

How the West Was Lost

By

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Twenty-six hundred years ago, Western culture was born in Miletus, an ancient Greek city off the coast of Anatolia, in what is present day Turkey. That's where Thales was born around 625 BCE, who is considered the Father of Western Philosophy and, by some, the Father of science. Thales was the first person we know of who attempted to understand the world in natural rather than supernatural terms, empirically rather than mythically, using math, astronomy, and reason to figure things out.

Thales was the first of the Early Philosophers in Western history, also known as the Presocratic philosophers because they came before Socrates, who was born in 469 BCE, about 150 years after Thales. For the most part, the Early Philosophers, like Thales, also worked to explain things in natural terms, in physical terms, which is why Aristotle would later refer to them as *phusikoi*, "the physicists," who developed early ideas of atomic, evolutionary, and heliocentric theories, and discovered things like musical octaves, irrational numbers, meteorology, certain medical breakthroughs, and scientific experimentation.

It was an intellectual leap forward that was unprecedented in humanity's three hundred-thousand-year history up to that point. Philosopher Bertrand Russell says, "The rise of Greek civilization which produced this outburst of intellectual activity is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since."¹

To me, what is most remarkable about this epoch is its positive view of human nature, human agency, and human intelligence. In order to look beyond supernatural explanations of the world, explanations inferred from myths about gods or taken from writings and words attributed to gods, the Early Philosophers had to have faith in our own human abilities to work things out for ourselves.

Unfortunately, this humanistic perspective would become be thwarted and all but outlawed with the advent of the Holy Roman Empire during the 4th century CE. Except for Christian apologists—theologians who fancied themselves philosophers—philosophy was considered paganism, ninety percent of its writings were destroyed, and its thousand-year-old Academy, begun by Plato, was eventually closed by Roman Emperor Justinian in 529 CE because of its "pagan" teachings. Pagans weren't people who danced around Maypoles back then, they were anyone outside the Empire, including anyone outside its thinking.

During this period, known as the Dark Ages, as A.C. Grayling writes in his history of philosophy, "intellectual activity fell under the authority of the Church, and as time went by it became increasingly risky to diverge from doctrinal orthodoxy. Doing so could and too often did attract the severest of sanctions: the death penalty."² At the time everything—language, ideas, literature, art, music, science, philosophy—had to be expressed in strict orthodox religious terms.

Eventually, however, the Church's authority would be weakened due to tension between Kings and Popes and the successes of those like Martin Luther who began openly calling for reform. This was during the 14th century, an entire millennium after Emperor Constantine first Christianized Rome, when the beginning of what historians call the Renaissance began. "Renaissance" means "renewal," and this period was named such because the intellectuals of the day took a renewed interest in, guess who, the Early Philosophers. This also led to a renewal of positive beliefs about humanity and human potential. Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), known as the "Father of Humanism," was born in 1304, right at the start of the Renaissance, and he emphasized *studia humanitatis*, studying all the works of humanity, including whatever remained of the writings of antiquity that had been nearly decimated by then.

This underlying belief in human abilities led to the idea of human dignity, that all people, no matter their social rank, should be treated with respect. Such respect further led to the concept of personal freedom, that every person should be free to think and speak for themselves without fear of being punished by the authorities. In fact, the perceived role of the authorities was also shifting as some luminaries began emphasizing democracy and the expectation that monarchs should guarantee personal freedom for all their citizens. Above all, in order for such freedom, the freedom to reason for oneself, the Renaissance pushed for social tolerance. There can't be a free flow of ideas if we don't tolerate each other.

These principles—reason, freedom, and tolerance—first exercised by the earliest Western philosophers, rediscovered by the Renaissance thinkers a thousand years later, are both the seeds and the fruit of Western culture. They were the principles that went on to flourish during the Enlightenment period that radically reshaped Western society during the 17th and 18th centuries, and that influenced the fashioning of the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights, manifesting as the freedom to speak, democracy, and equality under the law.

But they are also principles that have been resisted and limited by many in Western society throughout time and to this day. In our societies, some have enjoyed the rights they guarantee more than others, and some not at all. Women, nonwhites, immigrants, the working class, and the poor, are among those who have had to struggle for these fundamental western rights. Yet, no matter how imperfect our Union, these founding principles have, until recent years, remained our highest aspirations.

But today, it appears, Western culture has succumbed to its more primitive instincts. Instead of rallying together, no matter our differences, under the banner of these great principles we once shared in common, too many of us retreat into our perceived tribes, fearful of and angry toward those outside, the "pagans" of our time, reserving freedom, reason, and tolerance only for those within our small circles. Freedom, reason, tolerance, yes—for those who think like us, but for those who don't, demonization, exclusion, and hate.

Perhaps they hate freedom most of all. For, to be a truly free society, we must be willing to hear and to tolerate those who hold beliefs and ideas different than our own. Freedom requires and, thus, leads to reason and tolerance. Reason and tolerance are necessary for

freedom. They are its outgrowths. Conversely, in order to deny and thwart the freedoms of others, we must first become unreasonable and intolerant. We must become what British historian R.I. Moore once called a “persecuting society.”³ Moore was referring to what happened in Western Europe at the very start of the Renaissance with the emergence of universities that started challenging Church orthodoxy. In the struggle to put the freedom genie back in the bottle, Jacob Mchangama, author of, *Free Speech*, says, “heresy became one of the defining issues of the 13th and 14th centuries—just as pagan teachings started enjoying a prominent role on the newly emerged universities where reason, inquiry, and science thrived.”⁴

The word *heresy*, remember, means freedom, the freedom *to choose* for oneself. Freedom of expressing ideas counter to the *status quo* was considered a social evil that justified the persecution of heretics, of those who spoke freely. The same is true with the word, licentious, referring to those who took license to speak freely. There was a time, after the printing press came along, that people had to have a license to preach or to publish. Those who did not, who took the liberty to speak freely, were called licentious. Recall that the Inquisitions also emerged only after the invention of the printing press as an effort to contain the spread of unsanctioned information.

Freedom, no matter how grand an ideal, is a fragile value that is all too easily disregarded by both authoritarian leaders and the intolerant masses. Yet it is so grand an idea, those wishing to violate its principle must first turn the tables on it by claiming those who use their freedom are the true danger; the heretics, the licentious, the pagans, or, in today’s terms, the “harmers.” But equating free speech with “harm” is nothing new either. It is an excuse for squelching dissent at least as old as the Protestant Reformation half a millennium ago. When Luther refused to recant by order of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles the V, the Emperor issued an edict declaring his books “harmful.”⁵ Mchangama says, “It is also clear that both English and Continental censorship rested on the idea that words and actions are indistinguishable, and that the former can be every bit as harmful and dangerous as the latter.”⁶

There has always been great resistance to the idea of freedom, especially freedom of thought and speech, even in the U.S., which is why we have both a Constitution and a Bill of Rights. Federalists like Alexander Hamilton and, initially, James Madison would never have agreed to the Constitution had it contained the freedoms later extolled by Enlightenment liberals like Thomas Jefferson and other anti-Federalists. Yet throughout history, even the most committed advocates of free speech have eventually turned on the idea when facing ideological opposition.

For example, in response to the English Parliament’s 1643 licensing law prohibiting what it called, “false, forged, scandalous, seditious, libellous, and unlicensed Papers, Pamphlets, and Books to the great defamation of Religion and Government,”⁷ the poet John Milton responded by writing his *Areopagitica*, an inspiring essay calling for the “liberty of unlicenc’d printing.” For only “when complaints are freely heard, deeply consider’d and

speedily reform'd, then is the utmost bound of civill liberty attain'd,"⁸ he said. "Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."⁹

Alas, as inspiring as his words remain to this day, when it came to Catholicism and the anti-Catholic sentiments of his day, Milton drew a line. In blaming the invention of censorship on the Catholic Inquisition, Milton advocated the burning of Catholic writings and later supported a 1650 Blasphemy ban targeting them. In the end Milton himself, a staunch advocate for free press, became a licensor. That which Mchangama calls, "one of the great ironies of the history of free speech,"¹⁰ has also become known as, "Milton's curse." It is a curse upon liberals who tend to become the worst censors when it comes to the freedoms of those they disagree with.

American Unitarianism is itself a liberal religion founded upon the Enlightenment principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance, values that initially remained central during the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961. As the renowned Unitarian Universalist Minister Jack Mendelsohn writes in his 1964 book, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, "The most fundamental of all Unitarian Universalist principles, then, is personal freedom of religious belief—the principle of the free mind ... No Holy Writ dictates. No creed dictates what must be believed."¹¹

Since, as I said, such freedom breeds reason and tolerance, this is also why Unitarian Universalists, until recently, have also been able to worship and work together, and befriend one another, no matter our differences. Again, as Mendelsohn put it 58 years ago, shortly after the UUA had been formed, "In a Unitarian Universalist congregation, an agnostic may sit beside one who believes in a personal God; at the after-service coffee hour a believer in reincarnation may stand chatting with one who affirms 'utter extinction.' Such are our diversities in theological belief."¹²

Yet, today, our liberal religion, like our liberal nation, suffers from Milton's curse, inventing contorted excuses to justify their illiberal, authoritarian, intolerance of those with differing opinions. Like a Holy Roman Emperor, they call books critical of their viewpoints "harmful" so they can justify violating the very principles they claim to affirm. Like Milton, these principles, like the worth and dignity of every person, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the right of conscience and the democratic process, are to be extended only toward those who think like us. Ours has become a religion of book banning and censoring ministers, claiming, as they did when condemning me and my book, that "The predictable 'freedom of speech' arguments are commonly weaponized to perpetuate oppression and inflict further harm,"¹³ and, "we cannot ignore the fact that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture to stifle dissent, minimize expressions of harm, and to require those who suffer to prove the harm by that culture's standards."¹⁴ Now, it would appear, the UUA dismisses freedom of speech arguments as tools of oppression, the reason freedom fosters as a form of white supremacy, and the tolerance both require as a thing of the past.

So we should not be surprised that during a December 2021 meeting of the Article II Study Commission (That's the committee working to change the language of the UU Association's

bylaw containing our seven principles.), one of its Co-Chairs is reported to have said, “The Freedom of Belief clause is a throwback to old ways of thinking, making the rest of the article meaningless.” Here’s what the now meaningless Freedom of Belief clause in Section C-2.4 says, “Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such [should be] used as a creedal test.” Yet, now, suffering from Milton’s curse, the UUA leadership is using unreasonable and twisted excuses to justify its intolerance and rejection of our liberal religion’s historic foundation and commitment to the principle of freedom.

This illiberal affliction, only recently manifest in our once venerable tradition, has afflicted our greater society since its birth, always to varying degrees, but no worse ever than it is today. For, as a nation, we have lost near complete sight of our guiding stars—freedom, reason, and tolerance—that, at once, held our course steady on dark nights, and, like an anchor, held us firm upon rough waters. But today our nation has been overtaken by cloudy skies, too dense to see our guiding constellation, these three sister stars to light, and we find ourselves tossed about on stormy waters, with no compass to guide us and no anchor to hold us. We are lost. We have lost our way.

Without sight of our North Star, freedom, we are also left without reason or tolerance, and so we succumb to unreasonable, irrational, and unsupported beliefs about vaccines conspiracies, or stolen Presidential elections, or that all of Western history must be interpreted through the implications of one year, 1619. The list of insanities goes on and on. Yet those who hold them do so with such ferocity that they hate anyone who questions their views, wishing, like some of the cruelest tyrants and mobs in history, to destroy them by crushing their souls and silencing their tongues. Whether it is DeSantis persecuting Disney, Fox News Demonizing Democrats, sanctimonious thespians slapping Comedians, or the Language Police Policing Language, civility has been lost in our society.

How has it come to this? I believe it is because we have failed as a society to prioritize our principles, especially by ensuring that we pass them on to each generation by teaching them in our schools, and, most importantly, modeling them in our own lives. Today the only principle our politicians seem to demonstrate is the principle of winning at all other costs. So, they are inconsistent in their actions, like an unanchored ship lost on frantic seas, refusing to confirm the nominees of their opponents one day, and quickly confirming the most unseemly of their own the next. Or blaming the other Party’s President for high fuel prices resulting from a war he did not start, while ignoring the even higher gas prices after another oil-war once started by their own. Or bringing in speakers and sending out emails calling for us to advocate for voter-rights while having systematically eliminated all genuine systems of democracy without our own religious association. Or passing laws to ban abortion while simultaneously being against everything that actually reduces unwanted pregnancies—birth control, sex education, and planning for parenthood. We are lost. We have lost our way.

Liberalism, in particular, has suffered much since losing its political prowess after the rise of Reagan and the extreme Right in the 1980s. Unable to succeed politically, our leaders retreated into academia and took over our Universities. “You may have thought,” Humanities professor Mark Lilla says in his book, *The Once and Future Liberal*, “liberals would have used their positions in our educational institutions to teach young people that they share a destiny with all their fellow citizens and have duties toward them. Instead, they trained students to be spelunkers of their own personal identities and left them incurious about the world outside their heads.”¹⁵

And this is how the West was lost, because too few of us today have been taught about the importance our culture’s founding principles—freedom, reason, and tolerance—and why they must be upheld by everyone in our society and their benefits extended to all, friend or foe. Doing so is what our own liberal religion is about and once stood for until those educated in identity spelunking took over. We were once a refuge in the storm of ethical confusion, and a beacon of light to those seeking to remember what we are supposed to be all about. Our religion has lost its way.

And so we, those of in this congregation and those concerned individuals is so many others, must rekindle the light of Unitarian Universalism until it becomes a flame that illuminates the path we have forgotten, for ourselves, for our religion, and for our world.

¹ Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

² Ibid., p. 131.

³ Moore, R.I., *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Defiance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, 2nd, ed., Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, [See Mchangama, Jacob, *Free Speech*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 2022, p. 50.]

⁴ Mchangama, Jacob, *Free Speech*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 2022, p. 50.

⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

⁸ https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/areopagitica/text.html

⁹ Mchangama, ibid., p. 106.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

¹¹ Mendelsohn, Jack, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1964, 1995, p. 39.

¹² Ibid., p. 40.

¹³ June 22, 2019 letter signed by over 300 UU ministers condemning *The Gadfly Papers* by Todd F. Eklof

¹⁴ August 16, 2019 letter of Censure issued to Todd F. Eklof by UU Ministers Association (UUMA).

¹⁵ Lilla, Mark, *The Once and Future Liberal*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2017, p. 60.