

To Crush Superstition
Whatever Happened to the Dream?
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Soon after it was established in 1887, the Spokane Unitarian Society adopted its first bylaws, which stated, “The authority of its belief is reason. The method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish the facts of religion.”¹ Today these purposes may seem to us to have been far ahead of their time. Based upon my understanding of history, however, I would argue that the founders of our church were a product of their time and that their hopes about superstitious thinking were common. Lots of people believed such thinking could, should, and would come to an end. Their rational and scientific mindset, a product of the Enlightenment, had reached its apex in the late 1800s, before beginning to wane in the middle of the 20th century, due to the emergence of Christian Fundamentalism and, later, Postmodernism.

But, as I have mentioned in previous sermons, the liberal mindset is rooted more deeply in the ideas and successes of the Early Greek philosophers going back to the 6th century BCE, more than two-and-a-half millennia ago. It was then that figures like Thales of Miletus, Anaximander, Protagoras, Heraclitus, and Democritus were among the first thinkers in history who strived to understand the world in natural rather than supernatural terms. By doing so, they learned to forecast the weather and predict solar eclipses, and developed theories of gravity, evaporation, electricity, evolution, and atoms among other grand discoveries. The 20th century philosopher, Bertrand Russell said, “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.”²

Tragically, during the rise of the Holy Roman Empire in the 4th century CE, Greek philosophy like all unorthodox ideas, was forbidden. It’s during this period that Christian zealots are estimated to have destroyed “as much as ninety percent of the literature of antiquity.”³ And so it was for nearly another millennium; any ideas about life, history, and humanity were constrained within the orthodox limitations of ancient Christianity’s superstitious beliefs.

It wasn’t until the start of the Renaissance in the early 14th century, when a renewed interest in the literature of antiquity, at least what was left of it, began to weaken the Church’s chokehold on thought. Historians now refer to this movement as *humanism* because it emphasized human dignity, human agency, and human goodness, along with the study of classical writings, education, critical thinking, and human achievement.

The invention of the Printing Press in 1440, further democratizing the flow of information; the Ottoman Empire’s capture of Constantinople in 1453, further weakening the Church’s power; as did the Protestant Reformation beginning in 1517—all helped strengthen and expand the humanism movement also known as the Renaissance. *Renaissance*, you will recall, means “renewal,” and refers to the renewed interest in the forbidden writings of antiquity, especially those of the Early Greek philosophers who used their own reason and powers of observation to explain the world. They believed, that is, in their own agency and, thus, in human agency itself, and in our power to discover for ourselves how the world really works.

If the Renaissance opened doors for us to explore new explanations and new possibilities, it was the Enlightenment that followed that led us to begin putting such ideas into practice. If, for

example, the Renaissance thinkers believed in human dignity, it was the Enlightenment thinkers who established the kind of governments, including our fragile democracies, that could secure this dignity. Such pragmatism is why the 1800s became one of the most productive and inventive periods in human history. Our own famous minister, John Dietrich, the father of religious humanism, once said, “the nineteenth century did more to add to the sum total of human life than all the other centuries of the Christian era put together.”⁴

“In fact,” Canadian scientist Vaclav Smil has more recently written, “perhaps the most inventive time in human history was the 1880s. That’s when electricity became a household commodity thanks to the invention of thermal- and hydropower generation stations that still provide 80 percent of the world’s electricity.”⁵ I won’t go into all the other inventions and advances that emerged at the time, but will remind you that it was then, during the 1880s to be specific, that our church was founded with the purpose of crushing superstition.

At the time, it felt as if the primitive and superstitious world that had once engaged the human mind—a world of brutality, disease, hunger, and hardship—was quickly passing with advances in medicine like vaccinations, x-rays, and anesthesia; and with commercial electricity bringing continuous light and warmth into our homes and businesses; and in communications with the invention of the Telegraph, then the phone, then the radio. And in transportation with the invention of steam locomotives, internal combustion engines, and the automobile just around the corner; along with mass production and mechanized agriculture that produced an abundance of affordable necessities like food and clothing.

It was all proof that human ingenuity had triumphed over unanswered prayers, pointless sacrifices, and mindless fictions of the past, making our lives easier, healthier, and happier than they had ever been before. And so, the founders of our church were not audacious in their wish to crush superstition. Doing so seemed like a forgone conclusion. Ridding the world entirely of such nonsense could only make the future even better. The prospects for human progress seemed to them as boundless as they were unimaginable.

Some of you may recall the sermon I gave a short time ago in March about the great 19th century orator, Robert G. Ingersoll. He was so popular that it was widely believed he could have easily been elected to any office he wished if he would simply not speak of his agnostic to atheistic religious views on the campaign trail. Instead, he said, “It is much more important for me to do what I can to give men light, and to break down religious superstition and bigotry, than it is to be senator from Illinois or United States minister to a foreign power.”⁶ Prior to his death Ingersoll wrote, “There is but little left for me to do. The fires of hell have been extinguished, the struggle with superstition is nearly over. We have passed midnight, and the great balance weighs up morning.”⁷

He wrote these words in 1899, twelve years after our church was founded, at the very turn of the century, yet his optimism, and that of our founders among many others, lasted well into the 20th Century. It was near its start that Sigmund Freud, himself an atheist, wrote, “the more the treasures of our knowledge become accessible to people, the more the defection from religious belief will spread, at first only from its obsolete, offensive vestments, but then from its fundamental presuppositions as well.”⁸ When John Dietrich spoke of Ingersoll in a 1924 sermon, he said, “Ingersoll is looked upon today as the most outstanding opponent of orthodox religion, and the most ardent champion of freedom from superstition, that we have ever heard in this country, if not anywhere in the world.”⁹

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Dietrich frequently expressed similar sentiments of his own. In his 1922 address, “Do We Need a New Moral Outlook?”, he said, “the rapidity with which we have been changing in the sphere of religion and morality has never been greater than it is now ... The general advance in all branches of the physical sciences has also weakened, I might say destroyed, the belief of well-informed people in the intervention of a divine power in physical events ... We may indeed be delighted that what we call a superstition has fallen to the ground.”¹⁰

As you can see from these examples, the expectation that humanity was finally done with superstition had become widespread in the late 19th and early 20th century, largely because of the proven success of the 1800s that resulted from the Enlightenment, which followed the Renaissance, which was inspired by the Early Greek philosophers. As theologian Karen Armstrong says of this period in her book, *The Battle for God*, “It was assumed that as human beings became more rational, they would have no further need for religion or would be content to confine it to the immediately personal and private areas of their lives.”¹¹

That’s plenty said to prove my point, that the founders of our Unitarian church here in Spokane were not unusual in their belief that humanity was on the verge of freeing itself from the kind of superstitious beliefs that had forever dominated its thinking.

So what happened between 1887 when our church founders promised to crush superstition, 1899 when Ingersol declared “the struggle with superstition is nearly over,” the start of the 20th century when Freud predicted “defection from religious belief will spread,” 1922 when Dietrich declared, “We may indeed be delighted that what we call superstition has fallen to the ground,” and today?

It’s too early to read much into yet, but did you catch the news this week from the Pew Research Center? The results of a survey released just three days ago, on May 14th, finds that 37% of U.S. adults now say religion is gaining influence in American life, the highest share since 2002, marking a 19point increase in the past two years, reversing earlier declines seen in the 2020s.¹² Whether this is true or just a growing impression is still to be determined. Based on the anecdotal evidence I’ve seen of late, I would also guess that religion is gaining influence in American life, especially the primitive superstitious kind of religion our forebears were hoping to crush.

There was widespread outrage last month when Donald Trump posted an image portraying himself as Jesus. People across the political aisle reacted strongly. Personally, I found the image neither offensive nor surprising. What troubled me more was the media response. I was struck to hear 21st-century television journalists debating whether the U.S. President had committed blasphemy as they were quoting the Bible and speculating about the mind of God. I wasn’t sure whether I was listening to CNN or a reality TV version of the Holy Inquisition.

And let’s not forget Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth’s recent admonition that all Americans should “get on bended knee with your family, in your schools, in your churches, in the name of Jesus Christ”¹³ and pray for our troops.

There’s also serious reporting about UFOs in the news these days, which is understandable given the government’s release of video images of unexplainable phenomenon and an increasing number of insider whistleblowers. If it turns out there is proof of beings visiting us from other worlds, it could prove problematic for those Christians who take the Bible literally. But, in recent weeks, I’ve heard a couple very prominent Christians already working to get a handle on the

matter. Over the past couple of years, for instance, rightwing conspiracy theorist and former Fox News icon, Tucker Carlson has frequently said he believes aliens are the spiritual entities referred to as demons in the Bible. And while discussing the topic on a conservative podcast in late March, the Vice President of the United States, J.D. Vance said, "I don't think they're aliens, I think they're demons." I bring this up, not to debate the issue of alien visitors, but to further prove that superstitious thinking is far from crushed. In fact, it is only a heartbeat away from holding the highest office in the land.

A more down-to-Earth example occurred just a few weeks ago when a federal appeals court ruled that public schools in Texas are allowed to display the Ten Commandments in their classrooms, as is now required by the Lonestar state. It's now a case that's heading all the way to the Supreme Court, not in the 1800s nor the 1900s, but right now in 2026.

So, what's happened? After so much promise, why is liberalism being crushed as superstitious thinking becomes dominant?

As I said at the start, we can attribute this shift, at least in part, to the rise of fundamentalism. In her aforementioned book, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, Karen Armstrong says that "In the middle of the 20th century, it was generally assumed by pundits and commentators that secularism was the coming ideology and that religion would never again become a force in international affairs. But the fundamentalists have reversed this trend and gradually, in both United States and the Muslim world, religion has become a force that every government has been forced to take seriously."¹⁴

Fundamentalism is a term coined by some American Protestants in the early part of the 20th century to "distinguish themselves from the more 'liberal' Protestants, who were, in their opinion, entirely distorting the Christian faith."¹⁵ "The Fundamentalists," Armstrong says, "wanted to go back to basics and reemphasize the 'fundamentals' of the Christian tradition, which they identified with a literal interpretation of scripture and the acceptance of certain core doctrines."¹⁶ And they succeeded, "By the late 1970s," Armstrong goes on to explain, "Fundamentalists began to rebel against the secularist hegemony and started to wrest religion out of its marginal position and back to center stage. In this, at least, they have enjoyed remarkable success. Religion has once again become a force that no government can safely ignore."¹⁷

Fundamentalism, then, was born in reaction against Enlightenment liberalism, the beliefs in human dignity that requires freedom of thought and speech and freedom from secular or religious tyranny. But, as Karen Armstrong further points out, "Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state."¹⁸ And since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, scholars have expanded the term to refer to extremists of any religion. "There are Buddhists, Hindu, and even Confucian fundamentalist," Armstrong says, "which often also cast aside many of the painfully acquired insights of liberal culture, which fight and kill in the name of religion and strive to bring the sacred into the realm of politics and national struggle."¹⁹

We see from all of this that the resurgence of superstitious thinking, at least as a dominant force in human life, is a relatively recent phenomenon and is a growing worldwide problem, which may further explain why there is so much fear, hate, intolerance, and violence in the world today. But I

don't want to falsely blame all of this on those with a more rigid conservative mindset, although they do deserve a lot of it.

It was in the 1950s that liberal American Universities also began rebelling against Enlightenment principles. Their Postmodernism, rooted in the earlier counter-Enlightenment movement, has been succinctly described by Enlightenment historian Richie Robertson as a "a group of thinkers who denied the supremacy of reason and pleaded for the importance of feeling; Who were interested not in universal civilization, but in local and particular cultures; who thought that polished modern culture suppressed the creative energies of primitive ages and of uneducated peoples." These were "ideas in the nineteenth century," he says, "that eventually fed into fascism."²⁰ As with fundamentalists, postmodernists care little for objective facts in preference for whatever it is they wish to believe, demanding that others placate their superstitions and coddle their lunacy. As contemporary philosopher Stephen Hicks says in his book, *Explaining Postmodernism*, "Many deconstruct reason, truth, and reality because they believe that in the name of reason, truth, and reality, Western civilization has wrought dominance, oppression, and deconstruction."²¹

So, this is the situation we're in and my explanation for why we are in it. The only way to counter it and to arrive at a point that we might, once again, have reason to hope we might finally crush superstition, as was once the purpose of our very church—the rock upon which it was founded—is a new Renaissance of our liberal values, which, as many know, I like to summarize as human dignity upheld through systems of reason, freedom, and tolerance. For, again, both fundamentalism and postmodernism were born in opposition to Enlightenment liberalism and have come to dominate the current zeitgeist. It's only reasonable that Enlightenment liberalism must now push back in order to turn the tide.

A century ago, in his 1926 sermon, *What is a Liberal*, John Dietrich said, "There is an occasional person who glories in his conservatism; but the majority of people are proudest when they are recognized as liberals." My how things have changed for us liberals since then. Yet our perennial values have survived. Their popularity has been diminished but not crushed. And they are still the values we need to finally free ourselves from superstitious thinking and all the ignorance and intolerance and stifling of progress that goes along with it.

Perhaps their dream wasn't naïve, only premature. The founders of our congregation weren't wrong about the direction of history. They were simply wrong about the speed with which it might happen. The arc they traced is real. The work is just going to take longer than any of them imagined, longer perhaps than any single generation can complete, including our own.

But here we are, still asking the questions they asked. Still holding the values they held. Still gathered, in this place, on this same foundation—a congregation that was built, of all things, to crush superstition. In a world where demons are being discussed in the halls of power and the Ten Commandments are going back on schoolroom walls, our continued presence and purpose is as remarkable as it is vital. The lights of reason have been dimmed before but never extinguished. Whatever else we may be about, whatever other important work we have to do, I hope the authority of our belief is still reason, and the method of finding our beliefs is still scientific, and that our aim is to crush superstition and to establish the facts of religion. Because that's what the world needs and that's what we have to offer.

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- ⁵ Smil, Vaclav, *Numbers Don't Lie*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2021, p. 98.
- ⁶ "Robert G. Ingersoll: An Appreciation" by John H. Dietrich | First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis | November 30, 1924, As Amended & Presented by Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof, March 22, 2026
- ⁷ Ibid.
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- ¹⁰ Dietrich, John, "Do We Need a New Moral Outlook?", Delivered in Minneapolis before the Iowa Unitarian Association of Illinois Unitarian Conference at Davenport, Iowa, October 18, 1922. Published by the Authority of the Joint Conferences.
- ¹¹ Armstrong, Karen, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, Random House, New York, NY, 2000, 2001, p. vii
- ¹² [Americans' Views of Religion's Role in Government and Christian Nationalism | Pew Research Center](#)
- ¹³ [AFN - Hegseth called 'controversial' after asking Americans to pray for troops](#)
- ¹⁴ Armstrong, *ibid.*, p. viif.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.
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