



Then came what we call the “Age of Enlightenment.” It started in about the sixteenth century AD. Scientific knowledge was making great progress; communication systems were becoming much more effective; education was available to a greater number of people; the Reformation and the start of religious freedom had loosened the stranglehold which the Roman Catholic Church had acquired over the political and economic life of Europe. Men and women started to question their need for God.

*Why believe in a power you cannot see? Science presents you with concrete evidence of powers you can see, power you can touch, power you can hear, power you can experience in your bodies.*

*Why waste your time on old legends and superstitions? The spread of the printed word means that you can know what is happening in the world here and now, which is surely more important.*

*Why allow a religious hierarchy to teach you what you must and must not believe, what you should and should not do? You have a mind, reasoning powers of your own. You can work out for yourself, through rational thought processes what is true and what is false; what is moral and what is immoral.*

Now admittedly the established church had helped this slide into religious cynicism. The church itself had come to prize tangible rewards of immense power and huge wealth and had exploited vulnerable people in order to get them. It had also declared open war on science, wanting no-one to threaten their authority over human minds. So it is hardly surprising that, as men and women started to think for themselves, they became suspicious of a highly organised religion with a great deal of money governed by power-hungry leaders who claimed their ultimate authority from a being who could not be seen. Like the Magi, people looked for a new guide. The Age of Reason was born, with people choosing to use their own knowledge, their own opinions, their own thought processes to govern their lives.

How did they get on? Let me tell you two stories: first, in Shakespeare’s play, “A Winter’s Tale,” King Leontes has become obsessed by the belief that his wife has been unfaithful to him. She indignantly denies this but Leontes remains tortured by his suspicions. The play is set in ancient Greece where there was said to be a divine oracle in the temple at Delphi. Leontes, unable to prove his accusations against his wife, agrees to send messengers to ask this holy oracle for the truth. The oracle, supposedly from the gods themselves, states clearly that the Queen is innocent and the King is behaving like an idiot. Leontes declares the oracle to be a fake and drags the Queen to court on a charge of high treason anyway.

Second: Shakespeare wrote this during the reign of Elizabeth the First and it was her father, Henry the Eighth, who had overthrown the rule of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain. He wanted to divorce his first wife because she had not borne him a son and he was anxious about the Tudor succession. Why, he demanded, should he allow religion to dictate to him? He was an intelligent, educated, powerful King who could make his own decisions. Like Leontes, he rejected religious decrees and brought his Queen to court on trumped up charges. Henry got his own way and married again. But when this wife produced only a daughter he had her charged with adultery and beheaded. So it went on.

His third wife died, his fourth wife he divorced, his fifth wife he executed and mercifully the sixth wife outlived him.

Both of these stories are about intelligent and powerful men. Why should not Henry and Leontes use their own reasoning to make decisions rather than obey the dictates of religion? But neither of those men were guided by careful, rational thought processes; rather by fear and jealousy: two highly explosive and irrational emotions. Like the Wise Men in the Nativity story, they chose a false guide and took wrong turnings which cost them and many innocent people dear.

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There have been many persuasive and powerful arguments put forward as to why human beings should not believe in God, why it is naïve and foolish to try to allow yourself to be guided by God and where religion has got it wrong. But what are our alternative guides?

Science? Science is amazing. Science can work miracles. Science can cure diseases of body and mind; it can produce food for the whole world's population; it can send us into outer space or into the very depths of the earth. But science has also produced the atom bomb with power enough to destroy the earth and all its people. Science has created terrible diseases of body and mind. Science has shown us how to understand the workings of our world and its creatures more clearly than ever before but it is also enabling us to destroy the world and its creatures more speedily than ever before. Science alone- with no greater power to answer to- becomes megalomania. It gets out of control. By itself it is no safe guide.

Logic then, human reason? Working out for ourselves what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. Alright, so Leontes and Henry the Eighth acted under the influence of fiery human passion but we are not all like that. We are capable of thinking calmly and logically most of the time. Adolf Hitler's "final solution" which led to the systematic extermination of six million Jews was not an act of blind panic or emotional passion. It was worked out calmly, legally and practically. Hitler could chart logical, even moral reasons why six million human beings had to die. We can argue ourselves into anything if we have the inclination. Human logic, of itself, is not a safe guide.

Materialism? Just doing as Voltaire suggested and cultivating your own garden. Making a nice safe haven for yourself with roses round a cottage door and minding your own business. That sounds alright- a long way from the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. Except that materialism is both unsatisfactory and addictive. Nobody is ever satisfied with what they have got and the urge to keep acquiring more and more and more possessions is what leads to serious debt crises; sweated labour to keep the prices down; unfair trading rules so that the rich can keep buying; grinding poverty in many countries which leads in turn to revolution, to terrorism, to bombs and even holocausts. Materialism, alone, is not a safe guide.

To the wise men it seemed like a good idea to abandon the star and trust their own reasoning and experience. To intelligent, educated human beings it seems like a good

idea to abandon faith and trust their own knowledge, their own reasoning, their own desires. But over and over again wrong ways are taken, huge mistakes are made and innocent victims suffer.

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There was a time when the stars were the only guide for travellers. You chose your path, you sailed your ship according to the position of the stars because there were no maps, no compasses, no radar screens. We have come a long way since then. But the position of the stars has not changed. Their setting in the sky remains a reliable guide. Our more sophisticated travel aids are based on the position of the stars-they do not deny their existence nor do they argue with their places. People are not that stupid.

Over the last five hundred years or so human beings have come a long way in knowledge, in rational thinking, in standards of living. The days when organised religion held a total monopoly on their thoughts and beliefs, their standards and behaviour, their social and political structures are long gone. But God remains where he always was. God remains the ultimate power above all other powers and we should not be so stupid as to deny this. We cannot rely on solely on our own thoughts, our own understandings, our own knowledge or our own desires because we are human. We make mistakes. We are misled.

*“Don’t trust yourselves,” wrote St Peter, “get away from the lying and hypocrisy and jealousy and arrogance and turn to God. God will be kind to you. God will lead you into truth. God has called you out of darkness and into his own marvellous light.”*

Jesus Christ came into the world so that we might see how God exists in human life.

Jesus Christ came into the world to wake us up to our own spiritual awareness- to show us how to find the power of God in any and every circumstance of our lives. Jesus came into the world to give us back the right we had discarded- the right to be people of God. He never tried to stifle human knowledge or argument. He never denied the value of the good things in life. He never gave organised religion the right to claim total authority over our minds, our lives or our purses. What he pleaded for was that we kept our identity as people of God, that we recognised God as our Father, that we satisfied the spiritual desires of our lives as well as the material. For only then would we get life in proportion. Only then would we live by the truth. Only then would we walk in ways that were safe and creative and life giving rather than straight into destruction.

So “lighten up.” See the light of the glory of God and find it reflected in your own soul. Follow the stars which God gives you to be your guide and may you find life, eternal and abundant throughout your journey.

Amen.