The Enlightenment

Submitted version of article published in Robert A. Segal & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.) *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* Vol.1 (Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2015)

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Abstract: The Enlightenment was a social and intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was characterized by scepticism about authority and respect for the power of reason. Unsurprisingly, it resulted in a series of conflicts with religious authorities, particularly with the Catholic Church, and a reconceptualization of the understanding of God.

Key words: Enlightenment, reason, tolerance, deism, scepticism

The Enlightenment was a social and intellectual movement of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of European origins with particularly important developments in England (Porter 2000), France (Cranston 1986, Blom 2010), Scotland (Herman 2001) and later in America (May 1976). It was characterized by scepticism about authority and by respect for the power of reason. The origins of the Enlightenment included four influential developments of the seventeenth century. First, there was the bloody and religiously inspired Thirty Years' War (1618-48), a negative advertisement for the advantages of tolerance. Second, scientific advances, particularly in physics and astronomy, challenged both biblical and Aristotelian accounts, and culminated in Sir Isaac Newton's mechanics (published 1687), which held out the prospect that reason could comprehend the complexity and variety of experience. Third, the philosophical method of René Descartes (1596-1650) apparently deduced much of metaphysics entirely from reason without prior assumptions. Fourth, the British 'Glorious' Revolution of 1688 (in which William of Orange invaded England, deposed King James II and accepted monarchical powers limited by the Bill of Rights of 1689) suggested that progress toward a rational political order was not only possible but practical. Although recent scholarship has challenged the view that the Glorious Revolution was peaceful and pragmatic (Pincus 2009), what mattered from the point of view of influence was its long-held characterisation as relatively bloodless, consensual, progressive and rational.

Kinds and aspects of Enlightenment

Enlightened ideas varied widely over a century and a half (Fitzpatrick et al 2007). Broadly speaking, there were three 'flavors.' First, the radical Enlightenment advocated sweeping away the traditional order and putting a rational system in its place (Israel 2001, 2006, 2011). Key radicals included Jean le Rond d'Alembert,

Jeremy Bentham, the Marquis de Condorcet, Denis Diderot, Edward Gibbon, Baron d'Holbach, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (whose complex intellectual development also contributed to the counter-Enlightenment), and Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza (1632-1677) is the earliest of these figures, and Jonathan Israel (2001, *passim* and esp.159-174) argues convincingly that "the question of Spinozism is indeed central and indispensible to any proper understanding of Early Enlightenment European thought" (Israel 2001, 12). The radicals were also strongly influenced by the early example of Cartesianism (Israel 2001, 23-29); d'Alembert, in his introduction to the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* he co-edited with Diderot (1751), argued that Descartes "pointed the way for us" (excerpted in Kramnick 1995, 7-15, at 10).

A second, more moderate flavor focused on tolerance and on scepticism about authority, including scepticism about the radical figures' mastery of reason (Himmelfarb 2008). Key moderates included Pierre Bayle, the Comte de Buffon, Benjamin Franklin, Frederick II (the Great), Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Leibniz, John Locke, James Madison, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Voltaire. The boundary between these groups was fluid. For example, Bayle, while a thoroughgoing sceptic, influenced the radicals. Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) was perhaps the key moderate text, strongly informing the English Bill of Rights of 1689.

A third, minority flavor used the methods of reason and scepticism to develop justifications for the old order, producing a kind of conservatism that was not purely reactionary and that gave a positive account of the benefits of tradition and authority. This style of thought, the greatest exemplar of which was Edmund Burke, is often regarded as anti-Enlightenment, as it was by Burke himself. But it was clearly influenced by Enlightenment thinking, unlike a dogmatic defence of the Church or the *Ancien Régime*. Hume, Madison, and Smith have their conservative moments. Together with Burke, these figures have been very influential on modern conservative thought, although only Burke made a point of defending the overthrown order. Newton thought his demonstration of the regularities of reality helped prove the existence of God (a version of the design argument), and inspired people such as Samuel Clarke and the Latitudinarians, who defended Christianity while rejecting traditional authorities that represented themselves as immune to rational criticism.

The radical Enlightenment produced many ideas that are taken for granted in modern democracies, including racial and sexual equality, personal liberty, universal toleration, and the need for government to legitimise itself. But the radical position was also disruptive and divisive. Radicalism culminated in the French Revolution, which resulted in the displacement of radical ideals with Napoleonic imperialism. The moderate Enlightenment, which aimed at minimizing conflict, led to innovations such as the rule of law, the separation of powers, representative democracy, and Deism. Where it was behind revolutionary acts, those acts tended to produce lasting settlements, as in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776. At the same time the moderates often compromised with reactionary groups, most obviously with slave owners. Slavery was outlawed only as a result of pressure from post-Enlightenment evangelicals.

Given this variation in positions, it is hard to produce a precise statement of Enlightenment principles. Still, there are six aspects of Enlightenment thought to be found in most writers' works (O'Hara 2010, 3-16).

1: New sources of authority, particularly grounded in human capacities. In the Enlightenment there was a broad and general shift away from *authority* and toward the autonomy of the *individual*, who was expected to take more responsibility for the justification of the beliefs he held. Older sources of authority such as the monarchy, God, the Bible, and tradition lost their hold, and newer ones, such as experimental observation, reason, and logic became more respectable.

There were three important corollaries of this new attitude. First, the power of tradition was markedly reduced, and old habits and attitudes were routinely questioned. Second, toleration of alternative views became an accepted value. Third, the individual became more important as a political entity, and individual liberty was increasingly taken to be an important political goal.

Mystery, in particular religion and folk magic, became unfashionable, and in the arts clarity reigned. The dense, metaphorical poetry of the seventeenth century, represented in England by John Donne and Henry Vaughan, became the civilized, plainspeaking work of John Dryden and Alexander Pope, and the acme of poetical achievement was when one's lines were "what oft was thought but ne'er so well exprest" (from Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, 1711). The complex polyphonic music of William Byrd and Giovanni Palestrina from the sixteenth century gave way to the joyous works of Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Händel.

2: Confidence and optimism. Newton's mechanics showed that exact theories of even very complex phenomena could be developed not only to explain but also to allow one to intervene and alter the environment. Hobbes and Locke tried a similar trick with social and political thinking. One could secure total knowledge of a state of affairs. Abstraction and mathematics were important tools, and expertise was admired. Optimism in turn led to support for the old idea of Providence, that the world could not be any better than it was because a reasonable God would surely not make an imperfect world. This view is generally associated with the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz but was also evident elsewhere, such as in Pope's *Essay on Man* (1734).

3: Scepticism. Scepticism about the old authorities was quickly applied to newer ones. Bayle was unimpressed even with Newton. In *Candide, Or Optimism* (1759) Voltaire parodied Leibnizian providence through the character of Pangloss, who suffers terrible depredations while constantly intoning that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

Scepticism and confidence naturally clashed, and the clash was characteristic of the split between the radical and the moderate branches of the Enlightenment. Where the radicals were confident of their ability to design a rational political and social order, the moderates were sceptical of human powers of reason. The conservative Enlightenment figures took such scepticism even further.

4: Universal reason. A wealth of psychological theorizing during the Enlightenment sought to show how persons could deploy reason to discover implicit truths from explicit evidence. The power of reason was an important factor in the confidence characteristic of the era and justified the hopes for the authority of the individual. Reason allowed understanding of our common world and so had to be universal and global in scope.

For many Englightenment thinkers, God, the Supreme Being, must be the ultimate deployer of reason as the supreme mode of thought. God's behavior could therefore

be partially understood even by an imperfect human, who could follow at least some of God's reasoning. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) John Locke argued that reason was natural revelation and Christian revelation was reason enlarged by communication from God. The Protestant emphasis on individual conscience could be squared with much of the more moderate Enlightenment thought, but traditional Catholicism felt more threatened by reason.

5: Self-interest, happiness and human nature. The rise of individualism led to a favorable attitude toward purely personal good. The American Declaration of Independence (1776, reprinted in full in Kramnick 1995, 448-452), based heavily on the philosophy of Locke, enshrined the "self-evident" truth that individuals had inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of utilitarianism rested n the promotion of happiness. Pleasure became something that persons were expected to wish for and that it was no one's business to impede. Self-interest was not seen as automatically destructive of social harmony. Rather, it balanced the restraint of reason. David Hume went further, claiming that "reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume 1978, II.III.III, 415). Many thinkers believed that social virtues such as benevolence contributed to the happiness of individuals and helped reconcile individual wants with social needs.

6: Attitudes of an educated minority. The Enlightenment was very 'top down.' It was an attitude, by and large, of a highly educated minority, often wealthy and with social position. Enlightened thinkers did not expect their own views to triumph without a struggle and were keen to provide the conditions where they could flourish. Hence many thinkers developed theories of education.

Sometimes tolerant elitism led to a *lack* of toleration of the unenlightened. The great thinkers of the time were noticeably impatient with the working poor, or women, or non-white colonized peoples who were perceived as resisting Enlightened views. As Diderot wrote to his mistress in 1759, "the progress of Enlightenment is limited. It hardly reaches the suburbs. The people there are too stupid, too miserable, and too busy. There it stops" (quoted in Blom 2010, 104).

Enlightenment and religion

Although atheism was a topic for open discussion in the eighteenth century, few Enlightenment thinkers denied the existence of God. There was a great deal of scepticism about mysteries, revelations and miracles, and many philosophers used reason to criticise dogma. Those of strong sceptical opinions, including Hobbes, Bayle and Hume, were all accused of atheism but defended themselves vigorously. Spinoza's pantheism was also taken as a type of atheism, on the ground that if everything is part of an immanent God, then God is nothing over and above the laws of the natural world (an argument repeated, for example, in Blom 2010, 84). Yet the target of most Enlightenment philosophers was the authority of the churches, especially the Catholic Church; the existence of God, and His goodness, were generally questioned only to be reaffirmed.

Freethinkers such as Locke and his protégé Anthony Collins insisted that reason could be used impartially to assess the evidence for and against religious claims. If God was reasonable, human reason could be used to understand the mysteries of the cosmos. This thought led to the most characteristic Enlightenment position, Deism - the view that God was reasonable. The Deists, of whom the most influential was Voltaire, lined

up alongside anti-clerical critics to argue that dogmatism, tradition, and authority were responsible for error; that priests fostered mystery and deception to preserve their position; and that religious enthusiasm was superstitious and was best combated with mockery rather than imprisonment. Thinkers from Spinoza to Collins to Hume argued that the creation of a reasonable God should exhibit the regularities discovered by Newton rather than by miracles.

Deism ascribed to God the same humanitarian ethical outlook that the *philosophes* largely shared. If reason led us to tolerance toward those in religious error, to love of humanity, and to a focus on the moral content of religion rather than on the accidents of practice and ritual, then surely God should have the same views because He was hardly likely to be irrational.

Rousseau's theory of society as an unwarranted restriction on human nature led to a general love of "natural" modes of being and a rejection of all social structures, whether rational or traditional. He argued that these modes of being reflected the goodness of God's creation, which was only undermined by harmful institutions. This much more emotional Deism influenced Robespierre in his attempts to introduce the deistic Cult of the Supreme Being as the state religion of the French Revolutionary Republic.

At the other extreme, the most prominent of the small number of atheistical thinkers were Diderot and d'Holbach, who followed the materialist line that all motion was caused by matter, as explained by Newton's laws. From there it was a small step to deny that there was any need for God, soul, or spirit in the picture. God, on this view, was best considered as a monster invented by the ignorant to explain forces that were not understood, denying persons happiness in this life for the sake of a delusory life to come.

The French Revolution conventionally marks the end of the Enlightenment--whether at the fall of the Bastille (1789), the Terror (1793), the *coup* of 18 *Brumaire* (1799), or the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo (1815). Furthermore, Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Robert Burns, and William Wordsworth, while influenced by Enlightenment ideas, began to see value in the lived experience of the individual, legitimizing expressions of emotion and resistance to the universalizing forces of reason. The norm of happiness was displaced by the nobility of suffering. Here lay the foundations of Romanticism, which superseded the Enlightenment around the turn of the nineteenth century.

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