

Reason, Faith, and the Struggle for Western Civilization

Samuel Gregg

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Since so often “struggle” is shorthand for “class struggle” (without the redundancy), we tend to forget its equally appropriate use in describing efforts to preserve Western civilization, as Australian-born

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Samuel Gregg does in his book *Reason, Faith, and the Struggle for Western Civilization*. Research director at the Acton Institute and president of the Philadelphia Society, Gregg succeeded in earning a doctorate in moral philosophy and political economy from Oxford without abandoning either his Catholic faith or his common sense. His long list of erudite publications include: *Morality, Law, and Public Policy* (2000); *Economic Thinking for the Theologically Minded* (2001); *On Ordered Liberty* (2003); *The Commercial Society* (2007); *The Modern Papacy* (2009); *Wilhelm Röpke's Political Economy* (2010); and *Becoming Europe: Economic Decline, Culture, and America's Future* (2013). Though all tackle large topics, his latest book seeks to define the very essence of Western civilization—a daunting task, surely, and full of contradictions.

Some find the essence of Western civilization in science and progress, others in resistance to excessive change, while still others blame it for the evils of racism. Though semantics is hardly a popular sport, the twin totalitarianisms of Nazism and communism forced many in recent decades “to consider what the West *really* stood for, and *why* these ideologies were antithetical to Western civilization, even though fascism and Marxism were products of Western minds.” Could the same culture actually give rise to both the greatest scientists and artists—Isaac Newton, Leonardo da Vinci, Ludwig van Beethoven, Albert Einstein—and the most vicious monsters who murdered their own countrymen in the name of “justice”?

Gregg believes the answer lies in understanding the ambidextrous complement of reason and faith, their mutual tempering and reinforcement aptly captured by John Donne: “Reason is our soul's left hand, Faith her right.” A one-armed pursuit of knowledge is bound to fail, for knowledge presupposes truth, and truth cannot be attained by either pure empirical observation alone or by blind faith in an otherwise irrational world. Faith-without-reason reduces man to impotence; conversely, reason-without-faith is logically impossible. Ultimately, argues Gregg, it is “the commitment to reasoned inquiry in search of truth” that allows mankind to flourish.

And such inquiry is itself predicated on the primacy of individual freedom or liberty. As Lord Acton wrote in 1877, “Liberty is the delicate fruit of a mature civilization” whose members seek to unlock the secrets of nature without hubris, respecting its ultimate mystery—in recognition that no man is divine, bound by his limits, cognitive as well as moral. The freedom to know nature is limited by experience;

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the freedom to choose for oneself is limited by the prohibition against choosing for another.

As a result, observes Gregg, the “recognition of the limits of reason reinforced the Western emphasis on limiting state power and generated resistance to the utopian urges that have intermittently surfaced throughout Western history.” The biblical emphasis on freedom is “balanced by the insistence that human beings are not God and that they are constantly tempted to use their reason wrongly.” F. A. Hayek similarly detested the arrogant utopianism, the “fatal conceit,” of an allegedly omniscient technocratic vanguard that presumes to replace individual choice. These elite deciders are indeed the self-appointed idols of modernity.

Gregg credits the ancient Hebrews for being the first to reject all idolatry. God is One and there are no others. Certainly, no mere human deserves worship. As every man is created in the image of God and thus suffused with reason, each is able to understand a world that, however complex and often inscrutable, is “ultimately permeated with order.” No matter how lofty their ideal—be it the abolition of greed and envy by eliminating private property, attaining the putative greatest good of the greatest number, or the triumph of the strong, superior, or handsome, over the weak in mind or body—secular utopianists like Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, and Friedrich Nietzsche are in effect apologists for not merely a post- but a *pre*-Western kind of idolatry. Thus, unwittingly or not, each in his own way undermines the notion of personal conscience along with simple generosity and empathy, sacrificed at the altar of a political pseudo-religion that repudiates the biblical Western tradition.

Some blame the Enlightenment for the demise of that tradition, forgetting that, as Gregg points out, there wasn't just one but several “Enlightenments”: French, Scottish, English, and others. And while all shared a reverence for reason, the Anglo-Saxon sages showed far more humility before the Higher Power than did their French contemporaries. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, often considered “the hero of the Enlightenment,” was both a believing Christian and the very prototype of the rational man who rejected both blind faith-as-superstition and the reason-gone-amok of materialist atheists. So too, Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Adam Smith, all staunch advocates of empirical inquiry, underscored the moral and spiritual basis of human action. What Smith called “the system of natural liberty” was deeply rooted in the basic assumption of individual freedom as the source of the

greatest prosperity and of personal responsibility, the key feature of biblical ethics. And all warned against the excessive adulation of reason.

Such adulation leads to three pathologies, argues Gregg. First, "Prometheus unchained" assumes that human beings could be "remade" by changing their environment. Second, "scientism," treats the scientific method as a panacea for solving all questions, factual or spiritual. If there is any "knowledge" to be had, it must come from the scientists. But by implying that only science can be trusted to be "objective," scientists proclaim themselves quasi-divinities. And third, since value statements are not subject to empirical testing, ethics is an illusion, morality relative. A nude sculpture may be either in a museum or vilified as obscene; science cannot decide. Fair enough, but how about justice, responsibility, and rights? Is there no objectivity to such concepts?

Gregg points out that relativism crept into Western thought surreptitiously, under the guise of toleration of views different from one's own, which is certainly essential for freedom. Unfortunately, this can easily morph into nihilism or the denial of truth as such—which obliterates dialogue altogether. What Gregg calls "the coercion at the heart of the dictatorship of relativism" stems from the Nietzschean, as well as Leninist, principle that "all questions of justice are condensed to who has power and who does not." Might makes right, and religion itself becomes irrational. Yes, irrational—meaning anti-rational; the difference is critical, though woefully misunderstood by culture warriors of all stripes.

Far from demonizing those who seek the betterment of mankind through technology and education, Gregg commends their idealism but also their limitations. The English utilitarian J. S. Mill, for example, believed "the prospect of the future depends on the degree to which [the working classes] can be made rational beings," implying both a trust in reason and the ultimate goal of individual freedom. While laudable as far as this goes, Gregg argues that the notion that human beings must first be "made rational" before they can be expected to know what is good for them represents "liberalism as a religion," hardly the "system of natural liberty" proclaimed by Adam Smith. The secular creed of materialist, utilitarian foes of traditional religions is at root authoritarian, paternalistic, and ultimately little more than pseudo-spiritual.

In the same vein, the post-classical "liberalism" proclaimed by a sacerdotal elite presuming to mediate for the "unwoke" masses is also

a form of religion. Just as “[m]any religions formally commission classes of people to maintain, explain, and advance the faith,” so too the secular technocratic modern-liberalist variety justifies the existence of a “clerisy” consisting of intellectuals “who view the world through the lens of the sciences. Whether in universities, newspapers, or other culture-shaping institutions . . . [these are] evangelists.”

Cambridge historian Maurice Cowling, in his 1963 book on *Mill and Liberalism*, had already detected the presence of “more than a touch of something resembling moral totalitarianism” in the thinking of Mill and his fellow utilitarians. An elite that presumes to *make* men rational exhibits the ultimate form of hubris. Outsourcing God’s power to themselves, the secular elite exiles the human race not only to slavery on earth but to the loneliness of idolatry that cannot really replace genuine spirituality. Mankind succumbs again to hubris, managing to exile itself from the imperfections of reality in exchange for the perennial mirage of an ill-defined utopia.

But Gregg does not stop at criticism, nor does he wallow in lamentations for a past now gone. He finds inspiration in Edmund Burke’s observation that “difficulty is a severe instructor. . . . Our antagonist is our helper.” A culture can change without succumbing to apocalyptic self-destruction. Even science, the principal engine of modernity, far from supplanting and replacing faith, actually depends on it. Gregg cites Nobel Prize-winning economist Vernon L. Smith: “The conceptual and theoretical constructs of science constitute the ‘substance of things hoped for’ and observational support depends on instruments that record the ‘evidence of things not seen.’” Smith adds that today, “the time of the Big Bang, we have come to understand our world, technically, as originating at a massive singularity for which the equations that chart everything from stars and energy to planets have no finite solution.”

Of course, this does not amount to proving the superior let alone exclusive truth of beliefs held by any particular religious sect. But it does reinforce the belief that reason and objectivity go beyond the narrowly empirical—the denotation of observational statements. Indeed, mankind “can know the ultimate source of human rationality precisely because reason itself is derived from the same origin.” And no, “this line of reasoning is not peculiarly Christian,” writes Gregg; rather, it is an essential part of our civilization, the “persistent and particular pattern of human thought and action that has been transmitted across time and has made the West what it is.”

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Though unequivocally committed to the system of natural liberty, Gregg does have one objection to primarily defending economic freedom on utilitarian grounds such as the promotion of greater material benefits, efficiency, and prosperity. He focuses rather on the moral argument: that all men are owed equal treatment based on their common rational nature. He agrees with Alexander Hamilton, who wrote in *The Farmer Refuted*: “The sacred rights of mankind are . . . written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.” This is the common sense of the American Declaration. And while that divinity need not—indeed must not—be defined in sectarian terms, Gregg insists that God must be conceived as rational, “the God of the Bible.” That is the genius of America’s exceptional—constitutional—commitment to liberty.

Although this conclusion will not appeal to the fervent atheist, or to anyone who worships an irrational deity or deities, it does not mean such people cannot act in ethical ways. A society that respects everyone’s right to his or her own beliefs has plenty of room for them all. Bypassing the semantic fires stoked by a cynical secular elite that worships mostly itself, who have all but destroyed common sensical political discourse, Gregg has made one more important contribution to the struggle for individual freedom and the American Constitution that may yet save us from ourselves.

Juliana Geran Pilon
Alexander Hamilton Institute for the
Study of Western Civilization