

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Collapse of the Enlightenment Era?”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 21, 2018

Video excerpt from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks presentation at Chautauqua Institute 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNlvYFvUK1Y>) timecode: 7:21 to 13:12

Sermon

I shared this video with you this morning to virtually put you in the seat I was in this summer as I heard Rabbi Sacks words. I found those words challenged one of the foundations from which Unitarianism and Universalism has sprung. When he identified secularism as a key source of the impending collapse of Western civilization I was a little taken aback. As he mentioned the secularizing advances of each century, I began wondering where he was headed.

I expect most here would celebrate the advances of secularization he identifies over the last 400 years. The secularization of knowledge in the seventeenth century was the triumph of reason over dogma. That allowed for the expansion of scientific knowledge independent of belief. The secularization of power separated church and state in the eighteenth century. The secularization of culture allowed the flourishing of the arts outside religious constraints in the nineteenth century. It also lifted up other sources of inspiration besides sitting in a church pew. Our Transcendentalist forbears found God in and through the natural world.

Where Sacks builds his attack is on the last era of secularization, the twentieth century secularization of ethics, striving to build them on a rational basis. The departure from Jewish and Christian foundations for ethics and the attempt to build them on a purely rational basis, Sacks claims *has failed*. The result is the decline of enlightenment influenced religion. Those religious traditions that have tried to accommodate to reason and science are in decline. The ultra-orthodox, evangelical and fundamentalist religious movements around the globe that reject enlightenment values, however, are growing.

Not only are those enlightenment values in decline, he claims, they are also in the process of leading to the downfall of western civilization. Towards the end of his talk he quoted a famous twentieth century historian, William Durant, who wrote an eleven volume story of civilizations published between 1935 and 1975. Here is Durant's devastating summary of the rise and fall of civilizations that takes aim at secularization that Rabbi Sacks quoted in full:

"... a certain tension between religion and society marks the higher stages of every civilization. Religion begins by offering magical aid to harassed and bewildered men; it culminates by giving to a people that unity of morals and belief which seems so favorable to statesmanship and art; it ends by fighting suicidally in the lost cause of the past. For as

knowledge grows or alters continually, it clashes with mythology and theology, which change with geological leisureliness. Priestly control of arts and letters is then felt as a galling shackle or hateful barrier, and intellectual history takes on the character of a "conflict between science and religion." Institutions which were at first in the hands of the clergy, like law and punishment, education and morals, marriage and divorce, tend to escape from ecclesiastical control, and become secular, perhaps profane. The intellectual classes abandon the ancient theology and-after some hesitation- the moral code allied with it; literature and philosophy become anticlerical. The movement of liberation rises to an exuberant worship of reason, and falls to a paralyzing disillusionment with every dogma and every idea. Conduct, deprived of its religious supports, deteriorates into epicurean chaos; and life itself, shorn of consoling faith, becomes a burden alike to conscious poverty and to weary wealth. In the end a society and its religion tend to fall together, like body and soul, in a harmonious death. Meanwhile among the oppressed another myth arises, gives new form to human hope, new courage to human effort, and after centuries of chaos builds another civilization."

I left Sacks talk feeling a little defensive of the Enlightenment and our religious traditions. I've always thought liberating our minds from the limitations of religious orthodoxy was a good thing. After all, Unitarianism and Universalism have their roots buried deep in the rational use of the mind for seeking truth. Our challenges of the Trinity, the resurrection and the virgin birth were reason based. The early Universalists reasoned their way to universal salvation through rational scriptural analysis. We were among the first to welcome Darwin's deep insights into natural selection. The advance of scientific understanding is central to how we search for truth through direct experience rather than revelation. It is more than a little unsettling to hear Sacks and Durant blame the use of reason for the fall of Western civilization.

Sacks mentioned a philosopher who had deeply shaped his thinking named Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre wrote a critique called *After Virtue* in 1981. In this book is a penetrating critique of the attempt to build ethics on rationality alone, free from religious or traditional influence. A Marxist influenced Catholic, MacIntyre finds the anchor he needs in Thomas Aquinas' understanding and revisions of Aristotle.

Now, my college degree is in engineering. I studied how to design things rather than the philosophy of the nature of things. While I have read a lot of philosophy, I knew I was out of my depth trying to understand MacIntyre in the time I had. To help me unravel MacIntyre's critique, I thought, "I'll consult with a professional philosopher at the University at Albany!" After sending out a bunch of emails to different professors who I thought might know something about MacIntyre, I set up a telephone conversation with Dr. Jon Mandle who works in the area of political philosophy and ethics. He had read MacIntyre and helped me figure him out well enough to address my concerns.

MacIntyre is a contemporary philosopher from Scotland now in his late 80's. In *After Virtue*, he claims the Enlightenment thinkers fail to create a final and a universal account of morality based on

reason alone. One key problem in their failure, he claims, is that they try to do their work without an appreciation of the importance of teleology. One might say that teleology is one of his key concerns with the modern world.

Teleology is one of those philosophical buzz words like epistemology and metaphysics. Teleology describes, explains and rationalizes the ends, the purposes and the goals that drive living beings. The teleology of the acorn is to become an oak tree. The teleology of the mosquito is to suck your blood. At the most basic level, the teleology of animals, birds and plants is primarily to survive and reproduce. That forms the baseline teleology for people as well.

If we only go with nature as our rational source of teleology, MacIntyre complains, it is insufficient to build a good society. We need a sense of the Greek's ideas of virtue and the polis that do not come from nature to help us find a sufficient teleology, a sufficient purpose or goal for a meaningful life and a foundation for social ethics.

There is a whole lot more to MacIntyre's philosophy and his critique of the Enlightenment than this, but I am watching the clock and have a bit of a response I'd like to share this morning from reflecting on Sacks and MacIntyre. I'm going to have a class in February to unpack more of what Sacks and MacIntyre have to say and see if Dr. Mandle can come chat with us too. I've been having a grand old time wrestling with big ethical questions and am curious if there are others here who want to do that as well.

In my conversation with Dr. Mandle, we identified one of the big teleological problems. Do our goals and purposes come from the inside or the outside. In the case of most forms of organized religion, they are more than happy to supply us with teleology, with purposes and goals. In Christianity and Judaism, love to God and to our neighbor organizes teleology. In Islam, surrender of self to Allah is key to teleology. For the ancient Greeks, the pursuit of embodying the good and the virtuous as culturally defined was one's highest purpose or goal. These are goals that are not created by the individual but rather by tradition and revelation. They form an externally driven teleology.

In a pluralistic society, where Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and secular humanists all live together, in our American experiment of religious freedom, each individual is allowed to choose their own teleology, their own ethical and moral framework to live their lives. The common teleology we share as a society is determined by a democratic process and enshrined in law.

What is really important here is that no society before us has ever tried to do this. There has been tolerance of different religions for example, during the Greek and Roman Empires, but there was still the state religion. All people were still expected to sacrifice to Roman Gods too. The Greeks never understood those troublesome Jews who rejected polytheism and wouldn't respect their Gods. During the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the default teleology still came from Christianity in the West. It wasn't until the twentieth century when secularism became significant

enough to become a threat, most notably with *Roe v. Wade* in 1970's, that social polarization increased dramatically.

The problem is the non-religious and the conservatives are growing in the opposite direction, creating greater and greater friction and conflict, especially in the area of ethics, in the area of political philosophy.

The question we are facing today as a pluralistically designed secular state, is parallel to the question we face as a pluralistically designed religious tradition. Can we build an ethical center, a common teleology that holds us together while individuals are driven by different teleologies?

I can't give you a solution to that problem today because my sense is we haven't figured it out yet. My research on this topic has got me charged up about doing more exploration in this area that is critical to figuring out how to live in a pluralistic world. What is exciting for me is this is work Unitarian Universalists are already doing right now.

If Sacks is right, the question of our age that intensifies as the Western hegemony starts breaking down is how will we deal with difference *as a world community*. As China, India, Russia and Iran are no longer willing to accommodate Western norms, as intensely religious people are no longer willing to accommodate secular values that have been on the advance since the Enlightenment, how will we get along with each other? Will human rights that champion individual rights have a claim in theocratic states? Will democracy that is built on individual sovereignty be possible without secularism?

What MacIntyre has right is the importance of teleology for human flourishing. Most of us do not feel fulfilled in our own little bubble. We need a goal or purpose larger than us to organize and give meaning to our lives. It is far easier to adopt a teleology from outside and allow it to order our lives than to grow your own teleology. Easier if you don't ask hard questions.

Unitarian Universalists are the odd ducks that don't or can't allow their teleology to be imposed on them from the outside. Some of us have tried and our minds refuse to believe what we know in our bones is not true. For us our integrity is at stake. We still need that teleology but we may not be able to believe the theology that goes with it. Or we cannot trust the authority structure built in to that teleology and theology.

And maybe the teleology can be independent of theology. Maybe the spirit of the Great Commandments can be our purpose and goal without the theology. Maybe living a life of love does not need an eternal object of worship or a heavenly reward to be intrinsically meaningful.

These are the questions we ask here in this congregation. I have answers that make sense for me, but they may not make sense for you. If we are willing to listen to each other as we come up with

provisional answers for today, we will help each other form adjusted provisional answers for tomorrow. Living into the questions and beyond them helps guide our teleological fulfillment.

That is only possible because we *implicitly trust* that each of us *has* a source of guidance *within us* that is *more trustworthy* than an externally imposed one. However we name it, be it conscience, intuition, Spirit of Life and Love, or Presence of the Holy, we trust an *inner sense of knowing* what is right and true that can guide us as we follow the goals and purpose it has illuminated for us. And in relationship with each other, we can help each listen to and know that source. We can be spiritual supports and guides for each other as we navigate the shoals of life's challenges.

The secularization process was and is still necessary for us to have this freedom to follow our own hearts rather than be subservient to the dominant culture or religion. And I have great confidence that this remains at the core of the American experiment. Our religious tradition developed here as part of that American experiment.

As we face the headwinds of cultural climate change, may we preserve that free spirit here.