This is no coincidence. There is a clear CAUSAL explanation.

â€¨Very rarely have extremely religious figures paved the way for the inauguration of democratic ideals. Even Jesus of Nazareth—a Progressive in his own right—said very little about universal suffrage…or about what we now call “civil rights”. (Note

that the Galilean's greatest insights were, not coincidently, DEPARTURES FROM the established religious doctrine of the time. In many ways, the Hebrew carpenter was more secular than most of those around him.)

â€¨Figures such as Mevlana (Islam), Maimonides (Judaism), Gandhi, (Hinduism / Jainism) and—most recently—Martin Luther King Jr. (Christianity) broke new ground on this front insofar as they were humanists, not insofar as they were religious. In an analogous way, scientists who happened to be religious broke new ground insofar as they were scientists, not insofar as they were religious (James Clerk Maxwell being an obvious example). As I've shown else where, the occurrence of great thinkers who are very religious is extremely rare—about 5%. In other words, the exceptions prove the rule.

â€¨Institutionalized dogmatism has never been a good thing. Most of the time, it has had horrific consequences—from the Catholic Inquisition to Nazism, from the Taliban to Revisionist Zionism. By the same token, the most secular societies the world over, throughout history, have consistently been the healthiest (i.e. the most civil). Points in case: modern day Canada, New Zealand, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, etc. (Contrast this to the most religious places in the world—most notably the American "Bible Belt", where social dysfunction is the most rampant.)

â€¨This is not mere correlation (a point I was careful to make in the first essay). The correlation has palpable CAUSAL explanations that relate directly to the society's overall position on the religionism-secularism spectrum. Totalitarian theocracies, be it Germany's Third Kingdom or post-war North Korea, serve as a striking juxtaposition to the aforementioned civil societies.

â€¨It is almost impossible to look at, say, the Judean Settler Movement or Taliban Afghanistan, and claim—with a straight face—that religionism was NOT the root of the problem. In each case, the heinous conduct is directly attributable to the deranged doctrine at hand: participation in cult activity. Meanwhile, it is almost impossible to look at, say, Scandinavia or Germany today and think, "Gee wiz, they'd be so much better off if people there just became more religious!"

â€¨History has demonstrated time and time again that without religion, the world would be a much better place. Keep in mind what I do NOT mean by "religion": communal activity, the embrace of tradition / heritage, or spirituality that does not involve groupthink, hyper-dogmatism, or a command-and-obey modus operandi.

(Cherished folklore, a moral compass, a sense of fraternity, valued customs, and the positing of the divine needn't be religious in nature. Indeed, history has shown us that such things are best when they are secular in nature.)

â€¨Meanwhile, secularism is a necessary but far-from-sufficient condition for civil society. It is possible, for example, to have a secular oligarchy—be it (present-day) Russia's plutocracy or Burma's military junta. We can name numerous instances of egregious dysfunction in secular contexts, but in no case is the dysfunction attributable to a lack of religionism. (Some vegetarians get cancer; we don't blame the cancer on the vegetarianism. "See what happens when you don't eat meat!" is something a person would say that has no understanding of vegetarianism or the causes of cancer.)

â€¨Cult activity is the primary way that oligarchs secure and maintain power, but it is not the only possible way—as has been demonstrated by secular tyrants throughout history (from Sadaam Hussein in Iraq to Pinochet in Chile to Idi Amin in Uganda). Yet the solution, in any case, NEVER involves making the regime more religious. (Idi Amin's problem wasn't that he'd failed to "find Jesus".)

â€¨In the rare cases that progress HAS happened within the context of religion, it happened IN SPITE OF—never because of—the religionism at hand. For example, when scholastically-inclined elements within the Islamic world took pains to preserve ancient philosophical manuscripts, it wasn't due to any determination to follow the Koran more stringently. (The invention of algebra had nothing to do with fealty to Mohammed of Mecca.) Such noble achievements happened not because of Islam, but in spite of Islam.

â€¨Just as during the ancient Egyptian (and, later, the Roman) Empire, when impressive advances were made in engineering / architecture, never were such things achieved due to the incumbent dogmatic system. Rather, it was always due to an isolated (secular) inquiry that was allowed to transpire within the context of the ambient religious order…often for inane reasons (e.g. tribute to the deified authority, the promulgation of the regime's power, etc.)

â€¨CONFUSING "BECAUSE OF" WITH "IN SPITE OF": A CASE OF FALSE ATTRIBUTION:â€¨

Another common response to the present thesis is that much progress has happened as a result of religious people doing great things. This is, of course, true—but entirely beside the point. Even a brilliant Wahhabi scientist could find the cure for cancer. Such a happy development would in no way vindicate Wahhabism.

â€¨Indeed, myriad significant achievements have occurred in the context of religion—the Egyptian pyramids being a hallmark example. If a Hassidic, a Scientologist, a Salafist, or a Mormon were an amazing architect / electrician / plumber / carpenter / particle physicist, would we attribute his excellence in that field to his religiosity? The astounding civil engineering feats of the ancient Egyptians in no way corroborate the credence of their dogmas…even though their dogmas provided the context for those achievements. (Surely, the skilled impresarios at Giza were inspired by Thoth.)
â€¨James Clerk Maxwell, perhaps the greatest scientist of the 19th century (after Darwin), was a devout Christian. Do we thank Christian doctrine for his stupendous achievements?

â€¨No sane person looks at Maxwell's discoveries and concludes: "See what religion can do!" Why not? The reason is simple: His achievements were entirely secular in nature. (He didn't garner the insights he garnered by reading Leviticus more carefully or by praying more diligently at church.)

â€¨The small percentage of great thinkers (scientists, philosophers) and humanitarians (civic leaders) who happened to be (marginally) religious were able to establish a delimited domain in which they were NOT dogmatic. There are notable examples of this: Avicenna, Mevlana, al-Khwarizmi, and al-Farabi in the Muslim world…as well as Akbar the Great and Gandhi in the far east…not to mention Duns Scotus, Erasmus, Thomas Aquinas, John Wycliffe, Lord Kelvin, Johannes Kepler, John Adams, Joseph Priestly, Robert Boyle, Augustine Cauchy, Leonhard Euler, Michel Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell, Werner Heisenberg, and Martin Luther King Jr. in Christiandom. Again, the apparent exceptions prove the rule.

â€¨The fact of the matter is: Some people are able to partition their minds—compartmentalizing their dogmatic dispositions (essentially quarantining their dogmatic indulgences from their critical inquiry and analytical thinking). Abandoning religion outright is not a pre-requisite for contributing to society, as is demonstrated every day by fundamentalists doing good deeds and making scientific

discoveries. Bottom line: One can believe in the flying spaghetti monster and still contribute to society…though it is obvious that one is more likely to contribute to society if belief in the flying spaghetti monster is not central to one's life.

â€¨That religiosity is prevalent in our world makes it inevitable that many achievements will happen within the context of religion. In such circumstances, the religionist will naturally thank his Faith for his achievements. How could he not? Yes: Even a Pentecostal can make wonderful contributions to mankind…within a narrow field. The point is that, contrary to his own claims, such achievements will have absolutely nothing to do with his Pentecostalism.

â€¨ABOLITIONISM & CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA:

â€¨The early abolitionists here in America were—in part—Christian. But it only takes a moment's thought to recognize that the noble stand taken by such religionists was not directly attributable to some hidebound adherence to "received wisdom". Abolitionism did not have its ultimate grounding in sacred doctrine—even in the cases where abolitionists happened to be devout Christians.

It was Paine and Franklin, consummate secularists through and through, who established the first "American Anti-Slavery Society". Meanwhile, the Southern Baptist Convention was originally formed to protect the entitlements of slaveholders. That it eventually reformed (becoming a vehicle for the empowerment of African Americans and a mechanism for orchestrating protest) was in spite of, not thanks to, the received doctrine of its church.

â€¨One need only note the following: For every one Christian abolitionist, there were slews of Christian ANTI-abolitionists…and several more SECULAR abolitionists. In the 18th century, the most important anti-slavery figures were all secular: Mary Wollstonecraft, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, the Marquis de Condorcet, and—most importantly—Thomas Paine. Christianity had almost nothing to do with it.

â€¨It is telling to note that the most avid NON-secular abolitionists were the Quakers—a fact that reveals much about the nature of "received wisdom". What, exactly, was different about the Quakers? There is no simple answer to this question. (A possible explanation: Quakers make almost no attempt to enforce doctrinal conformity. Thinking for oneself is valued in Quakerism, imbuing it with a decidedly secular element.)

â€¨It suffices to say that no abolitionist who considered himself “Christian” was an abolitionist strictly due his Faith. Rather, the Quakers’ proclaimed Faith was retroactively applied to the (patently secular) moral stance. (Again, the trait unique to Quakerism was its emphasis on individual autonomy, and elimination of hierarchal authority structures.)

Unsurprisingly, Quakerism was in the north, while the Baptist South was hell-bent on preserving slavery.â€¨The God of the Old Testament (a.k.a. the Hebrew Bible) clearly expected certain people to have slaves; he merely requests that people not to beat them SO hard that their eyes and teeth fall out. (Meanwhile, recall that wives were considered a man’s property.)

â€¨The New Testament doesn’t fare much better on this matter. Even Jesus of Nazareth implicitly endorsed the reprehensible institution, on several occasions using slavery in analogies to make his point. (He certainly never explicitly denounced the practice.) Saul of Tarsus admonished slaves to serve their masters (e.g. 1 Timothy). Maintaining slavery in the Antebellum South was a Faith-based initiative (as slave-owners themselves often pointed out). One needed only reference holy scripture to justify owning humans as chattel. The Bible is no guidebook for civil rights.

â€¨No person was ever for civil rights (e.g. against slavery) because he/she was steadfastly adhering to some “received” doctrine. On the contrary, the secular principles on which civil rights were predicated had to be recognized…even if that noble position was—post hoc—couched in familiar terms (i.e. articulated within the coveted idiom). Paine’s writings make the secular basis for social justice loud and clear. We thus revere Martin Luther King Jr. for his humanism, not for any (Christian) dogmatism he may have harbored.

â€¨Think of it this way: For nearly two thousand years, “wage slavery” (a.k.a. indentured servitude, serfdom) AND “chattel slavery” were endorsed in tandem with strict allegiance to the Bible; so it is utterly asinine to “thank” that same book when people finally started promoting civil rights. (Such contorted attribution requires a flagrant post hoc ergo proctor hoc maneuver.)

â€¨Indeed, how inerrant can a text be with passages like Ephesians 6:5-6 and 1 Timothy 6:1-3, wherein Saul of Tarsus explicitly endorses slavery? (Note also 1 Peter 2:18.) Jesus himself seemed to be perfectly fine not only with slavery, but with masters beating their servants (Luke 12:47). The fact of the matter is that it is all-

too-easy to reconcile slavery with the New Testament. (The Old Testament outright celebrates it.) It was not by more strictly adhering to the Bible that a Christian would have opted to speak out against slavery. Christian lore is no guide to civil rights. It was only when some Christians LOOKED UP FROM their Bible that they were able to ascertain the iniquity of slavery.

â€¨But the idiom in which they couched their message remained the idiom with which they were most familiar. ALL people articulate things in the terms with which they are most familiar.

â€¨Obviously, when devout Christians (or even Deists) saw the ills of slavery, they invariably expressed their advocacy in the terms they understood. Certain idioms resonated with certain communities, so those were the idioms in which the ideas were phrased. It does not follow from this penchant that the ultimate basis for abolitionism could be found in the sacred doctrine with which a person may have been affiliated. On the contrary, it was the ability to rise above dogmatism and think for themselves that enabled people to (finally) embrace civil rights. (Even many Scientologists are for civil rights; we don't attribute that to their Scientology per se. Still, a Scientologist will opt to articulate a noble cause using different terms than, say, a Muslim civil rights activist.)

â€¨The existence of this secular trend was made even more apparent in the 19th century. Consider the later abolitionists: Robert Ingersoll, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and—of course—Abraham Lincoln. All secular. (After all, W.E.B. Dubois did not require religious dogma to make the points he made about civil rights.) In fact, these iconic figures basically eschewed religionism IN ORDER TO make the points they made—just as had Kant, Jefferson, and Paine before them. With abolitionism (nay, all civil rights activism), secularism is the common thread. Quakers like Bayard Rustin actually underline this point.

â€¨In the south, black churches (i.e. black churches) naturally became an emotional and social engine behind what was a legal / moral argument about civil rights for blacks. This happened by default. That is to say, due to the circumstances, the engine could not have been anything other than the churches. After all, there was no viable alternative. Churches were the venues that gave marginalized (i.e. all) blacks comfort, hope, and a sense of empowerment. Churches served as a mechanism for communal solidarity–and as the only dependable support network

available to non-whites. In other words, the local black church provided blacks in the south with all the things that they desperately needed; so they inevitably played an integral role in any movement black undertook.

â€¨Therefore to attribute blacks taking a stand against slavery to their CHRISTIANITY is to completely miss the point of what they were doing and why they were doing it. Their Faith imbued their cause with a shared narrative, and offered a means of solidarity. As with most things, religion was there to provide things with a context: just what the doctor ordered. Ergo the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference).

â€¨Other than MLK, there are therefore FOUR notable exceptions to the trend of secularism within the promotion of civil rights: Dorothy Cotton, Bayard Rustin (largely secular Quaker), Ralph David Abernathy, and William Sloan Coffin. Earlier in the century, there was Booker T. Washington, who was almost as important in stature and importance to his contemporary, the secular W.E.B. Du Bois.

â€¨Meanwhile, it was the southern WHITE churches that FOUGHT civil rights. Ergo, to say that it was religion PER SE that was responsible for civil rights is patently erroneous. Religion is whatever the adherents made it, according to their intentions (be they southern blacks fighting for emancipation or racist whites seeking to rationalize slavery). As for whites fighting for emancipation / civil rights in the north who happened to be religious, their noble stance could not have possibly been exclusively predicated on received doctrine.

â€¨Think of it this way: Southern blacks could have instead been gathering in, say, crocket clubs for comfort, hope, and empowerment. In theory, crocket clubs could have provided communal solidarity. This may have been the case if crocket had been an integral part of southern / black culture. If that had been the case, we would not attribute their bold effort to stand up and do something about their plight to…crocket.

â€¨Insofar as mobilizing a civil rights movement went, the role of the church was circumstantial: the movement needn’t have proceeded from dogmas unique to Christianity. Had crocket clubs offered those same key features that–as it so happened–only the churches offered, the same purpose may well have been served. In that case, the mobilization would have had nothing to do with hitting balls through wickets with mallets. It would have been due to the fact that the crocket clubs were serving the desperately-needed role that churches actually

served. It could have been Muslim mosques instead of crocket clubs. It could have been ANY empowering social organization–secular or religious. The SCLC was integral because–during the 60s–it was THE “go to” organization to galvanize and mobilize an oppressed minority in the South… NOT because it was a way for civil rights activists to further immerse themselves in ancient dogmas. It was a VEHICLE for the cause.

â€¨In a sense, the black churches acted as a mechanism for galvanizing and mobilizing a movement because they were the only places that COULD play that crucial role…for blacks…under the circumstances. Churches served as this mechanism IN SPITE OF, not because of, the particular dogmatic excursions they countenanced. (For more on this important point, see this essay’s Endnote.) Sacred doctrine did not facilitate the priniciples on which the movement was based.

â€¨Be it churches or crocket clubs, the point is to have a venue conducive to creating a support network, fostering communal solidarity, facilitating social organization, offering inspiration and encouragement, and engendering a sense of hope and empowerment. The particular dogmas that make Christianity Christianity were beside the point.

â€¨Clearly, it is not Christianity per se that we should thank for the anti-slavery OR civil rights movements. It was humans coming together to stand up for what was right, regardless of what it might have said in an ancient book. In reality, we can thank two secular EUROPEANS for pioneering civil rights. The marquis de Condorcet (French) and Thomas Paine (British) were the first two major thinkers to expound upon the equality of the sexes and the races. It only stands to reason that they were both SECULAR. Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft was the third of the crucial 18th century thinkers who pushed for equality. Unsurprisingly, she was secular too.

â€¨Who endorsed the abominable Jim Crowe legislation? The right wing. Who was (and still is) against pro-active civil rights measures? The right wing. What is the right wing now—and what has it always been? The most un-educated, reactionary, traditionalist, tribalistic, dogmatic, parochial segment of society. In other words: The most degenerate people in the country are almost synonymous with the most religious people in the country. There is an obvious symbiosis afoot.

â€¨During the 20th century, we saw this trend continue with the post-war civil rights movement. The more ardent WHITE advocates for civil rights (specifically, for blacks and for the poor) were the more SECULAR segments of America. Meanwhile, the

most ardent adversaries to civil rights reform were America's most religious (a.k.a. the right wing, mostly in the more provincial, ill-educated, and reactionary regions—specifically rural areas, especially in the south). This is no coincidence. There is a clear causal explanation.

As far as women's rights, we encounter the same pattern. (The exceptions proved the rule. Jane Addams, for instance, could be said to have been religious.)

â€¨It is key to note that the woman's suffrage movement and anti-slavery movement involved many of the same people. This is no coincidence. They were both clearly secular movements—as is the case with ANY civil rights movement. This is because it is all part of the same thing: Progressivism (i.e. a battle against received doctrine). This is why Martin Luther King Jr. fought for rights for blacks AND for the poor AND for women…while also taking a bold stand against the (morally reprehensible) Vietnam War. Such stances are inseparable, as they are all corollaries of (integral to) humanism. (Meanwhile, the more religious elements of America were PRO-war. Again, the explanation is clear: tribalism in one context translates to tribalism in another.) The ideals of civil society / social justice are CATEGORICALLY secular ideals.

Meanwhile…the Bible is pretty clear that women are NOT equal to men. For example, women are referred to as "the weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7) who must live "in silence" and shall not "usurp authority over man" (1 Timothy 2:12). And, remember, women should NEVER be allowed to speak in church…or even to braid their hair (per St. Paul himself). For only MEN have something worthwhile to say. Women–the Torah tells us–should worship their husbands, "and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16). Oh, yes, and don't forget that–as the anti-coveting commandment stipulates–a wife is effectively her husband's property. (Add to that the fact that, right from the beginning, the Bible promotes the idea that a woman's raison d'etre is to be frequently pregnant, whether she likes it or not.) â€¨

Saul of Tarsus, the effective inventor of "Christianity", supported this deranged view in many of his letters. The Catholic Church is to suffrage what the NRA is to the eradication of firearms.

â€¨It is entirely predictable, then, that the most fervent advocates of religion in the modern world are also the most deeply inculcated with the primitive mindset of command-and-obey: the hyper-traditionalists, the hidebound ideologues, and the

reactionaries. It is also no surprise that these same people (i.e. right-wing ideologues) are generally the least educated (the most ill-informed and credulous) segments of society.

â€¨Throughout history, it has ALWAYS been this way. The reasons are plain to see.

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF THE ROLE OF SECULARISM IN CIVIL RIGHT::

As far as stance on civil rights went in the antebellum south, the key was THE COLOR OF THE CONGREGATION, not the church per se. White churches were consistently AGAINST abolition; black churches were consistently FOR it. Ergo religion was not the clinching factor. I will elaborate on this point here.

Conglomerates of churches were even more effective than solitary congregations–demonstrating the veracity of the adage about strength in numbers. Thus the Southern Baptist Convention and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (both of MLK Jr. fame) were integral to the civil right movement. It should be noted that the raison d’etre of these organizations was neither evangelization nor the imposition of doctrine. The prime directive was to empower their members (primarily with respect to the promulgation of civil rights). That is, they were formed to promote civil rights by galvanizing nascent activists (and to coordinate their efforts); not to indoctrinate (promulgate dogmas). Religious communities were their BASE, not their goal.

Meanwhile, how many WHITE southern churches were fighting for the rights of blacks? Almost none. Clearly, being a member of a church was not the pivotal factor; it was being an African American (i.e. being a member of the oppressed ethnic group and having recourse to only a single mechanism to pursue enfranchisement).

Meanwhile, we mustn’t forget pivotal figures in the abolition / civil rights movements who were avowed secularists: Ben Franklin, Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, A. Philip Randolph, etc. Here’s the key: These figures and the civil rights activists who happened to be religious SHARED THE EXACT SAME impetus for this noble enterprise. They both proceed from a principle that transcended sectarian divides. In other words: The driving force existed independently of religiosity.

The explanation for the role of BLACK churches in the abolition / civil rights movements is twofold: logistical and social-psychological.

Logistically: For blacks, the local church was the only available mechanism for communal solidarity. Moreover, it was the only viable means for effecting the kind of organization / galvanization a revolutionary movement requires.

Regarding those who were in need of a dependable support network, the church is all that most of them had. Indeed, a CHURCH was the only safe way that blacks could assemble. (That is: it was the only way they could gather in groups without arousing suspicion.) Therefore, it was inevitable that the churches would become the primary vehicles for their activism.

Psychologically: The only terms in which parishioners in African American communities understood hope (being "saved" from tribulation) was the narrative of empowerment and salvation offered by their religious institutions. That it was a worldly salvation (rather than a cosmic salvation) that they sought is beside the point. Indeed, these were the terms in which southern blacks made sense of their predicament (and conceived the possible way forward). Naturally, the Christian idiom is the idiom in which they expressed themselves. Ergo: The articulations of Martin Luther King Jr.

Bottom line: The church was all they had to hold onto; and so hold onto it they did, with gusto. Thus, it was inevitable that the Christian narrative of redemption / reckoning would determine the manner in which they thought about their plight.

[Note: This also explains the role of "Liberation Theology" in Latin America.]

For the antebellum south, crossing the River Jordan was crossing over into freedom (or, as the case may be, over the Mason-Dixon line). The Promised Land was a post-emancipation Union. Later, the same would go for the long, arduous epoch before civil rights became a reality: The Promised Land was a longed-for POST-civil-rights America. It was only natural that many southern blacks saw this endeavor in starkly religious terms. And it is only natural that Martin Luther King Jr. couched his soaring rhetoric in terms that resonated with his audience. The Christian idiom offered the most poignant way of articulating his noble ideals–from his anti-war advocacy to his demands to combat the ills of capitalism.

In sum: The (delimited) role of churches in abolition and the civil rights movement was CIRCUMSTANTIAL. It was not an argument for the importance of religiosity in solving society's problems; it was an argument for creating social mechanisms that help empower the disenfranchised / marginalized. Religious institutions are hardly the only possible form such mechanisms take. Often, they are far from the best

way, as dogmatism and ritual usually serve as little other than distractions from the endeavor at hand. (This can be said with the proviso that such things can provide solace, reassurance, and encouragement to the otherwise disillusioned. No small thing in desperate times.) *

What about England? William Wilberforce, a British Methodist (the original, pro-intellectual version; in stark contradistinction to the American mutation) was the primary figure in abolishing the slave trade overseas (in the early 19th century). But Wilberforce did not come upon this position ex nihilo. Like MLK Jr. would a century later, he articulated his position in the idiom of the time; but he did NOT use church doctrine as the ultimate basis for his mission. In fact, he and his fellow abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (a liberal Anglican) BOTH had a British fore-runner to inspire them (and, for that matter, to provide the philosophical groundwork for their noble stand). That fore-runner was none other than the adamant secularist, Thomas Paine.

The degree to which either of these British leaders ALSO deigned to attribute the laudable enterprise to his own religiosity is anyone's guess; but it most certainly did not DEPEND ON his religiosity. The campaign to end slavery finally occurred not because of the existence of a holy doctrine, but in spite of it. (If anything, the response to Wilberforce and Clarkson should have been: "It's ABOUT TIME a Christian finally took a stand against slavery.")

Pope Eugene IV's 1435 bull, "Sicut Dudum", in which a statement can be found criticizing the brutality African slave trade, is–at best–a happy anomaly. The document allowed for indentured servitude of Africans–hardly a clarion call for human rights (let alone an encyclical against racism). Indeed, the African slave trade (and the vicious pogroms against indigenous populations in foreign lands) was enthusiastically INITIATED BY the Christians in the 15th century…IN THE NAME OF Christianity.

At no point did the Vatican discourage violence against "pagans" until the 19th century.

Meanwhile, slavery (along with systematic crimes against humanity) within the Catholic domain continued apace–replete with huge massacres, regular pogroms, and an endless series of brutal oppressions (especially in foreign lands). Never mind the Inquisition's terrifying practice against "heretics" in Europe (which involved the torture and murder of many thousands); we need only review the magnitude of the

heinous overseas campaigns of the Conquistadors (which likely involved the slaughter–and enslavement–of HUNDREDS of thousands)…just as Jesus would have wanted. (!)

Imperialism can exist with or without religion. Be that as it may, if not for religion, imperialism would have had one less piece of deranged rational for dehumanizing THE OTHER (and relentless pillaging foreign lands) in the interest of "conquest". For THE OTHER (a.k.a. savages) was primarily conceived in terms of being OTHER THAN CHRISTIAN. ("One of us" was, in large part, seen as being part of Christendom, and thus beholden to the same authority structure.)

* Another analogy may illustrate this point:

To say that "the church played a big role in the abolition movement" is like saying that gambling has played a big role in empowering Native Americans. Sure, casinos have been an effective way of generating revenue for those who would have otherwise been disenfranchised (on "Indian" reservations); but that's not a testament to the virtue of gambling ventures.

The fact is this: Over the past couple generations, casinos have often been the primary means of enfranchisement for Native American tribes. It's a shame that many Native Americans have had little else at their disposal (e.g. avenues for opportunity ensured to them by the State). This is a tragedy, not an argument for being an avid gambler. WHY have casinos been helpful? Not because they were CASINOS per se, but because they were one of the few enterprises available to help the micro-economies of various tribes (due to ambient factors).

"See all the good that gambling has done!" is not the conclusion sane people would draw from casinos' role in providing income for (otherwise destitute) families. In a narrow sense, we can say "Thank god the reservations had the casinos." But in a larger sense, this is misplaced gratitude…not to mention a misattribution of what has been good for Native Americans.

REFERENCES:

A good place to start would be with the "early democracy" era.Four notable books stand out:

- The Greeks by H.D.F. Kitto
- Egypt, Greece, and Rome by Charles Freeman
- The History of The Ancient Worldby Susan Wise Bauer

- Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic by Tom Holland

Reading ancient Greek philosophy also puts things into perspective, as it illustrates where human thought was before its 17-century hiatus.

For the Roman Empire and the beginning of Christianity, I tried to list the nine books that best elucidate the points made in this essay.Understanding Period 1 is crucial to understanding the present thesis.

For the Dark Ages (Period 2), I listed seventeen of the books that best capture the stagnation discussed above.Summing up Period 2 with “not much good happened and a lot of bad things happened” would not be inaccurate—though this in-a-nutshell approach would certainly make Middle Age scholars wince.The key to this 1,000-year period, as I state, was the last three-plus centuries (what I call the proto-Renaissance). The last third of Period 2 is typically where those who romanticize the Middle Ages need to focus.

For the Renaissance (Period 3), I was only able to reference five books—as most of the literature pertains primarily to the art defined by the period.Books on the Medici family, Henry VIII / the Tudors, and Queen Elizabeth may provide some context for the present essay’s thesis, but don’t address it directly.(Also, Aristotle’s Children by Rubenstein and Galileo’s Daughter by Sobel sound interesting.)Alas, the best places to learn about societal progress (and the specific advances in human thought that fostered it) during Period 3 may well be reference books and textbooks.

For the Enlightenment (Period 4), nothing beats reading the writings of the great thinkers of the period.Reading biographies on major figures also illustrates the present thesis.The points made in this essay are supported by most scholarship.I listed ten books that pertain to the Enlightenment itself.

As for Period 5, there’s so much, it’s difficult to say exactly where to begin. (**American Colossus** by H.W. Brands and **A Peace To End All Peace** by David Fromkin both have good reputations.)Again, nothing beats reading books by the great thinkers of the period.There are countless biographies on the major figures (and books on the major events) from the American Civil War thru World War II; yet very few address the points made in this essay.Consequently, for the present purposes, I’ll stick to key books roughly pertaining to Periods 1-4.

PERIOD 1:

- **The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire** –Edward Luttwak

- **Constantine** –David Potter
- **How Rome Fell** –Adrian Keith Goldsworthy
- **The Fall of the Roman Empire** –Peter Heather
- **The Fall of Rome & The End of Civilization** –Bryan Ward-Perkins
- **Empires & Barbarians:** The Fall Of Rome & The Birth of Europe –Peter Heather
- **The Closing of the Western Mind** –Charles Freeman
- **Early Christianity** –Charles Freeman
- **Lost Christianities** – Bart Ehrman
- **The Birth of Classical Europe** –Thonemann / Price

PERIOD 2:

- **Framing The Early Middle Ages** –Chris Wickham
- **The Inheritance of Rome:** Illuminating the Dark Ages –Chris Wickham
- **Barbarians To Angels:** The Dark Ages Reconsidered –Peter Wells
- **The Making of the Middle Ages** –R.W. Southern
- **The Civilization of the Middle Ages** –Norman Cantor
- **The History of the Medieval World** –Susan Wise Bauer
- **Byzantium** I, II, III –John Julius Norwich
- **Byzantium** –Judith Herrin
- **The Byzantine Wars** –John Haldon
- **The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire** –Edward Luttwak
- **Lost To The West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire** –Lars Brownworth
- **The Formation of Islam** –Jonathan P. Berkey
- **An Economic & Social History of the Ottoman Empire** vol. I & II –Inalcik / Faroqhi
- **The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age** –Halil Inalcik
- **Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe** –Richard Hodges
- **Chronicles of the Crusades** –Jean de Joinville
- **God's War:** A New History of the Crusades –Christopher Tyerman

PERIOD 3:

- **A Distant Mirror** –Barbara Tuchman
- **Sailing From Byzantium** –Colin Wells
- **The Pursuit of Glory:** Five Revolutions that Made Modern Europe –Tim Blanning
- **Europe In The High Middle Ages** –William Chester Jordan

- **From Dawn To Decadence: 1500 to the Present** –Jacques Barzun

PERIOD 4:

- **The Philosophy of The Enlightenment** –Ernst Cassirer
- **The Enlightenment** –Margaret C. Jacob
- **The Enlightenment** vol. I & II –Peter Gay
- **A Revolution of the Mind** –Jonathan Israel
- **Radical Enlightenment** –Jonathan Israel
- **Enlightenment Contested** –Jonathan Israel
- **Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life** –Nicholas Phillipson
- **The Radicalism of the American Revolution** –Gordon S. Wood
- **Thomas Paine** –Craig Nelson
- **Thomas Paine & The Promise of America** –Harvey J. Kaye

ALSO HELPFUL FOR THE PRESENT ESSAY'S THESIS:

- **The Metaphysical Club** –Louis Menand
- **The Mind & The Market** – Jerry Z. Muller
- **The Worldly Philosophers** –Robert Heilbroner
- **Freethinkers** –Susan Jacoby
- **The History of Western Philosophy** –Bertrand Russell
- The "**AGE OF…**" series by Eric Hobsbawm

For a long-term overview, **The March of Folly: From Troy To Vietnam** by Barbara Tuchman and **Civilization** by Kenneth Clarke are both very interesting.

ANCILLARY WORKS (ON NON-WESTERN WORLD HISTORY):

- **The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia** –Rene Grousset
- **Empires of the Silk Road** –Christopher Beckwith
- **The History of The Mongol Conquests** –J.J. Saunders
- **Genghis Khan & The Making of the Modern World** –Jack Weatherford