



Traitors to the Enlightenment Europe turns its back on Socrates, Locke, et al

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The first Western Enlightenment of the Greek fifth-century B.C. sought to explain natural phenomena through reason rather than superstition alone. Ethics were to be discussed in the realm of logic as well as religion. Much of what Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and the Sophists thought may today seem self-evident, if not at times nonsensical. But that century was the beginning of the uniquely Western attempt to bring to the human experience empiricism, self-criticism, irony, and tolerance in thinking.

The second European Enlightenment of the late 18th century followed from the earlier spirit of the Renaissance. For all the excesses and arrogance in its thinking that pure reason might itself dethrone religion — as if science could explain all the

mysteries of the human condition — the Enlightenment nevertheless established the Western blueprint for a humane and ordered society.

But now all that hard-won effort of some 2,500 years is at risk. The new enemies of Reason are not the enraged democrats who executed Socrates, the Christian zealots who persecuted philosophers of heliocentricity, or the Nazis who burned books. No, they are a pampered and scared Western public that caves to barbarism — dwarves who sit on the shoulders of dead giants, and believe that their present exalted position is somehow related to their own cowardly sense of accommodation.

What would a Socrates, Galileo, Descartes, or Locke believe of the

present decay in Europe — that all their bold and courageous thinking, won at such a great cost, would have devolved into such cheap surrender to fanaticism?

Just think: Put on an opera in today's Germany, and have it shut down, not by Nazis, Communists, or kings, but by the simple fear of Islamic fanatics.

Write a novel deemed critical of the Prophet Mohammed, as did Salman Rushdie, and face years of ostracism and death threats — in the heart of Europe no less.

Compose a film, as did Theo Van Gogh, and find your throat cut in "liberal" Holland.

Or better yet, sketch a cartoon in postmodern Denmark, and then go into hiding.

Quote an ancient treatise, as did the pope, and learn your entire Church may come under assault, and the magnificent stones of the Vatican offer no refuge.

There are three lessons to be drawn from these examples. In almost every case, the criticism of the artist or intellectual was based either on his supposed lack of sensitivity or of artistic excellence. Van Gogh was, of course, obnoxious and his films puerile. The pope was woefully ignorant of public relations. The cartoons in Denmark were amateurish and unnecessary. Rushdie was an over-rated novelist, whose chickens of trashing the West he sought refuge in finally came home to roost. The

latest Hans Neuenfels adaptation of Mozart's Idomeneo was silly.

But isn't that precisely the point? It is easy to defend artists when they produce works of genius that do not offend popular sensibilities — Da Vinci's Mona Lisa or Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws — but not so when an artist offends with neither taste nor talent. Yes, Pope Benedict is old and scholastic; he lacks both the smile and tact of the late Pope John Paul II, who surely would not have turned for elucidation to the rigidity of Byzantine scholarship. But isn't that why we must come to the present Pope's defense — if for no reason other than because he has the courage to speak his convictions when others might not?

Note also the constant subtext in this new self-censorship: fear of radical Islam and its gruesome appendages of beheadings, suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices, barbaric fatwas, riotous youth, petrodollar-acquired nuclear weapons, oil boycotts and price hikes, and fist-chanting mobs.

In contrast, almost daily in Europe, "brave" artists caricature Christians and Americans with impunity. Why?

For a long list of reasons, among them most surely the assurance that they can do this without being killed. Such cowards puff out their chests when trashing an ill Oriana Fallaci or Ariel Sharon or beleaguered George W. Bush in the most demonic of tones, but prove sunken and sullen when threatened by a Dr

Zawahri or a grand mufti of some obscure mosque.

Second, almost every genre of artistic and intellectual expression has come under assault: music, satire, the novel, films, academic exegesis. Somehow Europeans have ever-so-insidiously given up the promise of the Enlightenment that welcomed free thought of all kinds, the more provocative the better.

So the present generation of Europeans really is heretical, made up of traitors of a sort, since they themselves, not just their consensual governments or some invader across the Mediterranean, have nearly destroyed their won freedoms of expression — out of worries over oil, or appearing as illiberal apostates of the new secular religion of multiculturalism, or another London or Madrid bombing.

Europe boldly produces films about assassinating an American president, and routinely disparages the Church that gave the world the Sermon of the Mount, but it simply won't stand up for an artist, a well-meaning Pope, or a ranting filmmaker when the mob closes in. The Europe that believes in everything turns out to believe in nothing.

Third, examine why all these incidents took place in Europe. Since 2000 it has been the habit of blue-state politicians to rebuke the yokels of America, in part by showing us a

supposedly more humane Western future unfolding in Europe. It was the European Union that was at the forefront of mass transit; the EU that advanced Kyoto and the International Criminal Court. And it was the heralded EU that sought "soft" power rather than the Neanderthal resort to arms.

And what have we learned in the last five years from its boutique socialism, utopian pacifism, moral equivalence, and cultural relativism? That it was logical that Europe most readily would abandon the artist and give up the renegade in fear of religious extremists.

Those in an auto parts store in Fresno, or at a NASCAR race in southern Ohio, might appear to Europeans as primordialists with their guns, "fundamentalist" religion, and flag-waving chauvinism. But it is they, and increasingly their kind alone, who prove the bulwarks of the West. Ultimately what keeps even the pope safe and the continent confident in its vain dialogues with Iranian lunatics is the United States military and the very un-Europeans who fight in it.

We may be only 30 years behind Europe, but we are not quite there yet. And so Europe has done us a great favor in showing us not the way of the future, but the old cowardice of our pre-Enlightenment past.

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