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# The Anti-Enlightenment and Human Rights

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# THE ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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*“For two hundred years we had sawed and sawed and sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen, our efforts were rewarded and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake. The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses at all, it was a cesspool filled with barbed wire.”—George Orwell*

Modern human rights stem from the Enlightenment—the 18th century intellectual and cultural movement in the Western World which rejected tyranny, superstition, cruelty, and persecution in favor of open-mindedness, liberalism, reason, and humanitarianism. Arising out of the evolving standards of decency which mark the moral progress of mankind, the Enlightenment unleashed irresistible civilizing influences that have elevated and improved social manners, government practices, and political institutions. Respect for human rights was fundamental to the Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence (1776), the U.S. Bill of Rights (1789), and the French Declaration des Droits de L’Homme (1789) are products of the Enlightenment.

An important reason for the recent decline in respect for human rights in America has been the spine-chilling rise of what might be called the Anti-Enlightenment, under which the moral progress of mankind, the basis for human rights, is being halted or even reversed. The Anti-Enlightenment rests on four sinister doctrines: (1) Social Darwinism; (2) Gradgrindism; (3) Draconianism; and (4) Sacerdotal Inhumanism.

If human rights are to survive, the evolving humanizing influences of the Enlightenment must overcome the descent into inhumaneness of the Anti-Enlightenment mentality.

*Social Darwinism* is the reptilian philosophy that human life is a struggle for survival of the fittest and that neither government nor the individual should aid persons who, due to poverty, infirmity, or

misfortune, are in dire need. “The strong will survive; if you’re good, you’ll make it,” epitomizes this philosophy. That the weak or the oppressed perish or suffer due to lack of assistance is irrelevant.

*Gradgrindism*, a term coined in reference to Mr. Gradgrind, the heartless character in Dickens’ novel *HARD TIMES*, is the ice-cold philosophy that the only meaningful things are those that can either be weighed on a scales or measured with a ruler. Intangible things such as compassion and sympathy for others are therefore rejected as meaningless because they are not facts that can be calculated. Ayn Rand’s views are an example of Gradgrindism, as are the views of those who advocate an economic interpretation of law and society and believe that managerial efficiency is the summum bonum.

*Draconianism*—named after Draco, the ancient Greek lawmaker whose laws were so infamously harsh that even idleness was a capital crime—is the ferocious philosophy that governmental harshness and cruelty are admirable and that leniency to criminal offenders is sentimental weakness. Under this view, criminal punishments should involve the maximum severity; the more suffering the justice system inflicts on offenders, the better the system. Under Draconianism, concern for the plight of the pitilessly punished is “false humanitarianism.”

*Sacerdotal inhumanism*—the polar opposite of secular humanism—is the religious view that God is cruel, wrathful, and bigoted—that God is homophobic; that God supports capital punishment; that God supports wars of aggression waged by the United States; that God opposes universal medical care and food stamps; that God wants more prisons. Sacerdotal inhumanism is common among various organized Christian faiths these days. Kick ‘em in the teeth for Jesus, they prate. God, they seem to think, is not loving and forgiving but vengeful and barbaric; and Christians should behave similarly.

Each of these four foundations of the Anti-Enlightenment scorns human rights, which are sapped when significant segments of the community

believe that the weak and helpless are on their own, that compassion is a bogus concept, that severe punishments are dandy, or that God has an authoritarian personality.

To protect human rights we must remember and return to the values of decency and fairness that human rights are founded on and without which they cannot flourish. We must recognize and reject evil philosophies that seek to turn the clock back to a time when life was nasty, brutish, and short, and mankind was not thought to be endowed with unalienable rights.