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MacDonald King Aston

Fire Eater! Editor

Man the Machine: A Conversation with Bazz Childress and MacDonald King Aston

Part III: The Light & The Light Blown Out

1 March 2006

Dear Bazz,

The mixing of Athens and Jerusalem of which you spoke in your last piece got me to thinking about the role of both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in constructing modernity. Though distinct in time the Renaissance overlaps the Enlightenment both temporally and thematically. Without the Renaissance, it is difficult to imagine the Enlightenment and vice versa. The two periods form the metaphorical Athens of the alleged "modern mind," which looks increasingly less modern as time passes, and are therefore worthy of entering into the lists of our conversation.

While I understand why scholars treat the two periods as distinct, I myself find the similarities outweighing the differences. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment form a conceptual whole, since they both were attempts to resuscitate the Classical world (though that effort would always be informed by the Christian societies in which both periods came to be). First, a little history, if for no other reason than to remind myself of it.

As I understand it, the Enlightenment refers to the European intellectual movement that arose in the 17th and 18th centuries. Isaac Kramnick puts the dates as between the 1680s and the 1790s, corresponding to the Glorious Revolution in England, and the writings of John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton (whose *Principia* was published in 1687). Kramnick ends the period with the revolutions in France and America in the latter part of the 18th century. The Enlightenment comprised a worldview for those who lived in it, or at least those who cared enough to comprehend it and trace its meanings in the patterns of human life. The worldview of the Enlightenment is easy to sum up. It is the triumph of reason over faith, a dichotomy which rightfully to us now seems overly optimistic, for we have seen the sanguine results of reason in the War of 1865-1861, in Wilson's Useless War, at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, in Viet Nam, Iraq, and so the list continues.

The Enlightenment thinkers were affected much by the old Classical texts and, of course, by the spread of those texts after the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in circa 1450. It is perhaps more than an irony that Martin Luther (1483-1656) was born just a few short years after Gutenberg's invention, for the same technology that permitted the philosophes of 18th-century France to compile and distribute their Encyclopédie was the same technology that enabled the Reformation to spread to all corners of Christendom. Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, and the Marquis de Condorcet were thus able to disseminate their new paganism just as Luther and his followers were able to spread their reforming Christian theology by means of this new technology,

The battle, however, between *ratio* and *fides* had already begun centuries earlier, with the period we call the Renaissance, a term invented by 15th-century scholars to designate the time from the fall of antiquity to their own time. The Renaissance thus dates from about 1450 to the burning of Rome by the armies of Emperor Charles V in May of 1527.

The Renaissance (from the Latin for "rebirth") produced the Humanism of which you have written. Little wonder, perhaps, that the *umanisti* of 15th-century Italy were so struck by the rational principle as their Enlightenment counterparts were. This was an age of the seemingly miraculous: the exploration of new continents, the overthrow of the Ptolemaic astronomy for the Copernican, the decline of the feudal polity, the growth of commerce and industry, and the invention of paper, printing, the compass, and gunpowder, among others. To those who lived in the Renaissance, however, the chief glory of the times was the rediscovery of classical thought, especially coming on the heels of the "dark ages."

It is this rebirth of Classicism, with its corresponding focus on the primacy of reason, that connects the Renaissance so intimately with the Enlightenment, that binds the two periods together, as I argue, into one movement, howsoever spread across the years. Classicism forms the fundamental affinity between the two times that enables Peter Gay to call them both forms of modern paganism. The Renaissance created modernity in short, and the Enlightenment synthesized the strands that made up that creation into the tapestry that is our own era. If the humanists of the Renaissance saw themselves as rescuing antiquity, the Enlightenment thinkers saw themselves as perfecting the task.

At the heart of Humanism, which is really the animus for the Renaissance/Enlightenment, is the human being; not in relation to other human beings necessarily, but the human being alone, the individual and his self-interest. The human being was henceforth considered capable, by his unaided reason, and not by faith in God or even tradition, to ascertain the conduct of human affairs. The entire purpose of the Enlightenment in particular was to free the individual from the constraints of the community (or any other corporate body, such as the Church). How to achieve this radical makeover of the individual? As you pointed out, *Sapere Aude!* became the mantra of the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant spelled it out in 1784: "Have courage to use your own reason"—that is the motto of enlightenment." Denis Diderot, in his article on the Encyclopédie (written for the same Encyclopédie), put the issue more truculently: "All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings...."

The Enlightenment thinkers reorganized the political, moral, intellectual, and economic worlds around the individual. Hedonism became acceptable as pleasure and happiness were accepted as the final of human existence, and on this earth, not the next. The hippies of the 1960s would have happily summed it all up in one phrase: "If it feels good do it, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." Rousseau went along with that protasis when he abandoned all his children to an orphanage. He wouldn't, he said, have made a good father.

Attending the French and British Enlightenment was the newly found goodness of commercialism and progress, both of which were seen as progressive and reformative, capable of striking down both aristocratic privilege as well as religion. Marx here had his philosophical birth long before his physical birth. The new man was the Radical, the Reformer, and a Leveler to the core. But both movements were, at bottom, simply recreations of ancient paganism. In this sense, neither could claim an originality; certainly not in the same way that Christianity could claim, and still does. The rise of modern paganism is important to us for at least two reasons: it illustrates the pervasive influence of classical Greek and Rome upon our own thinking, and thereby equally illustrates the necessity of understanding antiquity both in relation to the Renaissance/Enlightenment and to our own time.

The accomplishments of antiquity were impressive, especially those of ancient Greece (for the Romans were really followers of the

Hellenes). The influence of the sophists, of Plato, Aristotle, and most especially, Socrates, can readily be seen in the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), whose quoting of the ancient Greek and Roman writers seems to us painfully slow and laborious. But to Montaigne, living in the shadow of the declining Renaissance and antedating the Enlightenment by almost a century, the ancient thinkers pointed the way to a thorough-going humanism. Thus said Terence (Publius Terentius Afer, circa 195-160) "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto" (I am a human being: nothing human is alien to me).

In our day, we might say the opposite, that just about everything human is alien to us; we would certainly like to believe that the monstrous evil that humanity is capable of is alien to us. The Christ, of course, said the opposite, that evil is in and of us, and inescapably so. In saying this, Jesus reveals the chasm between humanism and Christianity, for the God of Christianity is not the God of Humanity. The God of Abraham is the *I AM* above time and history, but the gods of the humanists were located in men.

Beyond human reason, beyond Diderot's manic dualism of the war between the philosophers and the anti-philosophers, beyond the Enlightenment itself, lay only the arid wasteland of David Hume's "Stupidity, Christianity, & Ignorance." Here, I believe, we see the failure of Humanism at its core. If the Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers were trying to do away with the "superstition" of Christianity, it was because of their problems with its theodicy, because of the Problem of Evil. It is remarkable how frequently the metaphors of dark and light comes to the service of the Enlightenment. Thus Turgot: "Emerge, Europe from the darkness that covered you!" Naturally, the "light of reason" shone amid the dark of superstition.

But the humanists could no more answer the question of evil than could the Christian scholastics before them, whose best efforts seemed to come down to "an absence of good." Evil is just as real to humanism as it is to theism. But in tracing the end of all things to humanity, the humanists came up against a dead end: themselves.

There is no "answer" to the problem of evil, either in Christianity or in Humanism. Evil simply is. And that it *is* is *what* it is. But Jesus the Christ did not come to settle the quarrels of the scholastic clerics any more than he came to justify the puffing-up of the humanists. He came to save and to announce the Kingdom of God, and in both he gave an answer to a much larger question than evil. He answered the question of existence itself. He did so by proclaiming, as did the prophets before Him, an ontological order beyond the flux of experience. His truth was not, therefore, relative to human experience, as is that of the humanists, but absolute and central to it.

To attempt to refute the message of the Christ, as the humanists sought to do, is to assert the possibility of existence as no-order (for even chaos is only known through contrast with order). And that attempt is the suicide of reason, for reason itself is of the creature, limited, and a wisp in the winds of all things. To use reason to grasp what is beyond reason is the great failure of Humanism and explains why it has no possible chance of success. This is not to say that Christianity is set against reason; quite the opposite. It is, however, to say that the limits of reason are found in the reasoner. To extrapolate the extra-experiential from experience is not only absurd, but impossible. But that is the mission of the humanist: to locate what is outside of experience within experience. Whether evolutionism (philosophical naturalism) or the evanescent ghost of a hypostasized Progress, the humanist must confront the impossibility of his own enterprise in attempting to think beyond thought, to experience beyond experience. Montaigne's first-person of his *Essais* has nought other to turn to than a self-referential self, and is, therefore, incarcerated within a hopeless tautological prison of reason.

To Christianity, no such limits apply, for the Christ came to announce, as well as embody, a reality that lay beyond reason ultimately. That the humanist can not get to that beyond is irrelevant; for Christians can. There is in fact an order beyond the senses, beyond the world of the seen, or, as the philosophers put it, a noumenal world beyond the phenomenal. The temptation to

arrive at that noumenal world by use of human reason is, however understandable, just that: a temptation. Kant's "ding-an-sich," the "thing in itself," could not and never did exist any more than the Platonic Ideas, which is to say, as metaphors for the noumenal. This Socrates knew, by the way, when he spoke in the Apology (40A) of the prophetic voice of his "daimon," or "sign"; what we might call an angel. In Socrates, for whom the noumenal was more real than the phenomenal, we have come to the end of what the Classical world could teach us, and the beginning of the message of the Christ.

In Jesus the Christ is the refutation both of Humanism, with its suicidal ratiocination, and of reason itself. Beyond experience we may not go, and the experience of the Christ, of God, is as real in itself as humanistic reasoning is unreal of itself. We can get to the former, but never to the latter. The road from Athens leads not to Jerusalem, but to Rome, as Rousseau himself had written in 1751 when boasting of their "magnificence and glory." In this sense, then, I would say that the combine of Athens and Rome is really found only in the doctrinal part of Christianity, touching very little upon the essence of the message of Christ. To some extent, the Gospel of John uses the thoroughly Hellenic concept of the *logos*; a concept alien to the Jewish mind of the time. But John's message is ultimately a Christian message that transcends Greek philosophy entirely.

Athens proclaimed, as Saul of Tarsus saw, the unknowable God. Jesus the Christ proclaimed the known God. When the light of human reason was blown out at Shiloh and Dachau, at Gettysburg and Hiroshima, the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world still shone, as it always had.

IN CHRISTO IESU FILIO DEI,

Mac