



W I D E N Our Imagination

The Great Experiment *The Role of Religion in Our Nation's Experiment*

"Faith is a certain widening of the imagination."
Louise Cowan

Louise Cowan (1916-2015) was a college professor, lover of the liberal arts, and a devoted Christian. She defined *faith* as "a certain widening of the imagination," citing the angel Gabriel's visit with Mary.¹ A betrothed virgin, chaste her entire life, Mary learns she'll soon be pregnant. *How can this be?* Mary exhibits trust in God, faith, asking Gabriel to widen her imagination as to how this will happen. Gabriel tells her. The Holy Spirit will impregnate her. The result is Mary's Magnificat (Lk.1:46-55), a deepening faith formed by a widening imagination.

This reading is a resource designed to widen our imagination, our faith. The topic is "The Great Experiment" It's written mainly for those who recognize our post-Christian age, those who seek proven resources so that they may impact it, with the aim of widening how we imagine the role of religion in sustaining our nation's great experiment.

The Great Experiment

"America is the most grandiose experiment the world has seen,
but, I am afraid, it is not going to be a success." – Sigmund Freud

In his fatherly Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington referred to the new republic as an "experiment" in self-government. Can a nation's people can be self-governed? The Founding Fathers devised a "most nearly perfect solution" to answer the question. How many of us remember what they devised?

Thomas Jefferson did. He expressed confidence in our experiment. "I have no fear that the result of our experiment will be that men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master." Alexis de Tocqueville was equally confident. After touring the United States in the 1830s, Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*. In it, He wrote glowingly about "the great American experiment" in self-government.

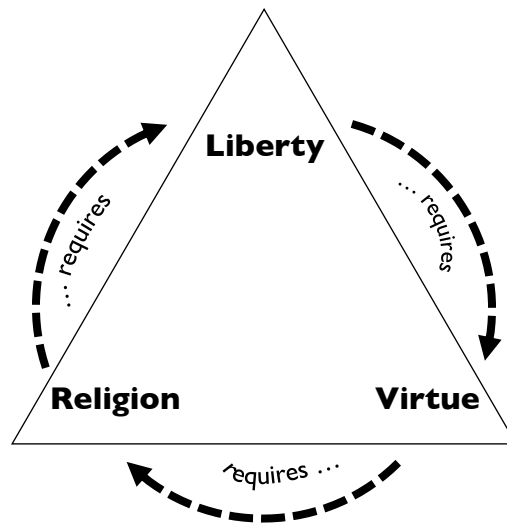
Abraham Lincoln didn't share their confidence. He referred to our experiment a few decades later, noting how "the silent artillery of time" might destroy our memory of it. Sigmund Freud seemed to agree. He described America as the most grandiose experiment the world has seen, but doubted it was going to be a success.

Clapham Institute shares some of their doubts. We say this because few Americans can imagine what the Great Experiment looks like. But Clapham also sees a way forward in renewing our country's experiment in self-government. It's the same way forward that cultural analyst Charles Murray sees, as well as many evangelical leaders like N. T. Wight, James K. A. Smith, Jim Wilder and the late Dallas Willard.

To discover this way forward, let's begin with a recap of the Great Experiment.

¹ Louise Cowan, "How Classics Address Our Imaginations" *Mars Hill Audio Journal* 1998. Vol. 34.

Imagining Our Great Experiment



A Never-Ending Great Circle

The American experiment in self-government looks like a never-ending circle, or sphere, with three interlocking points: Liberty requires virtue. Virtue requires religion. Religion requires liberty.

This ordering of liberty was new. The Framers sought to establish, order, and then ensure the preservation of our hard-fought freedoms. They were good observers of history, recognizing that most governments fail to ensure their form of government, eventually failing. This includes Greece and Rome, seemingly destined to last forever. But in studying carefully those governments that came before them, the Framers recognized they were introducing “a new order of the ages” (we see this on the American dollar bill: *novus ordo seclorum*). This new order begins with *liberty requiring virtue*.

Liberty requires virtue

“Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom,” wrote Benjamin Franklin. He speaks for the framers’ writings, as well as contemporary philosophers, including as Isaiah Berlin, the British philosopher and historian who argued that freedom includes more than negative freedom (“freedom from”), it also includes positive freedom (“freedom for” or “freedom to be”). This accords with Lord Acton’s famous formulation, “Freedom is not a permission to do what we like, but the power to do what we ought.”

The framers added that if there is no virtue, neither the law nor Constitution can sustain freedom. The Framers called for a freedom of *conscience*, as John Adams declared, “We have no government armed with powers capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net.”

James Madison, the father of the Constitution, agreed: “Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”

To this notion of liberty, the Framers added an innovative element: *virtue requires religion*.

Virtue requires religion

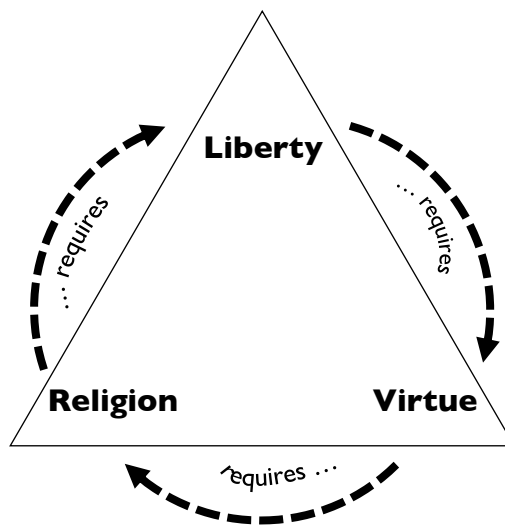
Here again we hear from Franklin: “If men are so wicked as we now see them with religion; what would they be without it?” For the Framers, virtue was more all-encompassing than the way that many view it today. For one thing, virtue included features such as excellence, courage, and good conscience. And for another, it had to be grounded in something real. In the age when the Framers wrote, religion was imagined as defining how the real world worked, hence it provided virtue with its moral frame (how we imagine it) and its sanction.

This didn’t mean the Framers were all people of orthodox faith. They represented a wide range of positions on faith, just as they represented a wide range of positions on the relationship of religion and public life. But without exception they believed that religion was essential to virtue. In George Washington’s words, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

To this notion of religion and liberty, the Framers added another innovation: *religion requires freedom*.

Religion requires freedom

This final innovation—religion requires freedom—is lost on an increasing number of Americans. They’re post-Christian, suspicious of “religion,” with many becoming religious “nones”—spiritual but not religious. Post-Christians are religious skeptics, fearing that some sort of coercive faith will be “imposed” on them or established by law. On the contrary, as Madison argues in his *Memorial and Remonstrance*, the Christian faith does not need establishing. “Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the Manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.” Only a freely chosen faith, not one imposed on people or established by law, can ground the virtue that guarantees freedom.



Religion as a Reliable Guide

This is how religion, mainly American Christianity, played a role in America’s Great Experiment. In the 1790s, Christianity was recognized as a reliable guide for how real life works. In fact, “for most of Western history, the basic claims of the Christian tradition have in fact been regarded by its proponents *as knowledge of reality*, and they were presented as such.”² But then in the 1800s a “cultural calamity” occurred. American Christianity embraced Enlightenment thinking about human nature. It became rationalist: *Think right, act right*.

² Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (HarperCollins, 2009), 8.

A Cultural Calamity

This proved calamitous for in the 1800s Enlightenment thinking about human nature was undermined by emerging findings from brain research. The central points of a rationalist American Christianity were undermined as well, relegated to the domain of mere “faith,” sentiment, traditional ritual, or power.³ Religion was no longer a reliable guide for how real life works. It was privately engaging, but publicly irrelevant, vacating its role in the Great Experiment that soon began to unravel—a calamity that few Americans recognize today.

Abraham Lincoln recognized it. In his Address given before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, on January 27, 1838. Titled “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” he warned how the “silent artillery of time” was destroying the memory of our nation as an experiment. Years later, as our country was coming apart over the issue of slavery, Lincoln spoke these words in his First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861: “We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

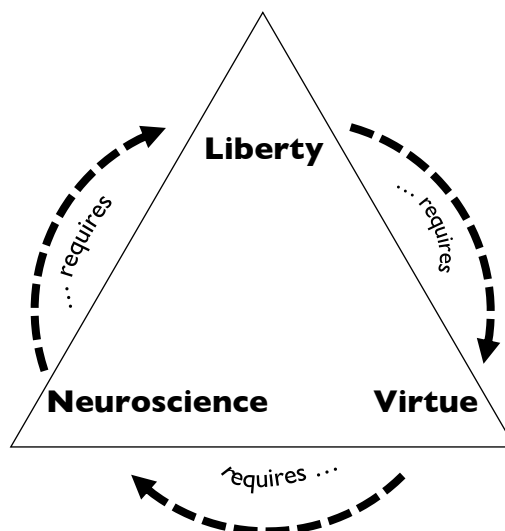
The bonds broke a month later. The Civil War erupted. But even after it ended, animosity lingered between North and South, evident in Sigmund Freud’s concern: “America is the most grandiose experiment the world has seen, but, I am afraid, it is not going to be a success.” Clapham Institute feels it can be. Here’s how.

Renewing The Great Experiment

Throughout America’s history, leaders have called for renewing our experiment. Lincoln did. So did Catholic scholar Michael Novak. When he addressed the Library of Congress in 1998, he cited Tocqueville who said democracies are ever in danger of slipping downward. This happens when we ignore or cover over the religious dimension of our country. The result, Novak warned, “is to suck wind out of the democratic sail, and to watch the experiment in self-government go slack.” Charles Murray, a religious skeptic, sees this happening.

Murray, an American political scientist, describes this in *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. The book describes the US as a country increasingly polarized into two culturally and geographically isolated groups. But Murray’s hopeful. He walks readers through America’s Great Experiment—exactly what’s been depicted in this booklet: a circle where liberty requires virtue, virtue requires religion, religion requires liberty.

Then Murray notes how America’s experienced three awakenings. He gets it exactly right. America experienced The First Great Awakening (1730s-1770s), The Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) and The Businessman’s Revival (1857-1869). Murray hopes for a fourth but recognizes a rationalist religion has been undermined, so he looks to neuroscience as a reliable guide regarding human nature and how real life works.



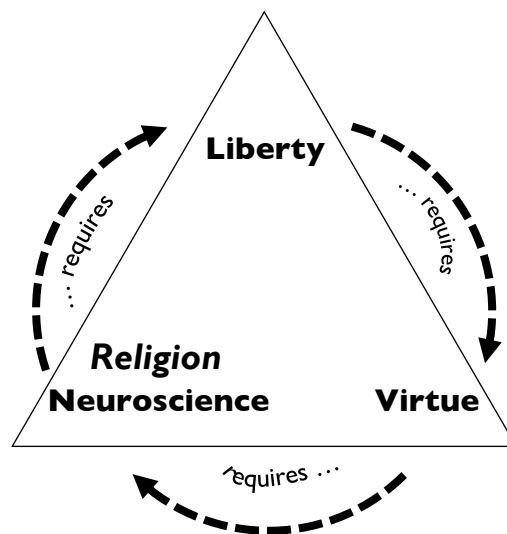
³ Willard, *Knowing Christ Today*, 132.

Religion's Great Opportunity

But this doesn't mean religion can't play a part in the Great Experiment. Murray sees a remarkable opportunity for the faith. He cites neuroscience's insights uncovering how people actually operate, then adds:

"The more we learn about how human beings work at the deepest genetic and neural levels, the more that many age-old ways of thinking about human nature will be vindicated. The institutions surrounding marriage, vocation, community, and faith will be found to be the critical resources through which human beings lead satisfying lives."⁴

This is good news. Recent findings from neuroimaging align with age-old, pre-Enlightenment faith traditions and their ways of thinking about human nature. These faith traditions are being validated, corroborated. This is a great opportunity for American Christianity to return to its part in our great experiment. It is the way forward, how the Christian faith can be recognized a reliable resource for satisfying lives. It looks like this.



The Way Forward

It's noteworthy that many evangelicals, including N. T. Wright, James K. A. Smith, Jim Wilder, and the late Dallas Willard see neuroscience as the way forward in our post-Christian age. Wright recommends the work of Iain McGilchrist, calling his book, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, "magisterial." Clapham Institute agrees. We have created a warehouse of resources based on McGilchrist's work, showing how neuroscience aligns with age-old thinking regarding God, the gospel, human nature, the church, spiritual formation, and how we engage the wider world. It is how we resource Christians who recognize our post-Christian age. If you want to learn more about our resources, contact us at:

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⁴ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (Crown Publishing Group, 2012), 300.