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THE END OF HISTORY AND CHARLES FREEMAN: A POLEMIC¹

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“The word ‘heresy’ not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous. The word ‘orthodoxy’ not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong.” —G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: Bodley Head, 1905), p. 12

Introduction: the two fallacies

My thanks to Professor Hartley for his generous invitation to be here tonight, and to Mr. Freeman for his intriguing comments. Tonight has been styled a debate, but I honestly doubt we will come to a conclusion. I’ve read Mr. Freeman’s book, the *Closing of the Western Mind*. After 403 pages, I’m afraid I was not convinced. And at the end of the day, I honestly doubt that I’ll be able to convince Mr. Freeman, either. Mr. Freeman’s central claim in *The Closing of the Western Mind* is evidently that he is the champion of the Greek tradition of rationality, tolerance, progress, and sophistication, and Christians aren’t.ⁱ Because Mr. Freeman champions reason, which he doesn’t define, those who disagree with him are portrayed as irrational. Because he champions toleranceⁱⁱ, those who disagree with him are portrayed as intolerant. Because he champions a better society, those who disagree with him are portrayed as anti-progressive and authoritarian. So, from what I surmise to be Mr. Freeman’s perspective, it would be unseemly of him to take correction from an unsophisticated, half-educated, intolerant, close-minded, irrational, mystical rube like me. But, if you’ll allow me to tax your tolerance for the next half hour or so, I would like to make a case, not for Christianity, but against Mr. Freeman’s views. His speculative polemic proceeds from a complicated rhetorical strategy

¹ A polemical address is intended to keep with the spirit of the evening: to distinguish as clearly as possible between both sides, and to illustrate to the students that the issues under discussion are not merely academic, but are of great matter. Mr. Freeman’s book, although at times conciliatory, and sometimes mitigated by vague speculation and grammatical modality, is nevertheless at heart a tremendously offensive polemic. (This is the reading copy of the paper: I have not noted sources as I would in an academic paper.)

that rests on two overwhelming fallacies: the first is an either-or fallacy. Either you're a sophisticated, rational secular materialist like Mr. Freeman's Greeks, *or* you're an irrational, intolerant conservative like Mr. Freeman's Christians (195). Consider two of the most influential Christian theologians of all time, Augustine, the African bishop, and Thomas Aquinas, the official theologian of the Catholic Church. Mr. Freeman calls Augustine a pro-slavery conservative (206, 298); and although he doesn't come right out and call Aquinas a fascist, Mr. Freeman begins his book describing an image of Aquinas between two fasces, symbols of fascism, telling us that Aquinas seeks a "final solution" (5). In this kind of rhetorically zealous polemic, there's no middle ground: there's only us/them, good/bad, right/left, east/west, and pagan/Christian. Mr. Freeman paints a mistaken picture of Christianity as unyielding, dogmatic, and orthodox, rather than, more reasonably, as characterized by debates and intellectual struggles. This is not an uncommon error, and it usually arises from assuming that the writings of the Church Fathers are typical rather than exceptional.

The second logical fallacy underlying Mr. Freeman's book is the genetic fallacy, also known as guilt by association. Christians of the fourth century were duplicitous propagandizers; therefore, by implication, so are Christians today.ⁱⁱⁱ These claims are immediately relevant. Mr. Freeman's book is getting good reviews in the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* not because there's a sudden interest in the fourth century, but because he claims that Christians are psychologically delusional! It's an election year—nearly half of Americans self-identify as Evangelical Christians, and most of them don't vote for candidates endorsed by the *Boston Globe*. His book offers timely support to the inference that the Christian right is delusional.^{iv} So are conservative, religious Republicans: Christian churches, writes Mr. Freeman, have long been associated "with wealth, conservatism and the traditional structures of society" (203), and Christian bishops well into the 19th century were "financial overlords" (211). I'm not sure what "traditional structures of society" are, but I'm willing to bet they don't vote Kucinich.

Mr. Freeman's book is a radical polemic enmeshed in current political, social, and cultural conflicts. Like any polemicist, his tactic is to attack, but to appear fair and

balanced. He manages this by selecting only facts that prove his thesis and ignoring mounds of evidence that contradict it, by speculating on motives, and by offering half-truths—half-truths aren't quite true, but they're not quite false either. So one can conclude that Christians might be either psychotic or foolish. You can't disprove that they *might* be, but you can't prove it either. It's an argument by innuendo. It might be, could be, arguably is, suggests, indicates; one probes beneath the surface (217), reads between the lines, and imputes bad intent to one's ideological opponents.^v It's nothing new. In fact, Mr. Freeman's polemic is a very traditional speculative history.

So, what I would like to do tonight is first to describe Mr. Freeman's claims in their wider historical context. And second, I would like to make the case that Mr. Freeman's position is ultimately an appeal not to reason, but to the degradation of the human spirit. If this sounds unduly harsh, I can only reply that the stakes are uncommonly high. We are now at a point where the elite "North Atlantic mindset," as the Archbishop of Canterbury phrased it, is not only openly hostile to religion, but also promotes anti-religious bias as *sophisticated*, that is, as characteristic of the wise. John Humphries of the BBC, a self-identified atheist, recently spoke with the Archbishop. Humphries said that religion is at fault for all the suffering and war of the past. Now, that's simply an absurd claim.^{vi} Archbishop Rowan Williams replied: "It's another very familiar trope but the biggest slaughter of the 20th century..." and Humphries sheepishly finished his sentence for him: "... Mao Tse Tung, Stalin." "Right," said the Archbishop, "not religious. The biggest slaughters of the 20th century have not been religious."^{vii} A debate is at a very low point when you start comparing body counts. So beneath the rhetorical polish, we have devolved to children on a playground arguing about who's worse: my team or your team—your guys are intolerant, your guys killed more people, your guys are unsophisticated. The playground taunt now in vogue is the claim that religious people are psychologically delusional: they believe that a fairy tale is true. In his preface, Mr. Freeman comments that his work on Christianity overlaps with psychotherapy! I can't help but to recall Vladimir Lenin's phrase, that Christianity is an "infantile disorder." As I say, nothing new. And novelty is a real concern, since much of his book is based on the dichotomy between traditional thought and what Mr Freeman approvingly calls

“independent thinking.” He wrongly says that Christians call independent thinking pride (303)—apparently pride’s got nothing to do with arrogance. He condemns Jerome for not being original (274). He condemns Bede for not being original (318). And he praises any heretic, Arius, Pelagius, Jovinian, you name it, for standing up to authority. Christianity rejected reason, he writes, and “for centuries there was virtually no sign ... of independent thought, and most scholarly work focused on analysing, summarizing and commenting on the canon of authoritative texts” 326). Now it’s a strange thing for a historian to complain about analyzing a canon, but it does explain why Mr. Freeman pays lip service to so many scholarly, reasonable, and respected histories of the period, and instead vests his faith in revisionist fringe writers. He seems to think that anti-authoritarianism makes him independent and original. Ironically, his is a very traditional anti-authoritarianism.

Setting the Question: Protestant Polemic

So where does Mr. Freeman’s argument against Christianity come from? Who famously argued that Christianity is both irrational and authoritarian? Ironically, it’s a Christian argument. There’s a political side to the argument, and there’s a philosophical side.

The **political argument** really took shape in the 1500’s under King Henry VIII. Henry was the first Protestant king of England, and to distinguish the English Protestant Church from the Roman Catholic Church, he needed to use history to prove that Roman Catholics weren’t faithful Christians. In similar ways, Mr. Freeman wants to use history to prove that Christians aren’t rational Westerners.

Henry portrayed Catholicism as the superstition that compromised the integrity of the English state. Mr. Freeman takes a similar tack; following people like Edward Gibbon, Mr. Freeman has widened his scope from Catholics to include all Christians: and now, for him, *Christianity* is the superstition that compromises the integrity of the state. “Christian thought,” he writes, “gave irrationality the status of a universal ‘truth’ to the exclusion of those truths to be found through reason. So the uneducated was preferred to the educated and the miracle to the operation of natural laws” (322). *Preferred* is slippery, since we

cannot prove it one way or the other. But Mr. Freeman's claim that irrationality was given "the status of a universal 'truth'" is illogical, for irrationality, a universal, can't be true or false in and of itself. But his claim gives readers warrant to infer that Christians aren't smart enough to participate at the elite levels of modern society and government.

From the time of Henry VIII through the Enlightenment, Protestantism was asserted by *protesting* against Roman Catholics. The more assertive it was, the more Roman Catholics looked like cartoons (the rhetorical term is *straw men*): they are all wildly superstitious, irrational, they worship icons, their theology of the Trinity and of Mary is a complete fiction, they are like slaves to the authority of the Pope, and so on. The same straw men populate Mr. Freeman's book.^{viii} Now, it's possible to protest so extremely that one completely rejects churches, liturgy, sacraments, priests, and the divinity of Christ. In 1993, the Anglican Bishop of Durham denied the Second Coming, and in 1984 he called the Resurrection "a conjuring trick with bones." He also declared that one does not have to believe that Jesus is the Son of God to be a Christian—which is strange, because that's the only thing one has to believe. The Archbishop of York defended him.^{ix} Mr. Freeman's position in his book is not very far from this one.

Who stops the protest, and decides on authentic Christianity? This is the central question of Protestant churches. The brakes are applied by doctrinal authority. *Doctrinal*, from the Latin *doctus*, means learned or experienced. Just as a learned judge offers clarity in legal matters, so do learned theologians offer clarity in ecclesiastical matters. Episcopalians place doctrinal authority in *episcopi*, bishops; Presbyterians in *presbyters*, priests. Congregationalists, in the Congregation; and so forth until you get to the individual. At that point, authority for faith rests in an individual's inner light and reason. The Greek word for faith, *pistis*, means to trust or to accept that which has been concluded, or reasoned towards—Thucydides speaks of ἐλπίς πιστὴ λόγῳ (something "warranted by reason").^x Faith is never divorced from reason; if faith were solely a matter of reason, we'd call it reason. If it were solely a matter of obedience, we'd call it obedience.

Protestants said, if you can't credit Roman Catholic writers, then you have to go back to the primary sources. This is the usual first step for historians, too. But Mr. Freeman bases his faith, his *pistis*, not on an examination of the primary sources, but chiefly on the authority of revisionist historians, and I'm not sure trust in them is ἐλπίς πιστὴ λόγῳ. Standard histories, which are careful with judgment and evidence, he dismisses as "traditional" and "conservative" (notes to ch. 13). Had he lived a century ago, he might have called them Papist.^{xi}

Mr. Freeman continues yet another long tradition. Like the Puritan divines who interpreted Scripture with unshakeable certainty, so does Mr. Freeman. He also chastises those who disagree with him. And he does it all in the name of sophisticated tolerance. Here he is on the Nicene Creed:

One can understand why the concept of the Trinity was so difficult for many to accept. There is comparatively little in scripture [*sic*] that can be used to support the idea in its final form. The terminology of Father and Son used in the Synoptic Gospels, in fact, suggests a Jesus who saw himself as genuinely distinct from his "Father" (190).

It does, does it? Why only the synoptic Gospels, isn't he forgetting one? Listen closely. "The terminology ... *in fact, suggests.*" Clever rhetorical move, that. Facts are certain, suggestions ambiguous. *In fact, suggests.* Mr. Freeman uses this rhetorical trope often, couching certainty in the language of ambiguity, so that he can appear open-minded while being authoritative—his favorite phrase in this respect seems to be "it is *certainly arguable.*" So, after 2000 years of debate, Charles Freeman has cleared it all up. No need to argue anymore about the Trinity. And if you disagree with him, well, then you're *manipulating* pagan philosophy to "create Christian truth" (191). Only Mr. Freeman knows the real truth. He solves the issue of free will, too, telling us what the Gospels actually say about it (289). He also informs us that the Gospels require "ambivalence to authority" (306), with no hint of irony or of the Cretan paradox he's just walked into. So by the authority of the Gospels, we should be ambivalent to being ambivalent, and therefore certain? But, if we're certain we're not ambivalent. Cretan paradox.

So, Mr. Freeman's arguments have a long, unsavory political history. Like radical Protestants before him, he is substituting his authority for the authority of the Church.

Mr. Freeman's arguments also have a long **philosophical history**. Allow me to sketch it briefly. A good skeptic has to ask, Well, if we can't trust Scripture, if we can't trust the Church, and if we can't be certain that Jesus was a historical person, then why do people believe in Christianity?

At the University of Tübingen in the early 1800's, two roommates discussed this question. One was Georg [Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel. The other was Wilhelm [Friedrich Joseph] von Schelling. Christianity, they agreed, is a myth. But an enabling myth, a story that helps you to think about reality. Mr. Freeman also claims that the story of Jesus "passed quickly into myth" (105). Except Christians actually believe it!^{xii}

Hegel took his inspiration from the Greeks, chiefly from Aristotle, but also from the later Academy. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Greek philosophers were asking, What do all these gods signify? Why Zeus? Why Athena? One fellow, Euhemerus, told a story in which the gods were originally mighty men or women, charismatic individuals. Zealous followers deified them. That process is now called Euhemerization. Mr. Freeman argues precisely the same thing about Jesus. Jesus was just a charismatic man. His followers overzealously deified him. It's a very old argument.

But why make a myth out of Jesus? Hegel thought that we need myths in order to understand reality. But Mr. Freeman thinks it's because the Apostles suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. The crucifixion was so awful that "Christians could not bring themselves to represent Jesus nailed on the cross" (103). And the stories of Jesus' resurrection, he writes, "have to be set within the context of this trauma" (103). Post-traumatic psychosis. You see, Mr. Freeman is *helping* Christians to overcome their delusions.

Well, this is a pretty thin theory all around. The roads to Rome were lined with crucified men. Death was everywhere, as were torture, war, rape, and violence. So, it's hard to credit a trans-generational trauma based on the horror of a single crucifixion. More likely is that the crucifix did not accord with received Christian symbology of resurrection.

Now Hegel came up with his own theory to *help* Christians. He described the World Spirit, and how it moves through history to try to attain self-realization. Which is, of course, a lot more believable. Schelling, though, thought that the Christian myth should be replaced with a better one. And a wide circle of Romantics and Idealists offered lots of options, chief among them a return to the Nordic gods. Odin and Thor and Freya, some thought, would inspire that same awe of the infinite that Schleiermacher later claimed was the essence of religion. Myth, it was held, answers a spiritual need. And a German myth will answer German needs. (Well, we all know how *that* turned out.) So, as spirituality became defined as a kind of human weakness or disease, myths like Christianity became defined as a medicine to cure it. Thus, Mr. Freeman's book is the medicine, and for only \$16.95, you too can be cured.

Mr. Freeman takes it a little further: the Apostle Paul believed the myth, and therefore, must have had deep psychological problems. One of them was insecurity. In a wonderful moment of speculative history, Mr. Freeman imagines that Paul was rejected by the sophisticated philosophers of Athens (114). That's why Paul petulantly rejected philosophy entirely: "So for Paul it is not only the Law that has been superseded by the coming of Christ, it is the concept of rational argument, the core of the Greek intellectual achievement itself" (pp. 119–120). Mr. Freeman writes with great authority and confidence about Paul. And this is strange, because I can't help but note that his main source for his derivative chapter on Paul is E. P. Sanders, *Paul*. He left out the subtitle: *Paul: A Very Short Introduction*. You'd think a man who has the temerity to contradict 2000 years of Christian theology might not depend so heavily on a book that you can get for a few bucks at an airport.^{xiii}

His theory is a little thin, too. Rational argument is a *Greek* achievement? Did no one in China or Egypt have rational arguments? And Paul did not reject rational argument. Mr. Freeman is absolutely convinced he did, though: thus, “it became the mark of the committed Christian to be able to reject rational thought, and even the evidence of empirical experience” (120). This really is silly: Christians are irrational, pagans are not. So, if I convert to paganism, will I be better at math?^{xiv}

The next name in the philosophical history of Mr. Freeman’s argument is Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche asked, Why offer a new myth at all? Just let people—he called them “the herd grazing before you”—just let the herd know that there’s nothing *but* the *material world*. Walk to the edge of the abyss and stare into it! Mr. Freeman advises, if a little less bucolically, “One should not search for any form of absolute truth” in the Christian myth (23). Nietzsche leads in part to Jean-Paul Sartre, who talks about the “god-shaped hole” in Western consciousness after Nietzsche killed God. Some people fill it in with myth, some with history, some with politics, some with reason. But ultimately there’s nothing. *Nihil*. Life is meaningless, pass the cheese.

Those who subscribe to this line of thought will be forced to conclude that human beings are nothing more than animal impulses shaped by the cultural and social forces of our material world. We’re clever animals with a tax burden. Ask such a person—perhaps a cultural materialist or a secular humanist—why, and the most satisfactory explanation, one finds, is usually a base, animal impulse. Why do we support capitalism? Because we’re greedy. Why do we have Christianity? Because we have a psychological need.^{xv} Why did people start a church? For tax breaks and money (203). Why do Christians give to the poor? To reinforce their own authority (203) and to satisfy their guilt at being rich conservatives (213). That recognition of the primacy of base, venal, animal instinct is, in modern vernacular parlance, *sophistication*. It means that you’re wise (*sophos*) enough to recognize the materiality of human existence, and the constant fictionalizing that permits us to escape this desperate fact.^{xvi} If you are seriously religious, then clearly you have failed to realize your own need to be psychologically validated.

Nihilism

The political and philosophical history of Mr. Freeman's arguments bring us back finally to Hegel. That *sophisticated* awareness of our selfish and material venality, of the constructedness of our identities, communities, and ideals is precisely the self-awareness that Hegel spoke of. The World Spirit has evolved to produce humans. As part of nature, *we* have become self-aware. Thus, Nature has become self-aware. That moment, for Hegel, is called the End of History.^{xvii} From now on, we do not need to strive for self-awareness. We only repeat what has gone before.

And it is the End of History that provides the nihilism in Mr. Freeman's book.² Here is that elitist North Atlantic sensibility that most threatens religious communities worldwide. Who would not be profoundly offended by the claim that religion is a psychological delusion, a disease, and that the only cure is Western nihilistic sophistication. What remains for us without God? Sex? Mr. Freeman continually condemns Christians for not being orgiastic lechers. The Apostle Paul is condemned because Paul is "ill at ease with sexuality" (110), invoking all the usual politically correct pieties. When Jerome urges a young girl to keep her virginity, Mr. Freeman calls this an "assault on traditional family values" (232). He condemns legislation against pagan rites, which included sacred prostitution—parents would give their girls to a temple to be serially raped. Mr. Freeman offers us a world turned upside-down, where sexual excess and immodesty are virtues. Is this what's left to us after the death of God? Sex, drugs, money, power? The condescension of looking down your nose at someone and saying, "I'm sophisticated, and you're deluded"?

That pleasant condescension may be rhetorically appealing, but its concomitant nihilism is irresponsibly provocative. And should we be surprised? Is it really so unreasonable to say, If it's psychologically healthy to be an empty, vapid consumer of pleasure, then I

² A member of the audience during the discussion pointed out that I offer a false dichotomy here: either one believes in God, or one is a nihilist. She's entirely right. But to discuss the various alternative options, I decided, would add too much time to the paper, and dampen the poetical tone. In retrospect, though, it probably would have been more effective to explore the options.

don't want to be healthy. If it's psychologically healthy to imperiously self-identify as sophisticated, to find satisfaction in the best \$10 wine and some middlebrow opera, then I don't want to be healthy. If I am deluded by Christianity, if I am deluded by Judaism, if I am deluded by Islam, then I wave my delusion like a banner.

Because like Schelling, we have to ask rationally, if you will be rid of Judaism and Christianity, of Islam and Hinduism, what will you offer in its place? Strip malls? Expensive handbags? BBC 2? Poetry? Or would you have us instead worship at the altar of Reason, like Robespierre before the Terror filled the streets of Paris with blood? Mr. Freeman faults Christian faith, having erroneously defined it an “*acquiescence* in the teachings of the churches” (5), but he would have us acquiesce to his own polished zealotry for a vaguely spritual materialist sophistication.

In the end, Mr. Freeman's Greeks seem to be but a pretence to deride Christians; they don't look like any Greeks known to competent classicists.^{xviii} Mr. Freeman's Greeks instead look suspiciously like English secular liberals who vote Labor and read *The Guardian*. He speaks of ancient Greek tolerance, sophistication, openness, multicultural identity, cultural diversity, and inclusiveness. Just the right words to sell his book in Boston. But fifth-century Athens was a homogenous, slave-holding society that didn't consider women, foreigners, or slaves citizens. Tolerant and diverse? I don't think so. Not surprisingly, Mr. Freeman's pagan Romans were also tolerant, sophisticated, open, and inclusive. Which might have come as a surprise to one of the African slaves digging sulfur with his bare hands in the mines of the Roman Empire. Mr. Freeman's progressive pieties may get him good reviews in the *Guardian*, but they lead him to mangle history in startling ways. For example, in order to show how *intolerant* Christians are, he says that the Celtic pagans of Gaul were “inclusive” (68)—he doesn't mention their human sacrifices, of course, or their infanticides. One chieftain invited a Roman general to watch as his men murdered every man, woman, and child in a neighboring city: thousands of them. Very tolerant. Mr. Freeman calls the mass murder of Christians under Diocletian a necessary step in the “logic of ... centralizing reforms” (85). Mass murder was logical. In his view, Christians wouldn't assimilate, so they “could no longer be tolerated” (85). We've heard

that argument before about other groups! Of course, when it's Christians, it's not intolerance, although one wonders how the *inclusive* Romans managed to *exclude* Christians, but never mind, we're in polemical mode here. In fact, says Mr. Freeman, Diocletian's actions "were marked by their restraint" (85). Murdering committed Christian families, Christian women, children, the weak and infirm: I don't know, when you start mass killings your own citizens, "restraint" doesn't seem quite like the appropriate word.^{xix}

But Mr. Freeman has championed logic, and he's championed Diocletian, so he has to show that killing Christians was logical. Logic and reason, though, are means to an end, not an end in themselves, as Aristotle teaches. Aristotle described a transcendent God. God is a self-thinking being, a *Noûs*, external to human ambition and self-interest. Reason is a *means* to *Noûs*. It is a tool. So an obvious Aristotelian objection to Mr. Freeman's thesis is that one can just as easily reason one's way to tyranny, to prejudice, to misogyny, to ecclesiophobia, to mass murder. It depends on distinguishing logical validity from verifiable truth.^{xx} All these terms—vacuity, validity, verity, accuracy, truth—are all sloppily subsumed in his "reason." Mr. Freeman wants to make a case that Christians don't use reason, but he can't. It would be silly. So he argues that Christians don't acknowledge reality. But he stumbles on that, because it's absurd. So, he complains that Christians look to their bishops for authority, rather than to "the fruits of reasoned argument" (336), as if bishops didn't make reasoned arguments. He stumbles on that, too, because it simply doesn't make sense. He's stumbling around in the tradition of extreme Protestantism, steeped in its polemical methods, taking on its old enemies, but he's lost his god.^{xxi} He's got nothing to hold on to.

Benefit of the Doubt

Why should we join him in his protestations? What do we gain but a degraded human spirit? "There *are* more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy." The Absolute that Hegel was trying to reinvent had long before become manifest through human agency in Scripture [and through natural agency in Jesus

Christ]. Why try to reinvent it again? For thousands of years, very smart people considered Scripture to be in some way true—not as Pi or Avogadro’s number is true, of course—but true as claims about universals are true. And as one who appreciates his own intellectual limits, I should like to give those people the benefit of the doubt. When the Catholic Pope, a philosopher from one of Germany’s top universities, or the Archbishop of Canterbury asks me to consider the truth of Scripture or of doctrine, I should like to give them the benefit of the doubt. When the rabbis of Boston, New York, and London ask me to consider the truth in this week’s Torah portion or in a Talmudic argument, I should like to give them the benefit of the doubt. I am not so certain of my own intellect that I am willing to deny that there might just be something more than myth or psychosis to this religion stuff.

And in the end, intellectual immodesty is what most troubles me about Mr. Freeman’s book. Not errors of historical judgment: they have been made before, and they will be made again. Not speculative history: it’s been written before (think of every Kennedy conspiracy, the recent Princess Diana conspiracy, *The Da Vinci Code*, and so forth). It will be written again. No, what genuinely troubles me is the supreme condescension of looking at one billion Catholics, almost a billion Protestants, and billions of Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, at thousands of years of theological inquiry, at the billions of committed dead, at the priests and rabbis and imams, and saying to them all, that alone among the peoples of the earth, Western secular liberal humanists know the truth.

Conclusion

Perhaps if secular humanists had a truth worth the money it’s printed on, the world would buy into it. But it is not very compelling, and it has a high body count.^{xxii} In the end, though, I don’t really think that Mr. Freeman is a materialist, even though he sometimes argues as one. And I don’t think he’s a Hegelian, even though he stands in that tradition. I think Mr. Freeman is a kindly and religious man looking for a god. First, because in his writing he assumes that the world should be just. If the world is random, like materialists say it is, then one could not reasonably expect justice, because justice does

not follow logically from randomness. Second, because he is evidently dissatisfied with revealed, epiphanic truth. Notwithstanding his mischaracterization of Christians as believers in instant truth, he sees, as Jews and Christians do, that truth is revealed over time, we grow to learn it, as individuals and as a society. And third, because he seems to believe in a future where things will be better. If we're at the end of history, and our self-realization is deepened only by more detailed scientific descriptions of the material world, then there is no *better*. There's merely a calmly shared nihilism with more efficient toasters.

Early Greek Christians called the feminine aspect of Jesus *Sophos*, wisdom, the true sophisticate, and they looked for the second coming as we all look for wisdom. Christian truth is based on a manifestation of the Absolute *in time*. Just as thought (*Noûs*) manifests itself in language (*logos*) over time—speaking an idea takes time. This temporal and qualified truth is understood through the imperfect minds and compromised languages of human beings over time. *Our understanding* of God changes in time, just as language and culture change. But a changed understanding does not mean a wrong understanding. Neither does it mean that we religious folk are fools credulous of myth. We seek justice, because we believe that the world was created by a just God, not because of a syllogism. We seek to improve the world, because we are called upon to love our neighbors and to comfort them in their suffering, not because of a syllogism. Mr. Freeman fails to define either truth or reason, but praises them anyway. If he can explain to us the derivation of the constant R in calculus, then can he explain the logical relation between R and a just government? Or the connection between the Periodic Table and treating my neighbors well? If ethics is exclusively a branch of philosophy, then why is there no consistent or compelling secular ethical code to direct human life? When we disagree, should we take ethical direction from the state? Can political authority adjudicate our ethical claims? Should we have faith in Mr. Freeman's instincts?

Christians and Jews seek *sophos* and diversity in unity, peace, and wisdom, and the coming of *Moschiah*. No myth, no lack of myth, no science, no rationalism can devise for us such profoundly humane goals. So when Mr. Freeman sets the purported decline of reason at

the feet of early Christians, I can only say that I've heard it before. But I wonder, with no little anxiety, what brave new world he imagines his arguments will shape.

NOTES (in anticipation of questions from the audience)

ⁱ And presumably the inheritor, as well. He concludes that any adherence to dogmatic theology, such as Roman Catholics practice, “invariably means the suppression of freedom of independent thought” (338). One is hard-pressed to verify Freeman’s vision of ancient Greece, or to imagine circumstances in which its most scientifically-minded citizens would come socially and politically to dominate the ancient world.

ⁱⁱ Tolerance seems to mean unprincipled, p. 298.

ⁱⁱⁱ He rejects the genetic fallacy in his diatribe against original sin, p. 291: “To accept original sin is to accept that one generation can be held responsible for the guilt of another, an assumption alien to most ethical systems.” Later, he slanders Augustine by saying “Augustine’s rationale for persecution [of Donatists] was to be used to justify slaughter” (299). Apparently, such guilt does get passed down if you’re Augustine.

^{iv} As apparently must be most Americans and Britons—77% of Americans are Christian, and 71% of Britons. This is an implicit case for the political worthiness of elite, secular intellectuals.

^v See especially the chapter on Ambrose.

^{vi} And one that Mr. Freeman makes as well, p. 338: “History suggests that conflicts between religions tend to be more destructive than those between scientists.” The fallacious metonymy is between theologians and religions, and reason and scientists.

^{vii} Need we also point out that more people died at the Battle of Stalingrad than during the Spanish Inquisition? Or is this comparison of body counts a way of arguing that fewer deaths is implicitly more moral than a larger number of deaths.

^{viii} Christians become more tolerable in Mr Freeman’s story as he approaches the Protestant Reformation. Gibbon argued that Christianity’s pacifist ideologies sapped the strength from Rome, “and its theology spreading a superstition which undermined the rationality of classical culture,” Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 14. So, Freeman. He defends Roman strength early in his book, strangely siding with order, force, and authority.

^{ix} He wrote, “He has said nothing which would have surprised or shocked his fellow theologians.” 14 Dec. 1993, at <http://www.cfpf.org.uk/articles/religion/jenkins_1993/1993-12-14_dt_jenkins.html>

^x Liddell & Scott, s.v. *Pistos* is to be trusted or believed, but not blindly.

^{xi} Mr. Freeman continues another long tradition. In a search for clarity in faith, Protestants ask the same questions that Christians struggled with in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries. The challenge here was that Protestants would not credit a Catholic writer—because he was Catholic, which is an argumentum ad hominem. (If your evidence contradicts me, then you must be prejudiced.)

^{xii} He thinks the Romans were aware that “their own myths ... were not dogma” but rituals “in the service of tradition and good order” (68), although I’m not sure how pouring a bucket of bull’s blood on one’s head leads to good order.

^{xiii} Mr. Freeman writes of Paul—with absolutely no evidence, a shocking dearth of source material, and little obvious interest in psychoanalytic accuracy—“Paul was one of those people who was desperate to belong and to express his commitment” (362, n.3). “One of *those* people”?—is that a technical phrase? You see, Christianity is an escapist fantasy to mask the meaninglessness of your impoverished life. Mr. Freeman wonders why Paul in his letters should stress the divinity of Christ, and concludes that “it is certainly arguable [what isn’t?] that his own psychological needs defined the distinctive teachings that he preached to his communities and should be central to any study of them” (108). We need to look at Paul not as a theologian, but as a psychological case study. In fact, Paul’s famous vision of Christ on the road to Damascus could have been “the culmination of a psychological crisis” (111). Could have been? It *could have been*. It *could have been* space unicorns making Jesus images out of mayonnaise—it *could have been*: there’s history in the speculative mode, slandering in hypotheticals. Throw in a possibility; turn it into fact; build the facts into a polemic. Paul could have been delusional; therefore, he was; and therefore, Christians foolishly believe in a delusion. QED.

^{xiv} I reject rational thought, but rejection is a logical operation; if I reject, I am therefore being rational, but I reject reason, so ... another Cretan paradox. Now, I understand what rational argument is, but what is a “*concept* of rational argument”? Is that a Platonic form of a syllogism?

^{xv} Augustine converted in order to “make peace” with his mother (282). A psychological need for a goddess figure yields the Virgin Mary (242).

^{xvi} Mr. Freeman says that in his view of what he calls “the Greek tradition,” “the material world operates according to its own ascertainable laws rather than in response to the intervention of the gods. Miracles, in short, have no place in sophisticated thinking” (77). This is his either/or fallacy: either you believe in the absolute materiality of existence, or you’re an unsophisticated rube.

^{xvii} Hegel “believes that the education of the human race is precisely this process of becoming explicitly conscious of the concepts inherent in human understanding. ... That is to say, human development involves teasing out new, more complex categories which are merely implicit in understanding and also coming to a more sophisticated conception of those categories which are already being explicitly employed.” Stephen Houlgate, “Hegel,” *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, eds. Simon Critchley et al (Blackwell, 1998), p. 95.

^{xviii} If there’s anything we’ve learned about idolizing reason in the last 2500 years—from Socrates and his Thirty Tyrants to the historical logic of Stalin’s USSR—it’s that a logical syllogism cannot give us good government. The Sophists taught us that. But Mr. Freeman won’t admit them into evidence, except to say that they were “clever and inventive” (62). He chooses a handful of Greeks—Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and so forth—out of millions and paints them as if they weren’t embedded in a deeply religious culture. Of course they were; read E. R. Dodds.

^{xix} And I’m not sure that Nero, who (Mr. Freeman fails to mention) fed Christians to lions for sport, can really be summed up as complex and troubled (63). Theodosius’ massacre has to be judged worse than merely “a public relations disaster” (224).

^{xx} Mr. Freeman accuses Christians of not coming to a consensus because they failed to use reason properly (336). And then he denigrates consensus for not being “wide-ranging” and “inclusive.” You can’t win. Using his own self-contradicting arguments, we can observe that secular states have yet to come to a consensus on ethics, government, taxes, social expenditures, you name it. Therefore, let’s be rid of secularity. And if we’re going to play “my team is better than your team,” then I’m not sure that the denigration of religion is going to fare any better today than it did in the USSR, or in China, or in Pol Pot’s Cambodia.

^{xxi} Put another way, Mr. Freeman is an idolater who cannot quite pin down his idol. But to what purpose will he convince us? If we were all to stipulate to the primacy of reason and materialist premises, what would we gain? A man pointed at the moon and said, “Look”; and the fool looked at the finger.

^{xxii} As far as I can tell, all that’s on offer is this: it’s sophisticated to think that we invent ourselves out of self-interest. Even if I look at those claims charitably, the *best* I can say about them is that they are merely observations of the material conditions of life. Simply observing the world does not distinguish us from the grazing sheep.