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Bush Ignores the Cost of Freedom

Commentary / Commentary

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President Bush is exacerbating the fears of many Muslims.

By Michael Coblenz

President Bush says that freedom is a gift from God, but radical Muslims fear that freedom will destroy their society. Oddly, both may be right.

In his April press conference, President Bush said, "I ... have this belief, strong belief, that freedom is not this country's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world."

Many people may not understand the religious basis for this statement, but freedom has long been part of Christian theology. The idea is implicit in the Bible, but it was made explicit by Martin Luther at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther said God made man free, and as a result, man should not be constrained by a church made by men. At first Luther used the idea to attack specific teachings of the Catholic Church, in particular indulgences and purgatory.



The Church's main spokesman against Luther, Johann Eck, said that the logical conclusion of this idea was that each individual would be free to develop his (or her) own understanding of God, and eventually religion would become entirely individualized. We see today that Eck was pretty close to the mark. There are now hundreds (if not thousands) of Christian denominations, and a growing number of interfaith movements.

We can interpret Eck's point to be that all ideas (even good ones) can be misused by some and taken to unintended extremes by others. Freedom, as Luther suggests, is derived from the inherent value of each individual, and it leads to the recognition of individual autonomy. But freedom, as Eck recognized, can also lead to the erosion of external controls and to absolute and unconstrained individualism and individual behavior.

The real problem with the idea of freedom was that once Luther had broken the hegemony of the Church, the floodgates were open to people wanting all sorts of freedoms. Thinkers wanted intellectual freedom and politicians wanted political freedom, and each has been taken to an extreme far beyond what Luther could have envisioned.

Some people took Luther's idea of freedom and used it to create political freedom. At first, kings looking to disentangle themselves from the Christian church declared state religions, but as a result nationalism was born. Then intellectuals and politicians wanted personal political freedom, and eventually democracy was born.

Once individuals came to believe that they could control government, they began to want more control over their own lives. Perhaps not purposefully or even logically, but eventually, individual autonomy led to the erosion and ultimately the elimination of most external constraints on the individual.

Martin Luther said that each individual had the right to be free to know and understand God, but his views were tempered by the belief that this freedom was not an unconstrained right because God (and God's rules) provided a natural constraint. But over time the constraints provided by God were questioned, challenged, eroded, and in some cases eliminated. Now we are seemingly left with an ethos that says that each individual has the right to do whatever he or she wants, completely unconstrained.

Many scholars used Luther's idea to promote intellectual freedom. Scientists wanted the freedom to explore ideas and to experiment unconstrained by Church teachings. This freedom allowed people to look at the sky and ultimately to create new scientific theories. The first men to study the sky removed the earth from the center of the solar system, and later scientists removed man from the center of the universe.

In the 1850s, Charles Darwin used the freedom of intellectual inquiry to analyze the differences among various species, and he determined that living organisms had gradually changed--evolved--over time. Darwin said that even man evolved, but he didn't draw the obvious conclusion. Others did: if man evolved, then perhaps he had not been created by God, and if God had not created man, then perhaps there was no God.

Once scientists showed the value of rationally analyzing the physical world, other intellectuals realized that everything could be better understood through rational analysis, even the Bible. Not long after Darwin, scholars used their freedom of inquiry to analyze the Bible, and they decided that it had been written by men for political purposes. Free inquiry into religion came to such a point that a crazy German named Friedrich Nietzsche said "God is dead." God gave mankind freedom, and men became so free that they decided that they no longer needed God.

The problem in each of these areas is not with the idea of freedom, but the fact that every idea, even good ideas, can be taken to extremes. That was Eck's point in his criticism of Luther. The creation of individual rights and the recognition of individual autonomy didn't just give us democracy, but also led to the mistaken belief by some people that there should be absolute freedoms. And the push for absolute freedoms has led to many negative social consequences.

Luther questioned only the teachings of the Church, and he challenged only the authority of the Pope; he did not question or challenge God. But he opened the door to questioning and challenging. In the centuries since Luther, people have questioned all teachings, which has led to great scientific and intellectual advancement, but has resulted in great moral uncertainty. In the same period, people have challenged all authority, which has led to unbelievable levels of human freedom, but it has also led to license and libertine behavior.

It is an odd and perhaps tragic irony that freedom killed God. God liberated man, and once man realized he was free, he wanted absolute freedom, freedom from everything, including God. God's gift of freedom led to His own demise.

Christian conservatives hate what these negative aspects of freedom have done to God, to religion, and to society. They are outraged that some people deny the existence of God. They hate the fact that many aspects of religion (prayer in school, for example) have been eliminated from public life. And they believe that these steps away from religion have led to an out-of-control libertine society.

Curiously, conservative Christians share this disdain of Western Liberalism with Islamic fundamentalists. These Muslims recognize what unconstrained freedoms have done to western "Christian" societies, and they fear it will do the same thing to their societies. They fear that political freedom will lead to the separation of Mosque and state; they fear that individual freedom will erode traditional family values; and they fear the intellectual freedom will marginalize the Quran.

It is an open question whether Osama bin Laden is truly an Islamist or merely a politically savvy revolutionary who is using or misusing Islam. But, whichever is the case, he is taking

advantage of the fear of some of the deleterious effects of unconstrained freedom within Islamic societies to foment animosity towards the "freedom loving" West.

President Bush may believe that he is calming the fears of Muslims when he talks about freedom as a gift from the Almighty. But, because of his lack of understanding of some of the insidious aspects of the idea of freedom, as well as his ignorance of the Islamic world, he is really confirming their worst fears. The President is, of course, free to be wrong. But when his errors exacerbate the problem, we all suffer.

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