

# Does Reality Butt Heads with Adventist Apocalypticism?

BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

*Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*

By Steven Pinker

Viking, 2018, 556 pp., \$35.00

*Why Liberalism Failed*

By Patrick Deneen

Yale University Press, 2018, 225 pp., \$30.00

Hope is the heart of Adventism. According to this hope, life on earth is bound to get worse, but at the point of final cataclysm, divine rescue—the Second Coming—interrupts, and all who are “ready” leave earth for heaven.

For nearly three years now, I have belonged to a small congregation in Gilbert, AZ, just twenty minutes east of the Phoenix Airport. The congregation rents worship space and shares (but for more than a year had not even had) a pastor. Early on, I sat in what was then the only adult Sabbath School class, and discovered that, among those present, I alone was a lifelong Adventist. All the others had joined the church as adults, and were still largely under the influence of evangelists like Doug Batchelor who continue, it seems, to define official Adventism. These people held the eschatology I have just described, and still do.

Now comes the well-known Steven Pinker, self-assured as a TV preacher, arguing at great length that, in fact, the world is getting better. Writing from his Harvard professor’s platform, Pinker has become a well-known apostle of the Enlightenment. In his *Enlightenment Now*, he uses page after page of arresting empirical evidence to make the case for human progress. Along the way, he vilifies, of course, the sway of religious authority. But he also ties into what he sees as the short-sightedness of

the media and the tiresome pessimism of left-wing, secular academia. Despite the constant “drumbeat of doom,” Enlightenment science and reason have helped the following, he says, to have happened:

Violence overall is down; so is death among the very young, and so is discrimination against women, children, gays and lesbians. As for famine and lethal infectious disease, both are declining rapidly. The world’s wealth, on the other hand, is hugely greater than it once was, and more evenly distributed; poverty, even among racial minorities, has fallen. Life expectancy is up. Education is better and more widely available, with IQs themselves higher by thirty points than for our ancestors. People are, by a mile, safer than they used to be.

Though some raise doubts, Pinker’s arguments for these

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points are, on the whole, convincing. The Enlightenment makes the claim that “we can apply reason and sympathy to enhance human flourishing,” and Pinker backs it up. He says, too, that “indiscriminate cynicism” serves no helpful purpose. It is true that nuclear and environmental challenges constitute true “existential threats,” but humanity’s record shows (even if it does not guarantee) that passion for knowledge and use of the scientific method can “improve the human condition,” including the human moral condition. These days, as he remarks, not even “the most worrying worrywart” frets over the possible return of cannibalism or foot-binding.

The Enlightenment did, unquestionably, accelerate scientific advance. It also helped to expose abuses and illusions associated with various forms of religious and political authoritarianism. But in its account of human nature and human goals, and of the political and economic order, it fell disastrously short. Or so argues Patrick Deneen, a political scientist at Notre Dame, in *Why Liberalism Failed*. From his point of view, you would have thought the prophets were targeting Pinker when they denounced those who cry: "Peace, peace; when there is no peace."

Deneen's focus is "liberalism," or the Enlightenment political theory whose core, his book suggests, comes down to four main propositions. One is that humans are

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choice-making, or "autonomous," beings; we are born free and have the capacity and the right to define and govern ourselves. Another is that tradition and authority, even unchosen relationships insofar as they conflict with rational self-interest, are obstacles from which we need emancipation; we harm ourselves, and fall short of moral maturity, when we allow such things to determine how we live or what we decide upon. Another is that government should reflect the consent of the governed; one version or other of democratic government is best, and the job of such a government, as James Madison put it, is to "protect the greatest possible sphere of individual liberty." A fourth proposition is that the best economic order is one energized by "rational self-interest" and the pursuit of private ends.

But all this, Deneen argues, entails strange and ultimately destructive commitments. Now "freedom" is a given, whereas ancient wisdom, both Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian, taught that freedom is "learned capacity," a mastery over "slavish pursuit" of "hedonistic desires." Now connection with local communities—families and churches and other associations that preserve particular cultures and instill virtues reflecting the wisdom of many generations—seems unnecessary. Now the state,

which must step in when abuses of unfettered choice interfere with the free choice of others, becomes the only legitimate, and also an ever-expanding, regulatory agency. Now an economy driven by self-interest replaces the common good with the protection of individual rights to property and wealth. Under all these impacts, social bonds loosen, enhancing choice but at the same time producing loneliness and alienation, and weakening "the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness." More and more, desperate and untutored appetites turn to "consumption, hedonism, and short-term thinking."

All this, Deneen wants his readers to see, describes the current situation for dominant Western cultures downstream of the Enlightenment. Assuming, as I do, that the account has enough plausibility to be troubling, what can Adventist eschatology truly say? Given the evidence Pinker presents, and the fact that Jesus made peacemaking a prime trait of authentic discipleship, we cannot truly say that the world is bound to get worse. It would have been incoherent, indeed, for Jesus to endorse peacemaking while believing it to be utterly pointless. Yet Daniel and Revelation and Jesus' own apocalypticism do stand tall in Scripture. The apocalyptic perspective, with its unflagging hope and radical suspicion of the status quo, provides indispensable awareness of our continuing capacity for folly and evil. What Pinker, the cocksure secularist, conveniently overlooks, or at least plays down, we cannot overlook.

Not when we embrace our eschatology without succumbing to its imperfections. Life on earth may get worse and worse, and I myself more often have to fight off doom and gloom than too-easy buoyancy about the human prospect. But surely the Kingdom of Christ can grow here, like the mustard seed in the famous parable. Perhaps it could, for the time being, grow by fits and starts, or grow in some places but not others. In any case, our job is the peacemaking that Jesus associated with the Kingdom, the kind that requires both confidence and suspicion. Anything less and we can no more be, in our togetherness, the true church than we can be, in our individuality, true disciples. If official Adventism omits to notice this, the truth of it remains, immovable as stone.

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