



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Dare to Understand

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In the 1780s, the hot button issue in German politics was civil marriage. Christian clergy argued that marriage belonged solely in the domain of the church-- marriage was far too foundational an institution to uncouple from the moral and spiritual teachings of the church. Only religion, pastors and theologians argued, could define marriage based in its biblical roots. In the academy, a group of philosophers began to argue against such a sequestering of marriage, which was not only a private religious affair, but a public and therefore civic institution.

Enlightenment ideals, they argued, supported the freedom of marriage as a civil institution that promoted human freedom, independent from the confines of religious dogma. A prominent clergy member involved in the controversial debate, Reverend Johann Friedrich Zöllner, asked the question:

“What is enlightenment? This question, which is nearly as important as ‘What is truth?’ should be answered before one begins to enlighten.”

In response to Zollner, a group of public intellectuals released a series of essays, among them most prominently was Immanuel Kant’s 1783 essay *What is Enlightenment*. In this essay, Kant proposed the untethering of moral and ethical ideals from the spheres of the religious and the nation state.

Kant argued for the importance of the “public use of one’s reason,” which can be informed by, but is distinctly independent from the nation state, or tribe, or religious sect. Conversely, the “private use of reason,” is constrained by one’s civic or religious post, such as a government or church official. Kant argued that positions of power will undeniably shape and distort reason. As a counterbalance, Kant emphasized the role of the scholar/ citizen calling humanity to awaken from a slumber of dogma and rhetoric to advocate for a sense of a larger public good.

“Dare to understand! Have the courage to use your own understanding,” is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.” This enlightenment requires nothing but *freedom*--and the most innocent of all that may be called “freedom”: freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters.

Now I hear the cry from all sides: “Do not argue!”

The officer says: “Do not argue--drill!”

The tax collector: “Do not argue--pay!”

The pastor: “Do not argue--believe!”

Only one ruler in the world says: “Argue as much as you please, but obey!”

We find restrictions on freedom everywhere. But which restriction is harmful to enlightenment? I reply: the public use of one’s reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment to mankind.

In its time, the Enlightenment attempted to respond intellectually to the plight of history. Its thinkers were reflecting back on the past with optimism for the future. In the past, they saw the best and the worst of human nature—the rise and fall of great empires and civilizations, crusades carrying out violence in the name of religious truth, colonialism and genocide. In Kant’s view, the vestiges of tribalism could still be found in the bones of religious and government institutions. What corrupted these institutions was a restriction of one’s

individual reason. Since Kant argued that the church and the government could not be trusted to reliably act on behalf of individuals, the disciplines of science and the humanities would create new emerging institutions to fill the gaps, building a civil society with a moral interest in the flourishing of all of its members. As a member of the academy, Kant and other free thinkers felt a responsibility to humankind as an “enlightening” force.

In our time, enlightenment thinking has enjoyed a renaissance of its own. Over the past few years, a multitude of books and articles have popped up promoting the relevance of the enlightenment for today’s world, calling for a new age of reason.... most notably Michael Lynch’s *In Praise of Reason: Why Rationality Matters for Democracy* and Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now: the Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*.

Alongside this literature are those who cite the failure of reason to adequately address the realities of the modern world: global poverty, tribalism and violence... in the place of the age of reason, Pankaj Mishra calls this an Age of Anger.

His book *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* critiques the Western dominance of the enlightenment narrative. He looks to the rise of nationalism, isolationism, and terrorism and tribalism-- conflict rooted in expressions of identity-- religious extremism, political affiliation and race, class, gender. He looks at the rise of authoritarianism and the erosion of democracy. In Mishra’s view, the fractured reality of the modern world is so far from any kind of moral standards that it has created a “toxic culture of resentment.” He calls for not only a return to enlightenment values, but a re-examination of the true meaning of reason and freedom in light of the painful reality of human suffering and harm.

The stunning events of our age of anger, and our perplexity before them, make it imperative that we anchor thought in the sphere of emotions; these upheavals demand nothing less than a radically enlarged understanding of what it means for human beings to pursue the contradictory ideals of freedom, equality and prosperity. With so many of our landmarks in ruins, we can barely see where we are headed, let alone chart a path. But even to get our basic bearings we need, above all, greater precision in matters of the soul.

Indeed, as Mishra has put it so elegantly, we are in need of greater precisions in matters of the soul.

The solution, Lynch and Pinker posit, is a hopeful return to the humanism of our enlightenment values. Where tribalism sees a threat in the other, humanism creates empathy. In Pinker’s book *Enlightenment Now*, he centers sympathy as the essential companion to reason, key to overcoming the self-interest of the tribe and to the embrace of the whole:

As a sentient being, you have the potential to flourish. You can refine your faculty of reason itself by learning and debating. You can seek explanations of the natural world through science, and insight into the human condition through the arts and humanities. You can make the most of your capacity for pleasure and satisfaction, which allowed your ancestors to thrive and thereby allowed you to exist. As the heir to billions of years of life perpetuating itself, you can perpetuate life in turn.

You have been endowed with a sense of sympathy—the ability to like, love, respect, help, and show kindness—and you can enjoy the gift of mutual benevolence with friends, family, and colleagues. And because reason tells you that none of this is particular to you, you have the responsibility to provide to others what you expect for yourself. You can foster the welfare of other sentient beings by enhancing life, health, knowledge, freedom, abundance, safety, beauty, and peace. History shows that when we sympathize with others and apply our ingenuity to improving the human condition, we can make progress in doing so, and you can help to continue that progress.

This week, our national gaze was fixed on the unfolding of the Supreme Court's nomination of Judge Brett Kavanaugh. We heard the emotional testimony of Christine Blasey Ford, who recalled in great detail an alleged assault by Kavanaugh over thirty years ago.

In these hearings, we saw the two post-enlightenment world views clashing against one another — the age of reason, and the age of anger.

We saw Dr. Ford's using of science to explain her certainty of her assault through her analysis of her own experience. At one point she schooled the Senate Committee on the neuroscience of memory:

"It's just basic memory functions, and also just the level of norepinephrine and epinephrine in the brain that ... encodes memories into the hippocampus so that trauma-related experience is locked there [while] other memories just drift." This, she explained, is why the image of Kavanaugh and Mark Judge is seared in her memory. Who can forget her haunting words: "Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter."

And we saw the use of anger from Judge Kavanaugh and Senator Lindsay Graham. Kavanaugh lashing out against the committee as he refuted the allegations. Kavanaugh was angry at Ford for coming forward, for the damage done to his family through the scrutiny of the investigations, angry at the Clintons and the Democrats. Lindsay Graham, amplified the righteousness of Kavanaugh's anger, calling the hearing not a job interview but "hell." Anger became the currency of credibility. Doreen St. Felix wrote in the *New Yorker* that it was "the patriarchy testing how far its politics of resentment can go. And there is no limit.

We should also not discount saw the use of blazing hot anger rising up from women, particularly from survivors of sexual assault and abuse... one posting I saw from a woman named Audra Alexander captured this well...

Kavanaugh is going to get confirmed, we all know that. A lot of women will be very angry. Some might even take to the streets. But this won't be the tipping point. There won't be a tipping point, there never is. There will just be the subterranean lava flow of women's anger - slow, blistering, savage and inexorable. We'll go to bed angry, we'll get up angry, we'll drink our coffee and fix the kids' breakfasts angrily, we'll drive thru car line and to work angry, we'll eat silent lunches with rage and we'll pick up groceries on the way home with vengeance on our hearts. We'll kiss our partners and our kids goodnight wrathfully. We'll cry hot, silently screaming tears in the middle of brushing our teeth. We'll go to bed angry. We'll get up angry...

Nothing will seem to change for you. The anger will shift, seismic but unseen. Before the lava used to burn us to ash on the inside. It's bubbling over now. Nothing will seem to have changed, until it's too late. The lava of our anger is going to cover the earth and bury you.

The age of anger and the age of reason.

The question of whether or not Dr. Blasey Ford was believed was superseded by whether or not it makes a difference in impacting Kavanaugh's confirmation. The issue here is not whether or not the assault happened, but whether or not the Senate, or the nation, find the hearing's expressions of anger or reason more compelling. The question is not whether we believe Kavanaugh or Ford, but whether or not we care.

It is no accident that the Supreme Court has become the place where our democracy's enlightenment values are being tested publicly. The judge is someone who is entrusted to uphold our constitution and the rights retained by the people, to steward our democracy by interpreting the rule of law on behalf of all of its citizens. Jeffrey Toobin has written of the role of the judge and frequently comments on judicial affairs. In his book *The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Court*, he writes:

It is confidence in the men and women who administer the judicial system that is the true backbone of the rule of law. It is the Nation's confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law.

The two qualities Toobin feels are most important for a judge to display in their opinions? "Decency" and "empathy." Will the evidence and facts of an FBI investigation which confirms or refutes Kavanaugh as the perpetrator of that assault actually disqualify him from the role of Supreme Court Judge? It's doubtful. Should his anger call his appropriateness into question? His inability to maintain decorum, civility? Absolutely.

It would be interesting to hear Kant's take on the role of the judge in our American democracy. Untethered from religion or political party, the judge should be the kind of arbiter of the "public use of one's reason." Let's hearken back to Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority ruling in the decision which would allow gays and lesbians equal access to the institution of marriage. It was the judge that acted in the Kantian sense as the voice for public reason and human freedom—judge as interpreter of marriage as a tool of human flourishing. Remember his words?

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.

In the Trump era, it is not just the court which is in danger of losing its soul, but our nation itself.