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Robert B. Louden

The World We Want

How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment still elude us

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ROBERT B. LOUDEN

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Printed in the United States of America
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Finally, for my parents,
Robert K. and Anne Z. Louden

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This is a book about two different pictures: a picture of a hoped-for future created by Enlightenment intellectuals slightly over two centuries ago, and a picture of our world at present. In drawing each picture I have aimed at accuracy of representation: in the case of the first picture, by looking carefully at what Enlightenment intellectuals from a number of different countries actually said about the future; in the case of the second, by examining the historical and statistical record. *That* the two resulting pictures are very different from each other I am confident I have established. This in itself may not be news to everyone, but some of the details concerning the extent of the gap did come as a shock to me, and I think that many readers will be surprised to learn that we have often not progressed as much as we think we have—indeed, that in certain central areas of human life things are actually worse now than they were two hundred years ago.

Why the two pictures are so different is much harder to substantiate, and here I am less confident of the particular answers I have offered. But if my explanations for why the ideals of the Enlightenment still elude us are

rejected, I hope that in the future they will be replaced by more accurate explanations. Previous efforts in this area are clearly unsatisfactory, and at present we suffer from a lack of serious analysis of the causes behind our failure to realize ideals.

Unlike most philosophical critiques as well as defenses of the Enlightenment, the present study focuses extensively on the relevant historical and empirical record: first, by examining carefully what kind of future Enlightenment intellectuals actually advocated; second, by tracking the different legacies of their ideals. The result is a more note-laden text than I would have liked, but one that also (or so I hope) speaks clearly and accurately about a number of issues that contemporary authors have often treated in an obscure manner. At the same time, in my efforts both to explain why many Enlightenment ideals have still not been realized and to find strategies for grounding hope in unhopeful times, I have tried to include a more philosophical and theoretical dimension within what is often a fairly descriptive and empirical narrative.

The basic conception of Enlightenment ideals that I put forward in part I and evaluate in part II is often at odds with many recent portrayals of the Enlightenment. On my reading, the heart of the Enlightenment was not a misguided scientistic attempt to control human life by means of a technocratic state, but rather a morally motivated effort to expand human freedom and equality. And the Enlightenment strategies for promoting these goals of increased freedom and equality were consciously multidimensional and pragmatic: Enlightenment intellectuals advocated not just political reform, but religious, educational, economic, and legal reform as well, anticipating that progressive changes in one sphere would help trigger needed changes in others, and that cumulative effects would outweigh solitary ones.

However, the following study is by no means a mere encomium to the Enlightenment. For I believe I have also shown that several of the means they advocated toward their ends (means strongly endorsed by later generations) are inefficacious, that at least one of their central goals simply does not fit with human nature, and that several of their ideals display a disturbing pattern of devolving into distorted versions of themselves when attempts are made to realize them. At bottom, I seek to analyze and evaluate these ideals, to determine what is dead and what is living in them.

.....

Many different institutions and individuals have helped me in writing this book, and now it is my pleasure to thank them. Initial reading and research

on the project were supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities 2001 Summer Stipend, and by a University of Maine System Trustee Professorship in 2001–2. A first draft of part I was written during 2002–3, with the aid of a sabbatical leave from the University of Southern Maine and an American Philosophical Society (APS) Sabbatical Fellowship for the Humanities and Social Sciences. I am grateful to each of these institutions for their financial support. The APS Fellowship in particular enabled me to devote a full year of uninterrupted time to reading and writing. Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743 to help support "all philosophical experiments that let Light into the Nature of Things," the American Philosophical Society was the perfect scholarly organization from which to seek support for a writing project about the legacy of Enlightenment ideals. In this regard I would also like to warmly thank Karl Ameriks, Martha Nussbaum, and Allen Wood for their support in my Fellowship application, as well as for their steady encouragement over the years.

Earlier versions of several chapters were presented as invited lectures at Binghamton University, State University of New York, in February 2003, and at Rostock and Münster Universities in Germany in June 2003. I would particularly like to thank my hosts Melissa Zinkin, Niko Strobach, and Ludwig Siep for their hospitality, as well as members of each audience for raising a number of important issues that eventually led to improvements in my argument.

Three anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press went well beyond the call of duty in evaluating two different versions of a not always robust manuscript, and I would like to thank them for urging me to be clearer and bolder in what I was trying to say.

During the time in which I worked on the manuscript, it was my good fortune to receive guest lecture invitations from a number of universities and scholarly organizations in parts of the world that I had never visited before. Although the specific focus of my lectures was Kant's moral philosophy, many of the broader themes of this book came up repeatedly during our discussions. For hospitality, friendship, helpful criticisms, and, yes, even occasional signs that the Enlightenment hope of a cosmopolitan community of the citizens of the earth is possible, I would like to particularly thank the following individuals, institutions, and organizations: Jens Timmermann, University of St. Andrews, Scotland (April 2002); Zeljko Loparic, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil, Brazilian Kant Society (June 2002); Maria Borges, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil (June 2002); Alan Thomas, University of Kent, England (March 2004); Heiner F. Klemme, Manfred Kuehn, and Dieter Schönecker, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany

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Part of the challenge of this project involved not making a fool of myself when writing about disciplines in which I am not trained. For helpful advice and criticism in this regard I would like to thank several of my colleagues at the University of Southern Maine (USM): Richard J. Maiman (Political Science), Martin A. Rogoff (School of Law), and Michael Hillard (Economics). Thanks also to Robert McCauley at Emory University for discussion and criticism of the two religion chapters, as well as for advice on general methodological matters.

The library staff at USM has been especially helpful over the years in procuring research materials from other libraries and getting them to my base in Portland and for advice on research strategies. Special thanks to David Vardeman, interlibrary loan assistant; Zip Kellogg, reference librarian; and Loraine Ann Lowell, John F. Plante, and Robert M. Spencer, circulation assistants.

I have also explored some of the book's themes with undergraduates in my philosophy classes at USM in recent years. In particular, I would like to thank participants from my senior seminar in spring 2000 (Challenges to the Enlightenment), my senior seminar in fall 2005 (Hume), my Early Modern Philosophy classes in fall 2004 and spring 2006, and my Philosophy of Law classes in spring 2004 and fall 2006.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the following individuals: Lawrence Simon (Bowdoin College) and other members of the Maine Ethics Reading Group, for prodding me to crawl out of my eighteenth-century fixation and confront more texts in contemporary philosophy (some specimens of which are employed in what follows); Beata Panagopoulos, head of technical services at the Kennedy School Library of Harvard University, for providing important research aid on an issue that had Mainers stuck; Ann Brushwein, software support specialist at USM, for doing amazing things to my computer disks that I still don't understand; Derek Phillips (University of Amsterdam), for encouraging me to keep my priorities straight; Peter Ohlin, my editor at Oxford University Press, for counseling both patience and perseverance; Aramis López, for help with the bibliography; and last but not least, Tama, Elizabeth, and Sarah, for putting up with my crankiness as I struggled to get the manuscript into shape.

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Note on Citations and Translations

Quotations from Kant's works are cited in the body of the text by volume and page number in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, later Walter de Gruyter, 1900–), except for quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which are cited by the customary use of the pagination of its first ("A") and second ("B") editions. When available, I use—with occasional modifications—the recent English translations in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, general editors Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992–). These traditional "Academy" volume and page numbers (and also the A and B pagination from the *Critique of Pure Reason*) are reprinted in the margins of most recent editions and translations of Kant's writings. I have also used the following shortened titles:

Anthropology	*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*

Conflict	*The Conflict of the Faculties*
Conjectural Beginning	*Conjectural Beginning of Human History*
Enlightenment	*An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*
Groundwork	*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
Judgment	*Critique of the Power of Judgment*
Morals	*The Metaphysics of Morals*
Peace	*Toward Perpetual Peace*
Pedagogy	*Lectures on Pedagogy*
Practical Reason	*Critique of Practical Reason*
Pure Reason	*Critique of Pure Reason*
Religion	*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*
Theory and Practice	*On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice*
Universal History	*Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*

The World We Want

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Introduction

The Enlightenment is the only historical period to be defined by a philosophical movement, and so philosophers can perhaps be excused for being a bit misty-eyed about it. However, Enlightenment philosophers were also more practical than many people realize. Ernst Cassirer, in his classic study *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, writes,

> The fundamental tendency and the main endeavor of the philosophy of the Enlightenment are not to observe life and to portray it in terms of reflective thought. This philosophy believes rather in an original spontaneity of thought; it attributes to thought not merely an imitative function but the power and the task of shaping life itself. Thought consists not only in analyzing and dissecting, but in actually bringing about the order of things which it conceives as necessary, so that by this act of fulfillment it may demonstrate its own reality and truth.[1]

In other words, Enlightenment philosophers also sought not merely to interpret the world but also to change it—indeed, they believed that it was their duty to do so. But although some of them were not shy in acknowledging that "Enlightenment is justly accused as the cause of revolutions,"[2] most Enlightenment intellectuals are correctly read as advocating peaceful change through free inquiry, public discussion, and institutional reform.

These latter strategies both overlap with and differ from "piecemeal social engineering." Piecemeal social engineering shares with its more radical utopian and authoritarian relatives a strong desire to improve the human condition through intentional societal development and change, but unlike them it is always constrained by respect for basic human rights and democratic processes.[3] At the same time, although commentators often claim to have located the origins of social engineering (piecemeal or otherwise) in the Enlightenment,[4] the term "social engineering" is itself out of place here. No application of any specific "engineering" technique to society was advocated by any major Enlightenment intellectual. Even if one defines "social engineering" more generically as the attempt to improve human society by means of "the scientific method," the label is still inappropriate (not to mention vague), for it is inaccurate to call Enlightenment social reform efforts "scientific." At bottom, their reform efforts were motivated by moral rather than scientific concerns: their goal was not an engineered society administered by a technocratic state, but increased freedom and equality for all human beings. What is appropriate is an acknowledgment that Enlightenment philosophers and intellectuals were strongly committed to "the task of shaping life itself" and "actually bringing about the order of things" which they conceived as necessary, believed that specific institutions and social practices play key roles in shaping human lives, were convinced that initiating certain fundamental changes in human institutions and social practices would facilitate a deeper moral transformation in human life, and held that it was humanity's duty to undertake these changes. Friends as well as foes of the Enlightenment tend to underappreciate these core commitments, plumping instead for sweeping statements and grandiose formulas that often have no demonstrable connection to anything Enlightenment intellectuals actually said or believed. Thus from one side we are informed that the Enlightenment's professed universalism was in fact merely a cloak for Western hegemony and cultural imperialism,[5] while from another we are comforted with the news that economic globalization and contemporary democratization represent the fulfillment of Enlightenment hopes.

Indeed, in many intellectual circles at present discussion of the Enlightenment has sunk to the level of derogatory clichés. The influential critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, decreed that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" and that it ushered in "the administered world."[6] Similarly, Michel Foucault concluded that Enlightenment efforts at social reform have led not to increased freedom but to the carceral society, a condition where the individual is "the effect of a subjection," "the effect and instrument of a political anatomy."[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, entered the fray later, proclaiming that "the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality" not only failed but "had to fail";[8] and soon countless critics joined the chorus, denouncing alleged Enlightenment sins of racism, Eurocentrism, sexism, and colonialism. These sins, alas, are sometimes all too real, but the present fixation on them has often obscured what is most important and compelling about the Enlightenment.

The present work is written from a much different perspective, one closer (in certain respects) to that of earlier scholars such as Cassirer, who, shortly before the Nazis exiled him from Germany, tried valiantly to silence the slogan of the "shallow Enlightenment" that was then also in vogue. "Instead of assuming a derogatory air," Cassirer wrote, "we must take courage and measure our powers against those of the age of Enlightenment, and thus find a proper adjustment. . . . We must find a way not only to see that age in its own shape but to release again those original forces which brought forth and molded this shape."[9] We today also need to find a way to see the Enlightenment in its own shape, as well as to try to recapture some sense of its hope for the future of humanity.

Although the connections may not be immediately apparent, this study is an outgrowth of my earlier books *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* and *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. In the latter work, I argued that an important and underexplored part of Kant's practical philosophy concerns the empirical study of human nature and culture, and that an integral aspect of Kant's empirical study of human beings deals with the influence of social and cultural institutions on human moral character. In the present project I am casting my net much more widely, in part because I have become convinced that the Kant I focused on in *Kant's Impure Ethics* is in some respects a less original Kant than I had earlier assumed. In arguing that the growth and spread of universal education, religious tolerance, republican government and the rule of law, free trade between nations, and the establishment of an international justice system would all jointly contribute to humanity's

eventual moral transformation, Kant was clearly not a lone voice but part of a much larger intellectual ensemble. By means of his philosophy of history Kant injected more systematicity into these Enlightenment social reform projects, and in his practical philosophy (particularly in what he called "the second part of morals") he also gave them a more robust rationale. But the proposals themselves do not originate with him. Kant arrives on the intellectual scene toward the end of the Enlightenment, and—at least in his applied practical philosophy, if not in his theoretical—he is integrating a wide number of earlier proposals made by other writers working not only in Germany, but also in France, Britain, the United States, and elsewhere.[10]

In *Morality and Moral Theory*, I defended an alternative conception of moral theory, one that owes several debts to contemporary virtue ethics and antitheory criticisms of formalist programs in moral theory, but one that also (or so I argued) more accurately reflects the actual moral theories of Aristotle and Kant. My goal was both to demonstrate the present need for more empirically informed moral theories and to show that the best moral theories of the past were in fact more empirically informed than their contemporary commentators and critics often make them out to be.[11] The present work is not directly a contribution to ethical theory construction, though in its concern with applied issues of moral development and the challenges of translating moral ideals into reality, it does offer an indirect contribution to theory. Indeed, part of what intrigues me about Enlightenment philosophers and intellectuals is precisely the extent to which they were able to overcome foundational and methodological differences in philosophy and moral theory and to reach agreement on more concrete issues of social and cultural reform. But in the present study I do continue my earlier efforts to show that classical moral philosophers were very much concerned both with how to make their theories efficacious and with how to change the world. That they are seldom understood in this way at present is more a function of contemporary philosophical tastes and interests than of what they actually wrote.

In the present work I examine critically a widely shared Enlightenment strategy for the gradual realization of basic social and moral ideals. One of my goals is to demonstrate certain shortcomings of this strategy, and here I employ a two-pronged method that focuses on means as well as on ends. In some cases, the means employed toward the realization of the ends are shown to be ineffective; in other cases, the ends themselves are called into question. A second goal is simply to register accurately the large gap that exists between Enlightenment ideals and contemporary realities, a gap

whose existence is often ignored or denied in many recent polemics about the Enlightenment. The pursuit of these two goals opens up additional questions as well: What are the causes of the large gap between Enlightenment ideals and present realities? How can we avoid past mistakes in this area? In cases where the means advocated by Enlightenment intellectuals are inefficacious, what more appropriate means for the realization of their ideals are available to us? And what remains in these ideals that we today need to recover and reassert?

The World We Want, while philosophically motivated, also involves a fair amount of historical and empirical research. The latter, though consciously mundane (my primary aim is not to uncover new facts, but to draw attention to, and then to reinterpret, certain well-established facts in making an argument about our failure to realize Enlightenment ideals), is needed at present. Philosophy, or at least the kind of philosophy undertaken here, "must involve more than abstract argument . . . it must engage itself in history. In this and other respects, philosophy cannot be too pure if it really wants to do what it sets out to do."[12] Certainly any philosophical assessment of the legacy of the Enlightenment should engage itself in history, though in fact few such assessments have actually done so.

I examine actual Enlightenment proposals for cultural and institutional change, with the benefit of two centuries' hindsight.[13] What specific proposals for cultural and institutional change did Enlightenment intellectuals put forward? How did they think their proposals were instrumental to the moral future they envisaged? To what extent are these proposals still appropriate to our own historical experience? How is our present world both similar to and different from the world they wanted? How and why do the ideals of the Enlightenment still elude us?

I do not intend to respond in detail to the attacks on Enlightenment ideals made by critics, in part because others have already done so, but also because, as noted earlier, most of these attacks are based on caricatures of Enlightenment ideals and are thus merely elaborate versions of a straw man argument. Rather, this study aims at an analysis and evaluation of the Enlightenment's actual goals, and also of the means advocated for achieving these goals. I believe that it is important at present to reexamine and rearticulate what the Enlightenment's hopes for the future actually were, in part because these hopes have often been distorted, and in part because by reflecting on them we are also led to give more thought to our own hopes for the future. Although I do endorse most of the Enlightenment's hopes (indeed, I believe that a strong majority of people do, once accurate versions of them are presented), in the present work I speak primarily not

as an advocate of Enlightenment ideals but as an analyst and evaluator of them. What were these ideals? How and why have they still not been realized? Are better means toward the realization of these ideals available, and if so, what are they? What is still viable in these ideals, and what is not?

As a philosopher long intrigued by Kant, my own base of operations for approaching the Enlightenment is unavoidably Kantian. But in the present study considerable effort has been devoted to establishing clear points of contact and agreement between Kant's views and those of other important writers from the French, German, British, American, and sometimes even other Enlightenments. I remain partial toward the German Enlightenment, for "of all European variants of the Enlightenment, only the German one took up Enlightenment itself as a philosophical problem."[14] But I am also convinced—at least as regards the core ideals explored in the following pages—that substantial intellectual agreement existed between the different variants of the Enlightenment.

In stressing points of contact and agreement between different Enlightenments, I am conscious of the fact that my approach differs from that of many contemporary scholars, who tend to stress plurality and diversity over unity. G. J. A. Pocock, for instance, urges us to pluralize the Enlightenment "into a number of movements in both harmony and conflict with each other"; James Schmidt claims that "the very notion that there was a single thing called 'the Enlightenment' appears, more and more, to be an illusion."[15] On this central point, I side with Jonathan Israel: the currently fashionable claim

> that there was not one Enlightenment but rather an entire constellation or family of "Enlightenments" . . . encourages the tendency to study the subject within the context of "national history" which is decidedly the wrong framework for so international and pan-European a phenomenon. Worse still, it unacceptably ignores or overlooks the extent to which common impulses and concerns shaped the Enlightenment as a whole.[16]

At the same time, my stress on certain fundamental points of agreement between different Enlightenment intellectuals is not intended to support the claim that there was "a single thing called 'the Enlightenment.'" The international Enlightenment ideals with which this study is concerned by no means cancel out the existence of numerous conflicts, tensions, and divisions between different variants of the Enlightenment.

Nor should the intentionally broad scope of this study be confused either with surveys of "the" Enlightenment or its increasingly popular

cousin, "the inflated Enlightenment," the latter of which has come to be "identified with all modernity, [and] with nearly everything subsumed under the name of Western civilization."[17] Many issues directly relevant to both the Enlightenment and modernity (not to mention Western civilization) are not examined at all in what follows. For example, this is a book not about "the intellectual foundations of modern culture,"[18] but about something a bit more modest and concrete. I am concerned with a widely shared Enlightenment strategy for moral reform, and I wish to determine what is living and dead in this strategy. Put differently, the specific themes explored in this work are themselves a function of the late eighteenth-century intellectual consensus that existed regarding the best means for the realization of desired ends.

At the same time, any serious analysis and assessment of these means and ends does entail that we move beyond influential platitudes that assert that the ethos of the Enlightenment amounts to simply endorsing an attitude of a "permanent critique of ourselves." For once we embrace this move we have created a hyperinflated Enlightenment that knows no temporal bounds: every philosophy student since Socrates who believes that "the unexamined life is not worth living" becomes an instantiation of the Enlightenment attitude. Contra Foucault, I do believe that some "faithfulness to doctrinal elements" is necessary: any significant investigation of the Enlightenment needs to investigate the specific means-ends story behind their hopes for the future.[19]

The method adopted in part I of this study is a simple and modest one, and it is important not to read too much into it. For each core theme introduced, I show that one finds expression and endorsement of it not only within the German Enlightenment (often, but not solely, established by means of Kant's texts), but also in the French, British, and American Enlightenments (and occasionally elsewhere as well). However, this is not an exhaustive study of any of these Enlightenments, nor of any of the authors whose works are cited. Rather, I focus on key expressions of a select core of social and moral ideals, and then indicate some level of the international support that existed for these ideals during the Enlightenment.

The specific fields of investigation chosen for this study are religion, education, economics, politics, and international relations. This list is intentionally selective and builds off of a similar investigation pursued in *Kant's Impure Ethics*. Although these five fields certainly do not exhaust Enlightenment intellectuals' interests in cultural and institutional change, they do, I believe, constitute their primary areas of concern. Within each of

the five chapters in part I ("Then"), I focus on two or three core areas of agreement among Enlightenment intellectuals from different countries with respect to each relevant field of investigation. The aim, again, is not to show that there is one monolithic "Enlightenment Project" to praise or bash, but rather to indicate that, despite their numerous disagreements, Enlightenment intellectuals were surprisingly unified in their hopes for the future with regard to each of the five fields as well as in their commitments regarding the means needed for realizing these ideals.

In each of the five chapters of part II ("Now"), I examine the subsequent historical record, assessing to what extent the major changes and developments in each field do or do not correspond to those envisaged by Enlightenment theorists. In part II the post-Enlightenment historical record is also employed as a base for evaluating Enlightenment means and ends. In which cases does our own historical experience show that the means advocated toward Enlightenment ends have been ineffective? And in which cases does it suggest that the ends advocated simply do not fit with human nature? Finally, throughout part II as well as in my conclusion, I reassess the Enlightenment position in light of what has actually transpired over the past two hundred years in each field and offer what I believe are more accurate explanations than one finds elsewhere for why the ideals of the Enlightenment still elude us.

Three skeptical conclusions are reached in this study: (1) There is insufficient evidence to support the widespread Enlightenment assumption that external institutional change leads to desired internal attitudinal change. Moral transformation, if it is aided by institutional development, is much slower and more uneven within the human species than Enlightenment theorists assumed would be the case. (2) Several of the means advocated by Enlightenment theorists to realize their ideals—though strongly endorsed by later generations—have not led to their predicted results. The growth of free trade, for instance, has not reduced poverty between and within nations, nor has it brought about world peace. Similarly, the creation of an international commercial society and the explosive growth of education have not led to an engaged public sphere but rather to a privatized consumer culture. (3) At present—and this is due in part to the lack of predicted moral transformation summarized in the first point—insufficient numbers of people are strongly committed to Enlightenment ideals such as peace, elimination of poverty, reduction of inequality, and an engaged civic culture to make clear progress in realizing these ideals. The predicted extension and deepening of commitment to these ideals among the human population at large has not happened.

Again, though, my aims are also positive. At bottom, I seek to show what remains viable in Enlightenment ideals, and why we still have reason to hope that humanity may some day achieve those that survive scrutiny. My underlying goal is thus to present a reassessment, reenvisioning, and qualified defense of the moral and political ideals of the Enlightenment for our own time and place.

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I

THEN

What had it been like to have convincing reasons for hope about the future of mankind? Were any of these reasons still valid? Could one any longer have such hopes after all the horrors of this century? Were his favourite thinkers just purveyors of dangerous illusions that blinded true believers and armed cynical manipulators with rationalist dogmas that had, ever since the Jacobin Terror, wreaked havoc upon mankind? Optimism, in short, was both his subject and his object.

—Steven Lukes, *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat*

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I

Religion

Pure reason does not undermine religion, but rather its aberrations. You will lose prejudices and retain religion. The closer you bring religion to the light of reason, the more securely and durably it will be established for the future. Religion will not have to fear any attack by the understanding because the understanding approves of it, and if the understanding is its support, religion will become necessary and holy to the human race.

—Andreas Riem, *On Enlightenment: Is It and Could It Be Dangerous to the State, to Religion, or Dangerous in General? A Word to be Heeded by Princes, Statesmen, and Clergy* (1788)

The myth of the antireligious Enlightenment is still alive and well in many circles. According to sociologist of religion Mark Juergensmeyer, "Enlightenment modernity proclaimed the death of religion," and the alleged "reappearance" of religion in contemporary society has demonstrated the falsity of this proclamation.[1] Similarly, political theorist John Gray, in *Enlightenment's Wake*, points to the present "renaissance of particularisms, ethnic and religious" as the primary supporting data for his thesis that "we live today amid the dim ruins of the Enlightenment project"[2]—one implication being that the Enlightenment was fundamentally antireligious. According to Peter Gay, Enlightenment intellectuals were supposedly united by "a single passion . . . the passion to cure the spiritual malady that is religion, the germ of ignorance, barbarity, filth, and the basest self-hatred."[3] More recently, historian Jonathan Israel has summarized the essence of the Enlightenment tradition as consisting in "the philosophical rejection of revealed religion, miracles, and divine Providence, replacing the idea of salvation in the hereafter with a highest

good in the here and now."[4] And Gertrude Himmelfarb, while acknowledging that religion "was not the paramount enemy" in the Enlightenment as it appeared in Britain and America, continues to defend the traditional view that we find an "animus to religion" in the French Enlightenment.[5]

In this chapter, I wish to challenge the myth of the antireligious Enlightenment[6] by presenting an account of Enlightenment religiosity, an account anchored by three core ideas shared by a wide number of Enlightenment intellectuals from different countries.

The Unity Thesis

Most Enlightenment intellectuals were convinced that religion, if properly reformed, could and should serve as a progressive force for the transformation of moral and social life—specifically, as a primary contributing factor in the formation of a more cosmopolitan moral community. A key strategy in their attempt to reform religion involves what I call the *unity thesis*, which holds that all historical faiths are manifestations of one universal religion. Leading representatives from many different aspects of the Enlightenment share a commitment to the unity thesis. Lessing, for instance, expresses his adherence to it repeatedly in his writings, the most famous example being his parable of the rings (which he borrows from Boccaccio's *Decameron*) in the play *Nathan the Wise* (1779). In Act III, scene vii, Nathan (who is modeled on Lessing's friend Moses Mendelssohn)[7] addresses Saladin's query concerning which of the three great religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) is true by means of the following allegory. In the ancient East there once lived a man who possessed a ring that had "the secret power to make its possessor pleasing to God and man."[8] The ring was kept in the family for generations, each bearer bequeathing it to his favorite son, until it was passed on to the father of three sons, "all three of whom were equally obedient to him, all three of whom he therefore loved equally." Not wishing to favor one son over the others, the father hired an artist to make two exact replicas of the original ring, so that upon his death he could present each son with a ring. A quarrel soon broke out over who possessed the original ring, but "the true ring was not provable . . . almost as unprovable as the true faith is to us now." Saladin interrupts Nathan's narrative at this point, protesting, "The rings!—Don't play with me!—I thought the religions that I named to you were certainly distinguishable." But, Nathan replies, external differences notwithstanding, all of them are grounded on history, written or oral, and "history must also be accepted only on trust and faith."

Returning to his allegory of the rings, Nathan relates that the three sons eventually appealed to a judge to settle their quarrel. But the judge too was unable to determine which of the three rings was the original, and so—since each son did in fact receive his ring from his father—he advised that each should try to prove the genuineness of his faith through the exercise of beneficence toward all people. And thus the task of religious believers everywhere is to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith through their conduct toward and relationships with other human beings. In this manner, Lessing's parable of the rings defends "a genuine religious pluralism, united by the common bond of universal humanity."[9]

French author Pierre Bayle, in his earlier *Philosophical Commentary on the Words of Jesus Christ* (1686–87), also advocates a version of Lessing's conclusion, albeit without quite endorsing the unity thesis: "If each religion adopted the spirit of tolerance that I recommend . . . the most that could happen would be honest rivalry in outdoing each other in piety, good conduct and knowledge; each religion would take pride in proving its favored share of God's love by exhibiting a firmer attachment to moral conduct."[10] And in the British deist tradition we find numerous expressions of the unity thesis. For instance, Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), the "father of deism," articulated a system of "Common Notions" within religion, a system that, "at least as it concerns theology, has been clearly accepted by every normal person, and does not require any further justification."[11] What he believed he had uncovered was the common thread that unites different historical faiths, a thread graspable by unaided reason. Amid the religious conflicts that had devastated modern Europe (and the desire to overcome these conflicts was itself a primary motive in developing the unity thesis), Herbert locates the following five Common Notions: "1) There is a Supreme God, 2) This deity ought to be worshipped, 3) The connection of moral virtue to piety is the most important part of religious practice, 4) Wickedness must be expiated by repentance, 5) There is reward or punishment after this life" (32–38). "Such then," he concludes, "are the Common Notions of which the true Catholic or universal church is built. . . . The only Catholic and uniform church is the doctrine of Common Notions which comprehends all places and all men" (40).

The American deist Thomas Paine provides one of the clearest and most radical expressions of the unity thesis. In *The Age of Reason* (1794), he rejects entirely the different historical faiths, on the ground that they are "no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."[12] But beneath these various human distortions of religious faith—distortions caused not only by political and

economic greed but also by variations in human languages and historical traditions—there is raw nature in all of its beauty and sublimity, God's creation, equally accessible to all:

> THE WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD and it is in *this word*, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man. . . . The Creation speaks a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they may be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds. . . . Search not the book called the Scripture, which any human hand might make, but the Scripture called the creation. (419, 420, 421)

France is often held to be the important exception to Enlightenment religiosity, with Voltaire's battle cry against the church, *Écrasez l'infâme* (Crush the infamous one), frequently being asked to carry the main burden of evidence. But at bottom Voltaire too embraces a clear deist faith that is very similar to Paine's universal religion of nature. In a letter to Frederick the Great (1770) he proclaims, "All nature cries aloud that He does exist: that there *is* a supreme intelligence, an immense power, an admirable order, and everything teaches us our own dependence on it."[13] Similarly, in an entry in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, he writes,

> Tonight I was in a meditative mood. I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature; I admired the immensity, the movements, the harmony of those infinite globes. . . . I admired still more the intelligence which directs these vast forces. I said to myself: "One must be blind not to be dazzled by this spectacle; one must be stupid not to recognize the author of it, one must be mad not to worship Him. What tribute of worship should I render Him? Should not this tribute be the same in the whole of space, since it is the same supreme power which reigns equally in all space?"[14]

Rousseau, too, in his vision of a nonsectarian civil religion that makes each citizen "love his duty," offers yet another Enlightenment endorsement of a universal natural religion of humanity. The various particular religions, he writes in *Emile* (1762), are to be regarded

> as so many salutary institutions which prescribe in each country a uniform manner of honoring God by public worship. These religions can all have their justifications in the climate, the government, the genius of the people, or some other local cause which makes one preferable to another, according to the time and place. I believe them all to be right as long as one serves God suitably. The essential worship is that of the heart. God does not reject its homage, if it is sincere, in whatever form it is offered to Him.[15]

Finally, in Kant we find an even bolder expression of the unity thesis: "There is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be various kinds of *faith*" (*Religion* 6: 107). The various historical faiths, on this view, are to be understood as humanly necessary vehicles for the transmission of pure religion. These vehicles can and will "differ according to differences of time and place," but if they are doing their jobs correctly they will all point to "one single *religion* holding for all human beings and in all times" (*Peace* 8: 367 n.). And the all-important moral content of this single religion is that of a universal "divine (ethical) state on earth" that will "one day enlighten the world and rule over it"—even though at present "the actual setting up of this state is still infinitely removed from us" (*Religion* 6: 122).

There are, of course, counterexamples to the claim that the Enlightenment was fundamentally religious, and the most significant ones are to be found in France. For instance, Baron d'Holbach proclaims in *Common Sense*, or *Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural* (1772), "Whoever will deign to consult common sense upon religious opinions . . . will easily perceive, that these opinions have no foundation; that all religion is an edifice in the air; that theology is only the ignorance of natural causes reduced to system; that it is a long tissue of chimeras and contradictions." But even Voltaire recoils at d'Holbach's audacity for asserting "that there is no God, without even having tried to prove its impossibility," and dismisses his writings as pernicious rant.[16] His rejection of d'Holbach's animosity toward religion was a representative reaction within Enlightenment culture. As others have noted, "Few *philosophes* held opinions as radical as d'Holbach's . . . [his] works were regarded as so materialist and anti-religious that they even shocked other radicals."[17]

Hume is the most significant eighteenth-century philosopher who poses a clear challenge to my thesis that the Enlightenment wanted to reform religion rather than to abolish it. But even he is closer to it than d'Holbach, in large part because his own skepticism prevents him from dogmatically asserting that there is no God. At the end of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Philo, despite the devastating criticisms