

LIBERALISM



Luke 6:27 "Jesus said, 'I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you (even). If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'"

In 1978, the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave a commencement address at Harvard University, warning about the loss of American self-confidence and will. "A decline in courage

may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today," he declared.

Those words continue to ring with disturbing force even now. For the enemies of liberal democracy these days seem to be full of passion and intensity, enemies like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping (shee jin ping), foreign jihadists like HAMAS, and the MAGA radicals. Meanwhile, those who try to defend liberal norms can sometimes seem like those Republicans who ran against Donald Trump in the 2016 primaries, decent and perfectly good candidates, but kind of feckless and about to be run over.

Into this climate emerges Fareed Zakaria's new book, "Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash From 1600 to the Present." One of the most interesting features of this book is that Zakaria doesn't treat liberal democratic capitalism as some abstract set of ideas or principles! He shows instead how liberal democratic capitalism was created by real people in real communities who simply wanted richer, fuller, and more dynamic lives.

His story begins in the Dutch Republic of the 16th century. The Dutch invented the modern profit-making corporation. As a result, the Dutch merchant fleet at that time was capable of carrying more tonnage than the fleets of France, England, Scotland, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, and Portugal combined.

By the 18th century, Amsterdam's per capita income was four times that of Paris.

And Dutch success wasn't just economic though. There was a cultural flowering as well (think of Rembrandt and Vermeer). There was also urbanization, the building of great towns and cities. In addition, there was civic and political stability, all centered around a decentralized power. There was also a relatively egalitarian culture, and Zakaria notes that there were no statues of heroes on horseback in Holland during those two hundred years. There was also moral restraint, as Dutch Calvinism was on high alert for the corruption that we all know prosperity can bring. That Calvinism also encouraged self-discipline and norms that even put limits on the display of wealth.

This new liberal experiment leapt forward next onto Britain. In the Glorious Revolution of the late 17th century, a Dutchman, William of Orange, became King of England and helped import some of the more liberal Dutch political institutions, ushering in a period of greater political and religious moderation there. Once again, you see the same pattern: technical and economic dynamism going hand in hand with cultural creativity, political reform, urbanization, a moral revival, and, it must also be admitted, a vast imperialist expansion.

British inventors and tinkers like James Watt perfected the steam engine that simply changed the world. From 1770 to 1870 real British wages rose by 50 percent! The great reform acts in the 1800s gave more people the right to vote and reduced political corruption. In the early 19th century, there was a vast array of social movements led by regular people who sought to abolish the slave trade, reduce child labor, reform the prison system, eliminate cruelty to animals, ease the lives of the poor, and introduce codes of propriety and decorum into Victorian life.

America was the next step forward for liberal democracy, and the pattern then replicated itself here: new inventions like the telephone and the electric light bulb further changed the world. People were flooding into the cities now. During the 20th century, American culture simply dominated the entire globe. And thanks in part to the postwar American liberal order, living standards surged around the world. As Zakaria notes, "Compared to 1980, the global world G.D.P. had nearly doubled by 2000, and more than tripled by 2015" spurred on by America's growth and success.

And yet for all these successes, liberalism is now ailing worldwide, and in retreat in some places like Turkey, India, Brazil, Venezuela, and, perhaps, America itself. Through Zakaria's book I developed a powerful appreciation of the

glories of liberalism, and also, a better understanding of what's gone wrong.

I'm one of those people who subscribes to the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's doctrine that: "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life." To see meaning in our lives, we need to see ourselves as part of some greater good, doing something that is considered important and meaningful, like caring for others, or living within an established moral community, or simply striving on behalf of some set of ideals or religious truths, like Jesus describes in today's Gospel perhaps; doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The great liberal societies that Zakaria describes expanded and celebrated individual choice and individual freedom. But when liberalism thrived, that personal freedom always laid upon a foundation, a foundation of commitments and moral obligations that superseded simple personal choice, like commitments or obligations to our families, to our communities and the nation, to our ancestors and descendants, to our churches or to God or to some set of transcendent truths.

But over the past few generations, the celebration of individual freedom has overspilled its banks and begun to erode the underlying foundations of our civic life. Especially after World War II and then into the 1960s, we saw the privatization

of morality, the rise of what came to be known as 'the ethos of moral freedom.' But Democratic liberalism requires a coherent moral underpinning and Americans now are likely to adopt the belief that each person has the right to come up with his or her own personal sense of right and wrong. As far back as 1955, the columnist Walter Lippmann saw that this was going to lead to trouble, writing prophetically that: "If what is good, (if) what is right, (and if) what is true, is only what the individual 'chooses' to 'believe,' then we are outside the traditions of civility."

Social trust lies in our trust that other people will mostly do what they ought to do. But when there are no shared moral values and norms, then social trust plummets, and people feel alienated and under siege, and, as the author Hannah Arendt observed, lonely societies often turn to authoritarianism. People will eagerly then follow the beloved leader and protector, the one who will lead the struggle that seems to give our lives back its meaning.

During our current moment of global populism, the liberal tradition is under serious threat. Many people have gone economically nationalist and culturally traditionalist. Around the world now, authoritarian leaders promise to restore the 'old ways,' the old religion, and our previous national greatness. The authoritarian leader Viktor Orban of Hungary declared

recently that "There are certain things which are more important than 'me,' than my ego - (namely) family, nation, (and) God." And yet while such men promise to restore the anchors of cultural, moral, and civic stability, they use brutal and bigoted strongman methods to get there, methods that belie their real underlining values.

The last administration tried to win over the disaffected by showering them with jobs and economic benefits, and it didn't work politically because the real absence that people are feeling right now is, I believe, an absence of meaning, and belonging, and connection, and recognition. Hence, there lies the importance of the church, of the community, and of caring for one another, as the basis of our lives together.

Zakaria's book will help readers feel honored and grateful that we got to be part of this glorious and ongoing liberal journey. He understands that we liberals can't just offer economic benefits; we also have to make the spiritual and civic case for our way of life together. And sadly, I think we have failed to do that! He writes: "The greatest challenge remains to infuse our (national) journey with (real) moral meaning, to imbue it with the sense of pride and purpose that religion once did - to fill that hole in our heart."

That requires a social purpose with community involvement and commitment to one another, that requires some self-sacrifice

of our own desires for the benefit of the larger community. And thus, Jesus said, "If you love (only) those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But (I say unto you) love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. (And) Your reward will be great, and you will be (called) children of the Most High; for God is (also) kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful (then), just as your Father (in heaven) is merciful . . . Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given unto you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back!" AMEN.