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Your View: The Enlightenment and its enemy: white nationalism

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By Mike Frates

The European Enlightenment of the 1780s made two promises. The first, if we embrace reason to the exclusion of all other human capacities, the inner workings of nature will be revealed, and the technology that results will better our lives. The price we paid was the embrace of a loving God. As the great Enlightenment philosophers began to apply reason like a scalpel to our understanding of human nature, Jeremy Bentham and Emmanuel Kant were developing sophisticated theories of moral philosophy that bring us to the second covenant. The Enlightenment also promised to make us better people, instilling the wisdom with which to wield this technology. One promise was kept, the other ... not so much.

Our species survived for quite a while without the benefit of Enlightenment principles. We fashioned tools out of rocks and sticks to better manipulate our environment. Hunting methods provided us with the protein necessary to support our evolutionarily expensive large brains. And, we developed strategies to exploit the resources around us. that which was different from us may have been dangerous in the form of competitors or predators.

Hunter-gathering gave way to farming, and crop surpluses allowed families to barter for goods and services. The feudal bureaucracy was born. Militaries were assembled, and walls were built to protect us from other humans. We continued to highlight the differences between ourselves and others because that which was different may have been dangerous. The Portuguese slave trade aggravated these ingrained, superficial biases.

We share 96 percent of our DNA with one of the most vicious and territorial animals on the planet, Pan troglodytes: the chimpanzee. As we civilized ourselves, those hunting, social and mating strategies began to translate into two principles that will forever bedevil our species, "pride and respect." The recognition of which became a zero-sum game. Our attempts to make sense out of our world through mythology, and, later, the three great monotheistic religions, normalized these influences. Instead of describing the evolutionary psychology that shaped our behavior, they became the values that dictated how we should behave.

Militaries grew larger, the walls got higher and the 1780s came and went. The lessons of the Enlightenment triggered Industrialization along with advances in warfare. We also witnessed the geopolitical status quo reach its culmination in balance of power politics. Germany brought the world to the brink of war when England, and the rest of Western Europe, failed to contain Bismarck. The old way of doing business had broken down, and humanity was about to pay a dear price as a result.

We responded to the two World Wars by embracing Enlightenment principles. Nations were no longer judged based solely upon their actions, but now their intentions as well. We held state action to moral standards. We embraced universal human rights in recognition of our common humanity, and self-determination flourished with the spread of democracy. We learned that pooling our resources would result in greater social justice for all. We looked forward to ameliorating human poverty and disease while we looked back at the Holocaust.

Populist elections both here and in Britain have, for the first time, placed this global order founded on Enlightenment principles under serious attack. But make no mistake: These issues have been raging ever since Nietzsche declared God's death. Science unleashed the wonders of nature while it reduced love to a chemical reaction. Science charted the heavens as it stripped us of our soul. The death of God meant the death of Our Father who gave our lives meaning and purpose. To embrace reason — to embrace the truth — we had to step out from beneath God's grace, and find the courage to tackle the world on our own terms. From Roe v. Wade to how

we educate our children to our justice system, everyone has a dog in this fight.

There are a few groups who oppose the Enlightenment. Pride of place goes to religious evangelicalism trying to resuscitate an enchanted vision of Camelot, but there is something refreshingly honest about these white nationalists. Instead of using religion to drape their most base impulses in respectability following Machiavelli's "The Prince," they put their pre-Enlightenment, tribal racism right there on display, stripped of any pious pretext. Our goal should be to repress our inner Troglodyte, and embrace our better angels, but that's not the problem right now. The problem is that the troglodytes are winning.

Mike Frates practices criminal law in the City of New Bedford.