

One Thought, Two Dreams

Tethering freedom to logic instead of the Divine Logos

Enthusiasm for the study of man and nature awakened in Europe during the Renaissance and transformed how empires were justified. This and succeeding briefs will draw our narrative closer to modern times, and you'll begin hearing ideas that sound familiar today. The Renaissance in Europe was stirred in part by the demise of the Islamic Golden Age. Suppression of intellectual inquiry within Islam and sectarian warfare in Muslim realms led to an exodus of scholars to Spain. They brought with them classical Greek texts from Islam's great libraries of conquest. Fresh translations in Europe sparked new interest in Greek philosophers as well as the Greek New Testament, paving the way for both the Age of Reason and the Protestant Reformation. A clamorous collision between philosophy and religion proved inevitable.

The Age of Reason

The Age of Reason came hard on the heels of Kepler, Galilei, Bacon, Newton, and others who birthed modern science. Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687) expounded on laws of motion and gravity, and anchored a fresh view of the world. His Third Law of Motion stated that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This "natural law" would resonate among philosophers who deemed it only natural to react against ultra-repressive monarchs and rigid church prelates. Ironically, Newton wrote more about the Bible and biblical prophecy than about science. In fact, many of the early scientists were devout Christians, but their thinking produced a more abstract, less personal sense of divinity than the church originally presented.

In 1637, Descartes posited his famous aphorism: *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am." It served as a soft dictum in the din of rethinking that marked the Age of Reason, and soon underpinned philosophical rejections of church authority. Enlightened thinkers, it turned out, were not convinced God's ideas in the Bible were rational, nor full of clear thinking.

The American Dream of a Free People

It's been widely documented, and well-debated, that both Enlightenment thinking and the Bible influenced the framers of the new American Constitution. Locke (1690), Montesquieu (mid-1700s), and Rousseau (1762), famously stand out among Enlightenment influencers who contributed much to the American approach to governing a free people.

There's also no mistaking the Christian influence on the Founders. The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson holds that "all men are created equal...**endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights**" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It goes on to say the "purpose of government is to secure these rights." The Declaration also refers to "**Nature's God**," a reference traceable to Sir William Blackstone, whose *Commentaries* on English law defined the law of nature as conforming to the "Maker's will." The Founders clearly saw freedom as a divine endowment.¹

¹ For more parallels between the Bible and U.S. Constitution, see <https://nccs.net/blogs/articles/parallel-concepts-between-the-u-s-constitution-the-bible>

Benjamin Franklin, not known as a religious man, famously moved during a particularly contentious time at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 that prayers be said every morning before the business of the day. He was a pragmatic philosopher open to religious sentiment who realized the initially divisive Founders needed every bit of help they could find to produce a new Constitution.

Other Founders directly asserted their personal views about the role of Biblical faith. Jefferson, a well-known Deist, valued Enlightenment thinking so much he struck out all the miracles of Jesus in one of his Bibles. Yet in his later years he wrote a personal letter to a friend, saying: **“I have little doubt that our whole country will soon be rallied to the unity of our Creator and, I hope, to the pure doctrine of Jesus also.”**² For Jefferson, Jesus’ “pure doctrine” rested on reason, not blind faith, and certainly not on superstition.

George Washington refused to take communion as an adult, but after serving as the first President he said in his farewell address **“It is impossible to govern the world without God and the Bible.”**

America’s second president, John Adams, famously said: **“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”** Adams, a lawyer, relied on Montesquieu’s ideas about separation of government powers. Yet Adams also cited a single Bible verse to justify separating the legal, legislative and executive branches in the Constitution: **“For the LORD is our judge [court system], the LORD is our lawgiver [congress], the LORD is our king [executive branch]; it is He who will save us.”**³

These biblical influences were so strong that a hundred years later the U.S. Supreme Court would unanimously conclude:

“Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind...our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian.... From the discovery of this continent to this present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation.” (*Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 1892)

Thomas Paine’s Not So Common Sense

Thomas Paine was an English grammar school dropout who fell on hard times before meeting Benjamin Franklin in England. Paine staunchly supported America’s disaffection with England’s King George III. Franklin encouraged him to come to America where Paine soon found work as a newspaper editor.

In 1776, Paine wrote an anonymous 47-page pamphlet titled *Common Sense*, which advocated for American independence. With eloquent zeal Paine declared: **“We have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest purest constitution on [earth].... We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”**

Common Sense helped convince colonists to take up arms against the British. It became the most widely read publication of the era other than the Bible and was carried by many revolutionary soldiers. Ordinary folk were drawn to Paine’s conversational writing style, which

² Thomas Jefferson to Timothy Pickering, 27 February 1821.

³ Isaiah 33:22

coined such modern sounding phrases as “the rights of man,” “the age of revolution” and “the times that try men’s souls.”

Paine would go on to write *The Age of Reason*, a series launched in England in 1794. It highlighted corruption in the Church and what he saw as misguided efforts to use religion to uphold political power. Paine wrote it while living in France, where his restless spirit led him after the American Revolution to examine and support the French Revolution.

Like Jefferson, Paine rejected miracles and the view that the Bible was divinely-inspired. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine fumed:

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of.... Each of those churches accuse the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all.

Paine advanced the idea of “natural religion” by popularizing the notion that reason was sufficient to establish the existence of the Supreme Being. In this sense Paine was not an atheist, but his controversial writings were rejected by many due to their irreverent tone. Reaction against his opinions played a role in triggering the Second Great Religious Awakening in America in the early 1800s. It’s been said Paine “**transformed the millennial Protestant vision of the rule of Christ on earth into a secular image of utopia.**”⁴

Paine was popular in France, but eventually returned to the U.S., where his death went uncelebrated. In Europe his ideas and anti-church rhetoric led to a very different idea of freedom.

The Revolutionary French Dream

The French Revolution harks back to July 14, 1789, and the famous storming of the Bastille two years after the American Constitutional Convention. The French were endeavoring to shape a different kind of liberty from the Americans, distinctly their own.

Born of philosophers rather than pilgrims, France’s idea of liberty birthed a nation founded “only on considerations of the common good,” as proclaimed in the first article of their “Declaration of the Rights and of the Citizen.” Whereas America chose to limit the power of government by decentralizing power to uphold personal freedom “under God,” the French formed a system that replaced the absolute rule of Kings and the Pope with the absolute power of the state. Resistance to oppression was enshrined as a natural right, a tenet that would come back to bite the revolutionaries. (See text box, next page.)

The Bastille was a large fortress built in 1370 to defend Paris from the English during the 100 Years War. In 1789, only seven prisoners were there, along with a store of gunpowder in case an uprising should occur as social unrest gripped France. A crowd of mostly working class people

⁴ [*Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*](#), by Eric Foner. Pg. 91. Oxford University Press, 1976. [ISBN 0-19-502182-7](#).

The Rights of Man and of the Citizen

Excerpts from the Preamble to Constitution of the French Revolution, 1791

ARTICLE THE FIRST: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.

§ 2. The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Man [including] Liberty, Property, Safety and **Resistance to Oppression**.

§ 3. **The principle of any Sovereignty lies primarily in the Nation.** No corporate body, no individual may exercise any authority that does not expressly emanate from it.

§ 4. **Liberty** consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others [as]... **determined only by Law.**

§ 6. **The Law is the expression of the general will....** It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes.

Bolded text added for emphasis.

plus some mutinous French soldiers swelled to around 900 and stormed the massive fortress. A hundred insurgents were killed, but the crowd pressed through. Some defenders were also killed, including the commander and a mayor whose heads were paraded through the streets on pikes. The event set a stark example of instant mob justice perpetrated in the name of freedom.

The Bastille became a symbol of victory over everything for which its massive walls stood. From then on, the king lost control of the nation. July 14th is celebrated to this day to commemorate the beginning of what became the French Republic, equivalent to July 4th in America. While July 4th celebrates a radical *declaration* of liberty, storming of the Bastille celebrates a radical *revolt* of disgruntled citizens and soldiers.

Storming the Bastille became the match that set all France ablaze. Behind the New Republic loomed enlightenment philosophers who viewed the Bible as a myth, rejected popes, and saw feudal monarchs as illegitimate authorities over naturally free citizens.

Birthered by Beheading

Within months after the fall of the Bastille, a newly declared French Assembly abolished major institutions of the feudal *Ancien Régime*. Taxes and church tithes were eliminated. When the Assembly published a new Bill of Rights that broadened the right to vote, many nobles left Paris to stir support for their king abroad.

The following year priests were required to take an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution, bringing them under state authority rather than the Church. This flaunt split the nation further and increased international opposition. In 1792, Austria and Prussia invaded France in support of the King. When the French army won an early battle, the Assembly was emboldened to formally proclaim the first “French Republic” in September 1792. France’s King Louis 16th was imprisoned and beheaded the following January (he asked his son to pardon the executioners!). His death incited conservatives across Europe even more to call for the defeat of the new Republic.

Ironically, the king's support for America had cost so much he was forced to raise taxes, which was a factor behind his eventual arrest and beheading.

The Infamous Reign of Terror

War abroad and factional rivalries within France led the new Republic to form a "Committee of Public Safety" with broad powers over arrests and punishment. Their guiding principle was **"those who have done nothing against freedom, also have done nothing for it."** That left no middle ground. If you didn't actively support the Republic, you were subject to arrest and possible beheading!

The Committee oversaw an infamous two-year Reign of Terror which accounted for some 27,000 executions.⁵ After killing the king, the mob began killing moderates in the Assembly. No class was excluded. Monarchs, nobles, Protestants, Catholics, men, women, priests and ordinary people were sent to the guillotine (invented by a French doctor to make the executions more efficient!).

Robespierre Enshrined Terror as a Virtue

One of the most influential members of the Committee was Maximilien Robespierre, a liberal who advocated voting rights for all men (but not women), as well as abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Robespierre believed terror was necessary to weed out whoever lacked the civic virtue to uphold the popular democratic government. In a defining speech to the National Convention in 1794, he declared:

The basis of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror.... Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the [State].⁶

Some Marxists would later hail Robespierre as the first to articulate a philosophy of dictatorship supported by terror to bring about collective virtue.

Two Different Legacies

America and France dreamt of two different kinds of Republics, both founded on the idea of personal freedom. In America, elected officials governed in a system that separated government functions in order to protect against tyrannical concentration of power—the very malignancy that overtook the French revolution.

In the new French Republic, freedom was based on reason and boundaries set for the "good of all" determined solely by the sovereign state. The French model failed to find ways to restrain those who wielded power from using it tyrannically against its own citizens. Even Robespierre fell to the gallows when his opponents gained enough power to condemn him. I wonder what he thought just before the efficient blade fell.

The short-lived first French Republic only lasted twelve years but set in motion a pendulum that would swing all the way into the 20th century. Following a succession of Empires, revived

⁵ Official records recorded 16,594 executions, but many were killed without legal warrant or record. The larger number quoted above is assembled from multiple estimates.

⁶ See [Robespierre's Speech to the Convention, 18 Pluviose Year II / 5th February 1794 | The Historian's Apprentice](#).

monarchies and revolutionary Republics,⁷ the French would finally promulgate a law of “Separation of the Churches and State” in 1905. It formalized state secularism by law, severed Roman Catholic Church influence on the state, and ended the divine right of monarchs to govern. Protestants applauded the law because it elevated their influence relative to the Pope, but in the end, the power of all churches was diminished as human logic tethered to the *Logos* of God yielded to the supremacy of secular power founded solely on reason.

Less well known, but no less significant, the French Revolution also released an unbridled spirit of radical revolution and logical terror that would inspire legions of emissaries to turn the whole world upside down—from Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedung, and Fidel Castro, to hordes of zealous Muslim freedom fighters.

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⁷ The Third Republic from 1870-1940, was replaced after WW II by a Fourth Republic (1946-1958). The current Fifth Republic (since 1958) is poised to become France’s longest lasting Republic.