Freedom, Religious Liberty, and the Church

Judaism and Christianity have a key role in shaping core concepts of personal, religious, and political freedom – concepts that are too often assumed nowadays to be secular in origin. Yet whereas these motifs were rooted in profoundly communal commitments to church and godly society, certain Enlightenment philosophies promoted a 'turn to the subject' which bred greater individualism, and which came increasingly to present individual freedom as freedom from belief in God and from the Church and its morality. This session will analyze the divergence of 'freedom' from its biblical roots and will examine how that divergence now threatens liberties hard-won by Christians over the centuries.

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1. **Two Basic Models of Freedom…**

   1.1 Individualistic self-expression (e.g. Oasis, 'Whatever')

   1.2 Collective liberation/emancipation (e.g. Anti-Slavery; Civil Rights Movement)

2. **Freedom in Scripture**

   2.1 Freedom *from…*
   - 2.1.1   Oppression, evil and suffering
     (Ex. 13:3, Deut. 16:1. Lev 19:33-4, cf. Lk. 4:16-21; Mt. 6:13; Lk. 8:35; Lk. 13:12-16)
   - 2.1.2   Sin, death and eternal condemnation
     (Jn. 8:31-36; Acts 13:38-9; Rom. 8:1-3)

   2.2 Freedom *for*
   - 2.2.1   Love, Fellowship, Service, Witness (Rom. 8:19; Gal. 5:1, 13; 1 Pet. 2:16-17)

3. **Secular Divergences from Scriptural Freedom: The Enlightenment**

   Throughout the Middle Ages, the highest intellectual achievements and energies of Western European society had been concentrated on religion and theology; his was part of Europe's legacy from the ancient world…Yet by 1650…more and more importance

was coming to be attached to **affirming the value of the things of this world rather than the next**.' Diarmid MacCulloch, *Christian History,* pp.218-9.

3.1 Jaroslav Pelikan: Enlightenment Challenges to Biblical Authority, Mystery & Miracle

3.2 Deistic and secular re-conceptualizations of freedom: 18thC American & French Revolutions

4. Freedom in Modern Thought

4.1 Individualist models

4.1.1 Utilitarianism
    4.1.1.1 Greatest good of greatest number
    4.1.1.2 Good derived from Nature v God
    4.1.1.3 **Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)**
        4.1.1.3.1   Good as maximal pleasure (hedonism)
        4.1.1.3.2   Quantity of pleasure on par with quality

4.1.2 Classical Liberalism
    4.1.2.1 Individual autonomy distinct from state
    4.1.2.2 Minimal government intrusion
    4.1.2.3 Negative Freedom – freedom *from...*
    4.1.2.4 John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)
        4.1.2.4.1   *On Liberty* (1859)
        4.1.2.4.2   'Higher' & 'lower' pleasures
        4.1.2.4.3   Quality trumps quantity (cf. Bentham)
        4.1.2.4.4   Education to foster 'higher' pleasures

4.1.3 The Harm Principle & Classical Liberalism
    4.1.3.1 Freedom curtailed only by threats to *others'* freedom, e.g. Physical violence; Incitement to violence; Censorship
    4.1.3.2 Law and military primarily for protection of individual freedoms:

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any other member of a civilized community, against his will, is **to prevent harm to others…Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign…**Freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing **our own good in our own way**, **so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs…** John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859, London: Penguin, pp.17; 21

4.2 Societal Models

4.2.1 Social Contract
    4.2.1.1 Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
    4.2.1.2 People relinquish *certain* freedoms for overall wellbeing - 'General Will'

4.2.1.3 Not just Utilitarian rule of majority – also for protection of minority views/groups

4.2.1.4 Government removable if contract broken through tyranny (democracy; revolution)

4.2.2   The Common Good

4.2.2.1 Pooling of freedoms for societal good

4.2.2.2 Rooted in *communities* beyond contracted state, laws

4.2.2.3 Religions and traditions key

4.2.2.4 Positive Freedom – freedom *for*

4.2.2.5 John Rawls (1921-2002)

    4.2.2.5.1   General conditions 'equally to everyone's advantage'

    4.2.2.5.2   Social market

4.2.2.6 Charles Taylor (1931 -)

4.2.2.7 'Horizons of significance'; 'social imaginaries'

4.2.3   Freedom, social responsibility & the Common Good (Comparative Case Studies)

4.2.3.1 Prohibition; drugs and smoking bans; abortion; euthanasia

4.3 Freedom & Rights and Freedom *as* a Right

4.3.1   Rights as non-negotiable claims

4.3.2   Rights as universal precepts

4.3.3   Roots in Aristotle, Aquinas, boosted by Enlightenment

4.3.4   Modern charters:

4.3.4.1 UN Declaration 1948

4.3.4.2 European Convention 1950

4.3.4.3 EU Charter & UK Act 2000

4.4 Christianity, Freedom & Rights

4.4.1   Divergences

4.4.1.1 Rights as a secular religion? (John de Witte)

4.4.1.2 Rights as anthropocentric v. theocentric

4.4.1.3 Rights as heedless of sin

4.4.1.4 Rights as heedless of responsibilities

4.4.2   Resonances

4.4.2.1 Image of God

4.4.2.2 Covenant

4.4.2.3 Common Grace

4.4.3   The Essential Link: Christian Freedom through Servanthood & Sacrifice

4.4.3.1 Free from sin; slaves to God (Rom 6:18-22)

4.4.3.2 Free from sin; servants of others (1 Pet. 2:16-17; Phil. 2:1-3)

    4.4.3.2.1   Free for eternity (Rev. 22:17)

4.4.3.2.2   Free in Christ 'our sacrifice'…

Throughout his life, [Jesus] was a victim of abuses of human rights. He became a refugee baby in Egypt, a prophet without honour in his own country, and the Messiah rejected by his own people…He became a prisoner of conscience, refusing to compromise in order to secure his release. He was falsely accused, unjustly condemned, brutally tortured, and finally crucified. And throughout his ordeal, he declined to defend on demand his right, in order that by his self-sacrifice he might serve ours. John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 1984, 149-50.

4.5 Religious Liberty & Toleration: Contemporary Case Studies & Applications

4.5.1   LGBTQ+ tensions

4.5.2   Street preaching, protest and hate speech

4.5.3   'Spiritual Abuse' discourse: winsomeness, wariness and weaponization

Suggested Readings:
Evangelical Alliance UK, *Speak Up: The Law and Your Gospel Freedoms.* EA, 2017. https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Speak-Up-FULL.pdf
Nigel Warburton, *Freedom: An Introduction with Readings.* Routledge, 2000.
Michael Farris, *The History of Religious Liberty.* New Leaf, 2015.
Joseph Loconte, *God, Locke, and Liberty: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in the West.* Lexington, 2014.
Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age.* Belknap, 2007.
James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor.* Eerdmans, 2014.
John de Witte Jr & F.S. Alexander (eds), *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction.* CUP, 2010.
Paul R. Beaumont (ed.), *Christian Perspectives on Human Rights and Legal Philosophy*. Paternoster, 1998.
Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation.* Sentinel, 2017.