The Enlightenment

Second Edition

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palgrave

2 The Goal: A Science of Man

Central to the aspirations of enlightened minds was the search for a true 'science of man'. Different thinkers had distinctive ideas of what this would involve. Hartley, La Mettrie and other 'materialists' (those who denied the independent existence of 'mind', 'spirit' or 'soul') hoped to develop a medico-scientific physiology of man understood as a delicate piece of machinery, or perhaps as just the most successful of the primates [150]. Some, such as Locke, Helvétius and Condillac, thought it was the mechanisms of man's thinking processes above all which needed to be investigated [71; 144]. Others, like the Italian Vico, believed man would best be understood by tracing the steps and stages of his emergence from some primitive condition or state of nature – which some envisaged as a golden age and others saw as a level of bestial savagery [134]. Still others, like Montesquieu and Hume, thought the key to a science of man lay in analysing the political and economic laws governing the interactions between the individual and society at large [104; 115; 31].

But, however great the differences of emphasis, there was widespread agreement that, in the words of Alexander Pope, the 'proper study of mankind is man'. Many sympathized with the aspiration of the Scottish philosopher David Hume, to create a science of politics and to be the 'Newton of the moral sciences' (or, as we would call them nowadays, the human and social sciences) [31; 57; 108]. Understanding why this quest for a science of man was both so attractive, yet also so fraught, will take us to the heart of the intellectual adventure of the Enlightenment.

Ever since Jakob Burckhardt's classic mid-nineteenth-century study, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [32], it has often been said that it was the glory of early modern Italy to have discovered 'man' (as distinct from the son of Adam, the Christian

pilgrim), and in particular to have developed the idea of human 'individuality'. There is a truth in this, and in the hands of daring spirits, such as Montaigne in sixteenth-century France, who posed the sceptical question, *'que sçais je?'* (what do I know?), Renaissance Humanism could lead to searching introspection into the human condition. Shakespeare has Hamlet muse, 'what a piece of work is man' [61: vol. 1, ch. 5].

Yet the 'man' the Renaissance discovered was typically also a somewhat conventional figure. He was still the being initially created, in the Garden of Eden, whole and perfect by the Christian God in His own image – in that sense, the humanist philosophy of the Renaissance was every bit as Christian as the faith of Luther or of the Council of Trent. Renaissance man, ostentatiously portrayed by artists as the well-proportioned, handsome nude, or the geometrically regular 'Vitruvian man', could still be represented as the microcosmic analogue of the macrocosm at large (the little world of man as an emblem of the great world of the universe). Practically all sixteenth-century thinkers, Copernicus excepted, still believed in the 'homocentric' (man-centred) and 'geocentric' (Earth-centred) cosmos first advanced by classical Greek science, with man as the measure of the divinely-created system of the universe. Likewise, most Renaissance scholars felt confident enough in tracing human history back, through a continuous pedigree, to Abraham, to Noah, and ultimately to Adam, the first human. Man thus retained his divinely fixed place in time and space.

Admittedly, the new Renaissance adulation for things Greek and Roman disturbed those evangelical churchmen who preached that Christ had died to redeem mankind from sin and the errors of paganism. But the broad effect of Renaissance Humanism's 'anticomania' (love of Antiquity) lay in consolidating a reassuringly harmonious vision of human nature and destiny. Moralists believed that from Classical poets, philosophers, moralists, historians and statesmen – above all, from Xenophon, Seneca, Cicero and Livy – models of virtue could be derived which the truly civilized man could pursue, in harmony with the Christian's progress towards spirituality and salvation.

The Renaissance thus emphasized dual but mutually consonant aspirations for man. It restored Classical learning, and thereby recovered a this-worldly model for social and political living. But it also integrated these noble ideals of Antiquity with the purified

truths of Christianity as spelt out in Scripture and authorized by the Church. These twin goals, uniting the good man and the good Christian, commanded widespread acceptance for well over a century.

Very slowly, however, they came apart at the seams. For one thing, the ferocious religious and dynastic struggles racking Europe from the Reformation through to the close of the Thirty Years War (1648) inevitably challenged the optimistic Renaissance faith that man was a noble being destined to fulfil himself through engaging in the public life of the commonwealth: Machiavelli's cynical and pessimistic view of man made itself felt. For another, with the progress of historical scholarship, a new sense of the past emerged, which finally laid dramatically bare the glaring divide between the 'old world' of Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the 'new world' of statecraft and diplomacy, of guns and the printing press [33]. Moreover, genuinely 'new worlds' were being discovered, above all America, unknown to the Ancients, presenting scenes of exotic, heathen and savage life that challenged Renaissance intellectuals' cosy assumption that Florence was the modern Athens, and the Holy Roman Empire was the successor to Rome itself.

What is more, the seventeenth century was to prove far more intellectually corrosive than the sixteenth. The brilliant 'new sciences' of astronomy, cosmology and physics, pioneered by Kepler, Galileo, Descartes and their successors, destroyed the old harmonies of an anthropocentric (man-centred) universe, that small closed world focused upon man himself, which both Greek science and the Bible had endorsed. Copernican astronomy, assimilated in the seventeenth century thanks to a succession of geniuses from Kepler to Newton, displaced the Earth, and man upon it, from being the centre of the universe. It ended up a tiny, insignificant planet, nowhere in particular in that dauntingly infinite universe (now visible through the newly developed telescope) whose immense spaces so frightened Pascal [40; 74; 121].

The new 'mechanical philosophy', espoused by 'atomistic' scientists who claimed that Nature comprised nothing but particles of matter governed by universal laws whose actions could be expressed mathematically, was, of course, a tremendous triumph of investigation and conceptualization. But it left what had always been cast as 'Mother Nature' dead and impersonal. The French

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philosopher and scientist René Descartes, moreover, contended that all living creatures, man alone excepted, were merely machines or automata, lacking even consciousness. The possibility inevitably arose that man himself might be just another machine – one, however, prone to vanity and self-delusion [84].

Early in the seventeenth century, the Metaphysical poet John Donne declared, 'And new philosophie calls all in doubt'. It would be quite wrong to imply that, faced with the discoveries of the 'new science', all thinkers doubted and despaired. But, in the light of this radical transformation of theories of Nature, many believed that received ideas about the history, nature, and destiny of man had themselves to be re-examined.

And a further, unsettling element became more prominent in the second half of the seventeenth century. Ever since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, a ferocious polemical war had been waged between Protestant and Catholic Biblical scholars and theologians over the fundamentals of faith. Central to these battles were rival contentions about who, where, and what precisely was the True Church; whence its authority was derived; whether every syllable of the Scriptures was inspired and literally true, and so forth.

Such wrangling, often acrimonious and unedifying, inevitably, in the eyes of some free spirits and inquiring minds, sapped the moral authority of the churches. Worse, it drove acute and honest scholars face-to-face with the profound questions of man's history and destiny, which close scrutiny of the Bible forced to be asked but did not (it now seemed) readily answer. Could the world really be only 6000 years old, as the Bible stated? Was Adam truly the first man? Did a serpent really hold a conversation with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Could a just and benevolent God really have exterminated the whole of the human race, save only Noah's family, at the Deluge? In any case, where had the water for Noah's Flood come from? Where had it gone? Had the Flood been a miracle? Or was it – and perhaps many other Biblical 'miracles' besides – to be explained as an 'effect' of the regular laws of nature as now, at last, understood by modern science? Had the Sun literally stood still for Joshua at the siege of Jericho? – and so on. Questionings of this kind uncovered hundreds of issues – historical, moral, scientific and theological – which posed pressing difficulties of fact and faith that Christians needed to settle. The

authority of revealed religion was being questioned. Some better path to true knowledge had to be sought.

The *Dictionnaire* (1697) of the unorthodox Huguenot Pierre Bayle, who had sought refuge in Holland from Louis XIV, gave great prominence to such doubts and dilemmas. Bayle also pinpointed the childish absurdities of pagan worship, in a manner that could be taken as a veiled attack upon Christianity itself. Scholars disagree whether Bayle was, at heart, a 'fideist', that is a believer who thought it the Christian's duty to assent to the authority of faith, as a means of overcoming rational doubt; or whether he was, rather, a sceptic, taking delight in spreading doubt and confusion. He was certainly adroit in covering his tracks [74; 75; 84; 134].

From the latter part of the seventeenth century, many of Europe's greatest minds came to the conclusion that to understand the true history and destiny of the human race, neither unquestioning faith in the Bible, nor automatic reliance on the authority of the Greek and Roman thinkers (the 'Ancients') would any longer suffice. Man's nature was not properly known; it must become the subject of inquiry. And the proper engine of such an investigation must be that 'scientific method' which natural scientists (the 'Moderns') had pioneered so successfully in the fields of astronomy, physics and anatomy [61: vol. 2, ch. 3; 70].

Systematic doubt, as advocated by Descartes, experimentation, reliance upon first-hand experience rather than second-hand authority, and confidence in the regular order of Nature – these procedures would reveal the laws of man's existence as a conscious being in society, much as they had demonstrated how gravity, as Newton proved, governed the motions of the planets in the solar system. This kind of analogy with natural science was precisely what Hume had in mind when he spoke of becoming the 'Newton of the moral sciences' [28; 31; 115]. For the new 'social scientists' of the Enlightenment, the old 'truths', expounded by Christianity and the pagan classics, now became open to question; in this respect at least, the 'Moderns' had surpassed the 'Ancients' in what was often dubbed the 'Battle of the Books' (the debate as to whether modern minds truly excelled the Greeks) [90].

Enthusiasts for Enlightenment were thus fired by Francis Bacon's conviction that the methods of natural science would launch the 'advancement of learning'; such newly acquired knowledge would

lead to power, and thereby, in Bacon's phrase, to 'the effecting of all things possible'. As Voltaire emphasized in his *Lettres philosophiques* (1733), Newton's achievement truly demonstrated that science was the key to human progress [73]. Or, in Alexander Pope's couplet,

> Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night:
> God said, *Let Newton be! and All was Light*.

If the Roman Catholic Church chose to pronounce Copernicanism heresy, and to persecute Galileo, that merely proved that truth always had its enemies. Yet truth was great and would prevail.

The French historian Paul Hazard termed this late seventeenth-century time of ferment and unsettlement the 'crisis' of the European mind [74; 75; *cf.* 88]. Enlightened minds believed that such a 'crisis' was to be overcome by the execution of a programme for the scientific understanding of man. One favourite attempt along these lines lay in the construction of a 'natural history of man' to replace the traditional 'sacred history' of the Old Testament. Many *philosophes* tried to develop, empirically, imaginatively or systematically, such a historical or anthropological vision, tracing the emergence of European man out of the state of 'savagery' which was assumed to have been his primeval origin, and which could be inferred from the 'primitive' condition of the tribes explorers were beginning to discover in darkest Africa, America and, eventually, Australia [31].

To put such aboriginal peoples' capacity for progress to the test of science, natives were sometimes transported to Paris or London, and then exposed to the laboratory of polite society. A Polynesian, Omai, was brought back from the newly discovered Tahiti. Similar experiments were performed upon *enfants sauvages*, feral children found running wild in the woods of Europe. The Enlightenment faith in future progress, in the secular perfectibility of man, as proclaimed by Herder and Condorcet, and by such Scottish philosophers as Ferguson and Millar, hinged upon the assumption that much of mankind had already risen from 'savagery' to 'civilization', from 'rudeness' to 'refinement', or from the savage to the Scotsman [31; 19; 79].

Such supposition about the human capacity for progress would, of course, have been unthinkable without belief in the extraordinary

plasticity of man's faculties, and a generous confidence in the species' capacity for learning, change, adaptation and improvement. Fundamentalist Christian theologies, Catholic and Protestant alike, had traditionally characterized man as irremediably flawed by the 'original sin' of the 'Fall': without faith, or the sacraments of the Church, all man did was evil. The philosophical pessimists of Classical Antiquity had likewise seen man as inevitably engaged in constant civil war with himself, his nobler faculty of reason being all too easily overwhelmed by rebellious appetites and passions. Hence, thought the Stoics, a certain aloof detachment from his baser self was the best state man might hope to achieve [154].

3   The new Enlightenment approaches to human nature, by contrast, dismissed the idea of innate sinfulness as unscientific and without foundation, arguing instead that such passions as love, desire, pride and ambition were not inevitably evil or destructive; properly channelled, they could serve as aids to human advancement [45]. In Bernard Mandeville's paradoxical formula, 'private vices' (like vanity or greed) could prove 'public benefits' (for instance, by encouraging consumption and thereby providing employment) [81]. Such Enlightenment thinkers as Helvétius in France, and the pioneer utilitarian Jeremy Bentham in England, developed a psychological approach. Replacing the old moralizing vision of man as a rational being threatened by brutish appetites, they newly envisaged man as a creature sensibly programmed by nature to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. The true end of enlightened social policy ought therefore to be to encourage enlightened self-interest to realize the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' [51; 71; 102; 144].

Traditional preachers would have denounced such advocacy of the 'pleasure principle' as sinful, brutish hedonism. But a new breed of political economists, notably the Scottish Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), contended that the selfish behaviour of individual producers and consumers, if pursued in accordance with the competitive laws of the market, would result in the common good – thanks, in part, to the help of the 'invisible hand' of Providence [31; 38; 71; 79; 114; 133]. Likewise, such legal reformers as the Italian Beccaria argued that a truly scientific jurisprudence needed to be built upon the assumption of a psychology of rational selfishness: the pains of punishment must be precisely calculated to outweigh the pleasures of crime [152].

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4 • If mankind were to be progressive, the species had to be capable of change; above all, of adapting to new environments. Not surprisingly, therefore, Enlightenment psychologists were preoccupied with the learning process, and held out great hopes for education. The history of the race, suggested many thinkers, following Locke's fundamental *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), could be seen as like the education of the individual infant writ large [165]. Followers of Locke believed that preachers were wrong to judge that man was born sinful, and that Plato had been equally mistaken in claiming that people were born ready kitted out with 'innate ideas' (for instance, those of right and wrong). Rather, the human mind began as a *'tabula rasa'*, a clean slate or a 'blank sheet of paper'. It then continually absorbed data through the five senses, storing this information and shaping it into 'ideas', which were destined to become our empirical knowledge of the world and our moral values. Man's nature, capacities and knowledge were thus entirely the product of learning from experience, through a process involving the association of ideas (the building of complex ideas out of simple units). Man was thus the child of his environment; but in turn he acquired the capacity to transform those same surroundings.

Engaged thus in a constant dialectical interplay with his fellows and environment, man was ever evolving to meet the challenges of a world he was continually modifying. Hence it followed for such admirers of Locke as Condiilac and Helvétius that man was his own maker, and that his self-developing potential knew no hard-and-fast bounds. Towards the close of the eighteenth century, Condorcet wrote his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique de l'esprit humain* [*Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind*] (1794), which charted, in terms ever more rapturous as the future was approached, all the stages of the progress of the human mind – past, present and to come. Condorcet (who was driven to commit suicide in the French Revolution) boldly suggested that man, thanks to his capacity for 'perfectibility', would soon overcome want, weakness, disease and even death itself [19; 43: ch. 6]. The English anarchist William Godwin thought similarly. Both the French naturalist Lamarck and his English contemporary, the doctor and scientist Erasmus Darwin – Charles Darwin's grandfather – outlined the first biological theory of evolution, which presupposed,

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in their different ways, just such a capacity of creatures to learn, change, adapt and pass on their acquired characteristics to their offspring [96].

As it moves into the twenty-first century, Western civilization still subscribes to – or, rather, some would say, remains imprisoned within – this secular vision of the limitless human drive towards economic growth, scientific innovation, and progress, which the Enlightenment envisaged. Today's social sciences – sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology – have all emerged from seeds sown in the Enlightenment [18]. Prime ministers such as Mrs Thatcher have recently appealed to the teachings of Adam Smith, to justify their faith in market forces and the capacity of the pursuit of profit to guarantee the general good.

In view of this, we must consider the ambiguities of the science of man as forged in the eighteenth century, and note the complexities of its legacy. The *philosophes* claimed that they had dynamited obsolete religious 'myths' about man, and his place, under God, in Nature, replacing them with true scientific knowledge, objectively grounded upon facts. Many historians, including Gay, praise them for thus breaking with 'mythopoeic' thinking, and advancing 'from myth to reason' [61: vol. 1, ch. 2].

But it might be better to say that what the *philosophes* essentially did was to replace a *Christian* myth with a *scientific* myth – one more appropriate for an age of technology and industrialization. At bottom, it has been noted, the two myths have remarkably similar configurations. As Carl Becker contended in his wittily titled *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, the idea of the state of nature, as developed by *philosophe* speculative history, bears an uncanny resemblance to the Garden of Eden and the Fall as envisaged by Christian theology. Similarly, the Enlightenment idea of indefinite future progress can be seen as the secularization of the doctrine of Heaven. Far from being cast-iron 'facts', the notions of the noble savage and of progress are just as speculative, symbolic, and dependent upon preconceptions – faith even, one might argue – as the Christian formulations they succeeded [21; 154].

To suggest that the Enlightenment offered, not science in place of myth, but new myths for old, is not to debunk it. But it means that we must not take Enlightenment claims at face value, but treat them as highly effective propaganda. Consider, for instance,

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the development of economics. In his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith berated governments for their traditional 'mercantilist' and 'protectionist' policies, which (he argued) hamstrung trade for the fiscalist purposes of raising revenue. Smith further attacked the traditional belief that war was the route to wealth; accused vested interests of supporting monopolies contrary to the public interest; and argued that, properly understood, market mechanisms would, in the long-term, prove beneficial to all. In the light of such claims, we may understand why Gay concludes that Smithian, *laissez-faire* economics were more 'humane' and 'scientific' than the systems they challenged [61: vol. 1].

But it is also important not to forget that Smithian (or 'classical') economics provided an apologetics for capitalism in an age of industrialization, not least through its recommendations for the deregulation of labour (euphemistically called 'free labour'). Smith himself was frank enough to admit that the extreme division of labour required by modern manufacturing – his prime example was pin-making – reduced the worker to a 'hand', a mentally-stunted, alienated, slave-like machine. But he was not 'humane' enough to suggest a remedy. Classical economics' theory of the laws of profit and loss and the 'iron law of wages' precluded such 'interference' with market mechanisms (all interference with competition, they claimed, only encouraged inefficiency). *Laissez-faire* economics thus endorsed an *inhumane* system in the name of the 'natural laws' of market forces – laws which, the politician Edmund Burke proclaimed, were sacred because they were the 'laws of God'.

The new social sciences developed by the *philosophes* were highly critical of Christian conceptions of divinely appointed government, and of feudal hierarchy and subordination. But (with a few exceptions, such as Rousseau [42; 67; 116]), they did not provide anything like such a searching critique of commercial society, with its sanctification of private property and individual interests. In many ways, the Enlightenment hymn to 'progress' turned a blind eye to the equally biting inequalities and oppressions of the new commercial and industrial order: after all, wasn't everything getting better [97]? It is no accident that Blake, the Romantic visionary, so passionate in his denunciation of 'dark, satanic mills', should have condemned such leading *philosophes* as Bacon and Locke, Newton and Voltaire, as the evil geniuses behind that

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system. Maureen McNeil has plausibly argued that Erasmus Darwin, doctor, educationalist and scientist – overall the leading *philosophe* of late eighteenth-century England – was also the most articulate enthusiast for the values of the new industrial society [96].

3 The Politics of Enlightenment

The political ideas of the *philosophes* have always had their critics. Such opponents of the French Revolution as Edmund Burke and the Abbé Barruel portrayed them as immature rationalists, whose *a priori* and irresponsible sloganizing in favour of abstract liberty, the general will, and the rights of the people helped to topple the old order, only to produce first anarchy, and then a new despotism, in its place. Above all, critics complained, in politics the *philosophes* lacked that quality they pretended to value most: experience.

The charge is not without superficial plausibility. Whereas the conservative Burke spent a lifetime in Parliament, held office and tasted power, most *philosophes* did not get beyond being mere parlour policy-makers. It was hardly their fault, however. Louis XV was prepared in 1745 to appoint Voltaire 'historiographer royal'; he was, after all, the most eminent historian, playwright and poet of his generation [30]. But the monarch was hardly likely to appoint such a scabrous critic a minister of the Crown [60].

The political preferences of certain *philosophes* can be made to seem mighty unrealistic, naive, or even nightmarish. In his *Contrat social*, Rousseau praised small, poor republics as the nurseries of public virtue; but his adulation for ancient Sparta and the early Roman republic were at best only obliquely relevant in the Europe of the mid-eighteenth century, where the few remaining city states, such as Geneva and Venice, were oligarchic and opulent. In the opinion of certain recent historians, for instance J. L. Talmon, judging Rousseau in the light of the twentieth-century experience of fascism, his call for a heroic 'legislator' to act as a national regenerator was at best simple-minded and at worst sinister (though we may see such judgements as anachronistic). And what are we to

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make of the logic of his promise, or threat, to 'force men to be free'? [42; 43: ch. 3; 68]. **Other thinkers were, arguably, no less unrealistic.** In his *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), William Godwin advanced such a stridently individualist brand of anarchism, that he not only condemned marriage but also denounced orchestras and the theatre, on the grounds that they enforced conformity and compromised individuality.

The *philosophes* have also sometimes been accused of being politically rather unprincipled. The self-same Godwin who passionately denounced marriage as an infringement of individual liberty (it was a kind of legal prostitution) not only subsequently wed the freethinking feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, but insisted that the poet Shelley in his turn should marry their daughter Mary, rather than merely cohabit with her. Voltaire and Diderot, for their part, flirted with, and flattered, the leading absolutists of Europe, Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia. Their patronage, support and protection were doubtless useful; but the relative silence of these intellectuals, when confronted with the internally oppressive and externally bellicose policies pursued by both autocrats, leaves many questions to be answered [59; 89; 165].

Eminent French *philosophes* boldly denounced the evils of the old regime: but can it be said that they matched their eloquence with real political action? None seriously went about organizing political resistance, or issued calls to arms. Was this perhaps because, at bottom, they mainly felt comfortable enough with the *status quo*? **Voltaire and Diderot both suffered short spells of political detention;** but, that aside, they were able to proceed with their subversive labours without too much jeopardy to their personal liberty, and were lionized by the literary salons. Contrast the bloody fates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of thousands of heretics and of freethinkers such as Bruno, Campanella, and even, although to a lesser degree, of Galileo; and recall the persecution and outlawing of agitators in nineteenth-century Russia or Austria. **How committed, therefore, were the *philosophes* to destroying the *ancien régime*?** Might they rather be dismissed as noisy political lightweights?

In assessing their significance as political thinkers and activists, many things must first be taken into account. For one thing, ever since the American and French Revolutions, a programme of

political goals has established itself definitively in the Western world. We all now believe in government of the people, by the people, for the people. We believe in universal suffrage. We believe that democracy safeguards liberty; we believe in parliament, in elections, in representative government, in the party system. For better of worse, these have become the sacred cows of Western 'democracy'. Why then didn't the *philosophes* champion them?

The answer is that there is not the slightest reason why an enlightened intellectual in 1700 or 1750 should automatically have endorsed any of these principles, still less the whole package. Parliaments (in France, the *parlements*) had traditionally operated as the bastions of aristocratic vested interests, and political parties were universally associated with self-serving factionalism. Direct democracy was a system of government which had come in, and had gone out, with the ancient Greeks. And, as Rousseau knew as well as any radical English journalist, representative government was a recipe for gerrymandering and corruption [52; 116].

Above all, what possible grounds could the *philosophes* have had for vesting political trust in the wisdom of the people at large? Almost everywhere in Europe, the bulk of the population consisted of illiterate peasants, labourers, and (east of the Elbe) even serfs – all, to elitist eyes, hopelessly ignorant, backward, and superstitious, browbeaten by custom into an unthinking deference to Throne and Altar. The likes of Voltaire depicted the peasantry as barely distinguishable from the beasts of the field. Their point in making such unflattering comparisons was to criticize a system which reduced humans to the level of brutes; but such comments betray a mentality for which the true question was not popular participation in government – that did not seem a high priority – but whether the people were to be ruled wisely or incompetently [60; 100; 113].

The question of the right or legitimate type of government – who precisely should legally, or expediently, hold power – was raised in its most comprehensive form by Montesquieu in *L'Esprit des lois* (1748) [142]. *The Spirit of the Laws* identified three chief types of polity. First there were republics: Montesquieu felt a strong leaning towards republican government, believing that its participatory form preserved the liberty and enhanced the virtue

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of those actively engaged in political life within them. Republics had flourished in Antiquity, and Montesquieu ruefully concluded they were essentially a thing of the past [43: ch. 1].

Next there were monarchies, clearly a viable form of government in the modern world. They derived great stability from the hierarchical gradation of ranks they bolstered, which conferred a well-defined place upon nobles, gentlemen and ecclesiastics, and also from the sense of 'honour' which every member of a group attached to his rank. Monarchy was the desirable form of one-man rule. Its perversion, thirdly, was despotism, in which the ruler levelled all rightful distinctions between his subjects, and governed by fear. It was Montesquieu's anxiety – derived from consideration of the ambitions of Louis XIV – that the French crown was aspiring to change itself from 'monarchy' into 'despotism'. Hence his own writings, by way of counterweight, celebrated the political role of the traditional aristocracy, the provincial *parlements*, and even the Church, in the hope that these could serve as buffers, checks and balances, to prevent the emergence of Bourbon 'despotism'.

Montesquieu's analysis laid bare the dilemmas of the day in a particularly bleak form. In modern, big-state dynastic politics, republican government was evidently obsolescent. Monarchy, however, was gravitating towards despotism. Hence the preservation of liberty would probably require the support of the most reactionary estates of the realm (Montesquieu had already devastatingly mocked the pretensions and privileges of the nobility in his *Persian Letters*).

In any case, the politics of the *parlements* also had their dangers. Frenchmen were to find to their cost that whenever Louis XV or his successor attempted much-needed economic reforms or budgetary rationalizations, the *parlements* and nobility possessed the power to stymie change. More pessimistically yet, Rousseau was to argue that salvation did not lie in devising more sophisticated forms of constitutional arrangements to prevent the abuse of power and privilege. For the very fibre of modern society itself was utterly 'corrupt', alienating man from man in ways that sapped liberty, destroyed virtue, and caused decay.

The problems of who should govern proved perplexing; the *philosophes* on the whole found it more constructive to formulate advice about what rulers should *do*. They did not envisage

that government ought to be a simple matter of 'legitimism' and hereditary succession, the maintenance of the *status quo*, the defence of existing property rights and privileges. They wanted administrations which would achieve improvements, by promoting peace, prosperity, justice and welfare within civil society. As part of this goal, they naturally deplored all undue interference with the personal affairs of subjects [59]. Liberty of thought and expression, freedom to publish, religious toleration and the right of minorities to worship – all these were the elementary requirements of social beings [66]. Even the Prussian Kant, a temperamental conservative who distrusted the idea of the right of popular participation in government, argued that it would be degrading, both to government and to the governed, to deny basic civil rights, for that would be tantamount to treating adults as children. Voltaire extolled the virtues of civil and religious liberty, English style, by picturing in his *Lettres philosophiques* (1733) the scene at the London Stock Exchange. There Anglicans, Dissenters and Catholics, Jews and Mohammedans were all permitted to deal on equal terms. Freedom of trade went with freedom of religion, bringing peace and prosperity [60].

Philosophes deplored what they saw as the erosion of freedom throughout most of Europe. 'Man was born free,' Rousseau celebratedly opened his *Social Contract*, 'but everywhere he is in chains.' But the Continental *philosophes* of the 'High Enlightenment' never made their prime demand the maximization of personal freedom and the reciprocal attenuation of the state, in the manner of later English *laissez-faire* liberalism. For one thing, a strong executive would be needed to maintain the freedom of subjects against the encroachments of the Church and the privileges of the nobles. Physiocrats like Quesnay championed an economic policy of free trade, but recognized that only a determined, *dirigiste* administration would prove capable of upholding market freedoms against entrenched vested interests [104]. No Continental thinkers were attracted to the ideal of the 'nightwatchman' state so beloved of English radicals. Even Tom Paine, whose *Rights of Man* (1791) inveighed so vehemently against tyrannical oppression, nevertheless considered that a lawfully constituted popular government, duly elected by the people, ought to pursue constructive welfare policies (e.g., introducing old age pensions and child benefits) [39].

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It was the thinkers of Germanic and central Europe above all who looked to powerful, enlightened rulers to preside over a 'well-policed' state [89; 127]. By this was meant a regime in which an efficient, professional career bureaucracy comprehensively regulated civic life, trade, occupations, morals and health, often down to quite minute details. Laws were to be passed, for example, giving encouragement to earlier marriage, thereby boosting population, increasing the workforce, stimulating the economy, and extending the tax base, and with it the potential military strength of the realm. Such leading advocates of systematic rational government as Justi and Sonnenfels argued that *Cameral-wissenschaft* (the science and practice of administration) would simultaneously serve the ruler (by increasing revenue and strengthening public order) while also improving the lot of the people [26]. In the German principalities, medical practice, for example, was exhaustively regulated by the state, supposedly for the public good [91].

A similar disposition to regulation, or at least to giving priority to a centrally-organized 'general good', is also prominent in the more radical French theories of the mid-century. The utilitarian Helvétius saw human beings as essentially identical. All were thus equally malleable, capable of being profoundly conditioned by education and environment. The wise ruler could thus ensure the happiness of all [144]. Other thinkers such as Mably and Morelly contended that the abolition of sectarian privilege and private property, and the subordination of individual interests to the common good, would give rise to a new breed of virtuous citizens. Rousseau similarly dreamed that in a properly constituted society, human nature itself would be regenerated – or, at least, its degeneration would be halted [28: ch. 3, 5].

The thinkers of the early Enlightenment were preoccupied with finding ways to check the spread of despotism. Locke championed constitutional government, arguing that all legitimate authority was circumscribed by the laws of nature and derived from the consent of the governed – the Whig philosopher, however, was no democrat, and he certainly never envisaged political rights for women [97; 99]. Montesquieu used historical arguments to confirm constitutional prerogatives. By mid-century, attention had shifted, I have been suggesting, to questions of the ends and uses of political power. What kind of a state

would produce virtuous men? What sorts of policies would expedite trade or make for a healthy populace? Political programmes thus grew more positive, but they also ran the risk of degenerating into a proliferation of wish lists or even utopian fantasies [151].

That is why the revolt of the American Colonies against Britain proved utterly decisive for Europe. The Declaration of Independence (1776) demonstrated that, at least in the new world, virtuous action in defence of liberty was still possible. The War of Independence proved the military calibre of a citizen army, defending freedom against the British 'tyrants'. The American Constitution confirmed that republican modes of government could function in the modern world, and set an example of the role of the people as the sovereign political body [162; 61: vol. 2, 'Finale'].

At last, in the American Constitution, a political model existed in which the defence of liberty did not depend, as with Montesquieu, upon reactionary social groups. The American experiment – and it seemed to work – appeared to prove that power did not automatically corrupt, provided it came from the people and was carefully constitutionally regulated. The new republic beckoned to old Europe to go and do likewise. In the 1780s, such *philosophes* as Condorcet, who had heretofore trusted to reason and expertise to secure improvement, abandoned their earlier technocratic bias, and began to discover a new political virtue in the people [19; 117].

The ambiguity of the question of who exactly constituted, or could speak for, the people, did not become crystal-clear until after 1789. The French Revolution of course created a ferment of political theories and schemes. Following the execution of Louis XVI, successive regimes found no stable and successful way of reconciling the twin demands of popular government and efficient government. Yet that is to say no more than that the Revolution itself failed to resolve the riddle that had taxed the Enlightenment's best brains.

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4 Reforming Religion
   by Reason

The waters of politics proved treacherous for the *philosophes* to
navigate. They were unsure whether they wanted power them-
selves, or would prefer to exercise the prerogative of the pundit
in criticizing the prince. They were more sure of their ground,
however, with religion. No religion that lay beyond their own
personal jurisdiction was acceptable to them. Indeed, for many
Enlightenment minds, religion was unacceptable in any established
ecclesiastical shape or form.

Key Enlightenment thinkers were pained and angered by
the intellectual and institutional manifestations of religion they
witnessed all around them. Many leading *philosophes* – above all
those from France and England – made bitter and mocking
onslaughts upon the absurdity of Christian theology, the power-
crazed corruption of the churches (above all, the Vatican), and the
pestilential power still exerted by blind credulity over people's
lives. For some, notably Voltaire, Diderot and d'Holbach, the
emancipation of mankind from religious tyranny had to be the
first blow struck in a general politics of emancipation, because
the individual possessed by a false faith could not be in possession
of himself [34; 98].

Voltaire made his crusade – first against Popes, Jesuits and
priests, and finally against the Christian God – the climax of his
career [60]. David Hume deployed his sceptical philosophy of
experience to destroy the traditional argument that God's
existence and qualities could be demonstrated from Creation.
Our grasp of the relations between cause and effect, he argued,
depended upon experience of multiple examples; but there was
only one single universe, or 'effect'; hence we were in no position

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to assess its 'cause' or creator. For Hume, furthermore, the idea that a reasonable man could believe in miracles was a contradiction in terms. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), Edward Gibbon contended that Christianity had been no less responsible than the barbarian invaders for laying low that majestic edifice of civilization, and thus ushering in a millennium of darkness [118; 119: ch. 5].

Trenchard, Shaftesbury and the Deists in England [36], and Fontenelle, Boulanger and others in France, argued that the popular belief in the existence of wrathful gods in the sky should be interpreted primarily as the sick response of the savage mind, terrified of the unknown and powerless to cope with the forces of Nature. What primitive people feared, they turned into objects of grovelling worship. They had, so such *philosophes* argued, invented magic and sacrifices to placate these fabulous deities. Their readers understood, of course, that their account applied not only to the tribes of Africa or North America. For their real target was Christianity, with its magical sacraments and repeated sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist [98].

In his *Lettres persanes* (1721), Montesquieu, speaking through the mouthpiece of a Persian traveller, called the Pope a magician. Along similar lines, the Baron d'Holbach exposed religion as an infantile precursor to science. The primitive mind, he claimed, believed in souls and angels, devils and witches, and other childish fantasies [62]. Mature reason, by contrast, proved that none of these existed. All there was, was Nature, and Nature was simply a material system of physical objects governed by the regular action of the immutable laws of science [98].

Above all, Voltaire was the anti-Christ of the Enlightenment, battling throughout his career against the demons of false religion. Ever ready with an anti-clerical jest, his early campaigns were waged largely in the cause of religious tolerance (he particularly admired the peaceful English Quakers), and were directed against the Church Militant, and its more outlandish beliefs and practices [66]. Over the decades, his antipathy grew fiercer, and he directed his ferocious moral passion against the evils Christianity had perpetrated through wars of religion, burning heretics, executing so-called 'witches', etc.

In place of the Christian creed and church, Voltaire hoped to install what Gay has called 'modern paganism' [61: vol. 2, ch. 7].

This would take the form of 'natural religion', a non-dogmatic belief in the existence of a rational, benevolent God, to be regarded as the author of the Newtonian universe, and revered as the guarantor of justice and morality amongst men. Take away such a God, mused Voltaire, and why should not people be wicked with impunity? (That was why, as he quipped, if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.)

But even in this kind of 'natural religion', Voltaire was to suffer a loss of faith. In particular, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, that cosmic massacre of the innocents, shook his confidence in the Benign Intelligence he hoped he had seen behind Nature. In his last decades, Voltaire railed with restless, relentless ferocity against all religion, as though God (who after all did not exist) had done him some personal injury. His reiterated rally-call, 'Écrasez l'infâme', was extended beyond the Pope, beyond the organized churches, to practically all manifestations of religiosity whatsoever. Voltaire ended up, perhaps, an atheist.

We shall have to ask why so many of the leading *philosophes* – men who prided themselves upon their own sophisticated tolerance, their man-of-the-world acceptance of human foibles – grew apoplectic, or descended into sarcasm and smut, when confronted with priests and creeds. After all, the high noon of torture and heretic- and witch-burnings in the name of the true faith, of inquisition and crusading, was a thing of the past. Holy wars had had their day, and the Christian churches of eighteenth-century Europe had grown relatively torpid and tolerant: no small number of *philosophes* – Raynal and Mably, for example – were themselves *abbés*, while the Archbishop of Canterbury's wife happily played whist with the arch-infidel Gibbon [66; 119].

It is important, however, to insist upon the range and complexity of Enlightenment attitudes towards faith. Very few intellectuals wanted to replace religion with out-and-out unbelief. For one thing, most believed that science and philosophy, though casting doubt upon the existence of the specifically Christian, Biblical, anthropomorphic 'God of miracles', nevertheless pointed to some sort of presiding Deity, a supernatural Creator, Designer, and Mind. Even the sceptic Hume thought that it was improbable that the orderliness of the cosmos had come about by accident or chance, from the purely random movements of material atoms: in our idiom, such an outcome

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was as unlikely as a chimpanzee bashing typewriter keys and producing Shakespeare.

Furthermore, many *philosophes*, while hostile to 'priestcraft' and high church ecclesiastical pomp, nevertheless felt a personal piety. Swiss Protestant *philosophes* were notable for their own rational faith [Taylor, in 124]. Some scholars have suggested that even Gibbon may have been religious in his own, purely personal and private, fashion [119: ch. 5]. And most enlightened intellectuals believed that decency required a certain outward conformity to the public ceremonies of the established church, whether one believed in them or not. Such well-mannered behaviour helped to maintain proper social order and civil peace. Gibbon was probably an unbeliever, but he was also a dutiful churchgoer (following divine service with a Greek Testament, he said, improved his languages).

Many Enlightenment theorists in any case expected that a well-constituted society would possess a 'civic' religion, upon the model of ancient Rome – a faith designed to foster patriotism, community spirit and virtue. Gibbon remarked of that Roman religion, that the people believed it true, the philosophers thought it false, and the rulers knew it was useful. Islam made a better 'civic religion', he concluded, than priest-ridden and otherworldly Christianity [119: ch. 5]. Along similar lines, Voltaire was notoriously convinced that it was essential that one's servants – one's wife, too – should be pious, otherwise, lacking the fear of God, such people would steal the spoons or be unfaithful. Recognizing the utility of devotion, many *philosophes* not surprisingly advocated a two-tier religious system, with a simple, pure, rational religion for the elite, and a melodramatic faith to regulate the minds and hearts of the plebs. Such beliefs eventually found expression in the cult of the Supreme Being, a modern, rational, de-Christianized object of worship, concocted during the French Revolution.

Finally, we must remember that not a few *philosophes* were deeply religious. In his later years in particular, Jean-Jacques Rousseau waxed lyrical in praise of a piety which was emotional and spiritual rather than intellectual [68]. The great English polymath Joseph Priestley, 'discoverer' of oxygen, and uncoverer of the corruptions of Christianity, was second to none in his enlightened ardour that education, science, industry and technology would bring about endless progress; but he expressed his

belief in human perfectibility in terms of a literally millennialist Christianity. Priestley passed most of his career as a Nonconformist preacher of Unitarian leanings. (Unitarianism, which denied not only the Trinity but the divinity of Jesus Christ, was, quipped Erasmus Darwin, a 'feather bed to catch a falling Christian'.)

Especially in the main Protestant regions – in Northern Germany, Scandinavia, England, Scotland, and the Calvinist cantons of Switzerland – advanced thinkers tended not so much to be hostile to Christianity *per se*, or to religion in general, but were rather concerned to achieve a purified, refined expression of faith, which would prove commensurable with reason and science, conscience and probability. Countless educated people could see no reason why such a faith ('true religion') should be an obstacle to progress. Just as the Lutheran Reformation had purged the Medieval church of its corruptions, so, they argued, the age of reason would complete the process, ridding worship and creed alike of those absurd Medieval accretions (such as angels and the literal belief in eternal hellfire) which progressive thinkers could no longer credit. Articles of faith that had been valuable props to devotion in darker days would naturally wither away with man's intellectual advance.

Pathbreaking in this respect was John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). Locke argued that the thinking man must be a believer, precisely because Christianity's central doctrines – belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent Creator, the duty of obeying and worshipping Him, and so forth – were all perfectly consonant with reason and experience. Being a Christian was a rational commitment; but the reasonable Christian was not obliged to accept features of traditional faith at which his reason baulked. No irrational leaps of faith were required. In the guise of 'rational religion', Christianity was thus being pared down to the minimum which educated people found easy to credit.

Rather more *avant garde* advocates of such forms of 'rational Christianity' further argued that the incarnation of Christ, with his evangelical mission, his healing miracles, etc., had not been strictly necessary for the imparting of essential religious truths to rational people. Such 'revealed religion', as recorded in the New Testament, had, however, been required (suggested Anthony Collins and other deistic 'freethinkers' who emerged in early eighteenth-century England) to sway the unthinking herd [128].

Of course, it was but a short step from this standpoint for radical freethinkers further to conclude that, when subjected to the acid tests of reason and history, Biblical Christianity failed all down the line. Were not the so-called 'miracles' of the Old and New Testaments mere fables and fictions, designed by crafty clergy to overawe the ignorant? Modern science would expose their trickery or explain their 'mysteries' away. Hence, freethinkers claimed, it was a waste of effort to try to reconcile Christianity with reason. Educated people should frankly admit that Christianity was inherently irrational, to be abandoned in favour of a rational alternative, commonly known as 'Deism'. Deists, such as Collins's Irish contemporary John Toland, and, for most of his career, Voltaire, contended that contemplation of the order of things led the mind, in Alexander Pope's phrase, 'thro' Nature up to Nature's God'; theirs was thus a purely 'natural religion' [9].

For some, of course, the step from Christianity to natural religion led further, to a 'religion of Nature' itself. This rested on the claim that there was no good reason to believe that any conscious, intelligent principle, any Supreme Being or Great Architect, lay behind and beyond Nature at all. Nature was all there was, and in so far as anything was sacred, and requiring worship, it was Nature herself. The great seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza had influentially suggested that 'God' was the same as 'Nature'. A similar sort of atheism, or materialistic pantheism, was later boldly expressed in the Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la nature* (1770) [84; 88].

Eighteenth-century intellectuals, in other words, tried to find or forge a religion fit for the times. Traditional Christianity was widely found wanting, at least by and for the educated. Some tried to rationalize and refine it, others to create a more credible alternative.

The question remains, however, why so many *philosophes*, the French in particular, expressed such vitriolic hatred towards the Christian religion and church, habitually satirizing priests as perverts, friars as gluttons, monks and nuns as lechers, theologians as hair-splitters, inquisitors as sadistic torturers, and Popes as megalomaniacs.

In part it was because they convinced themselves that organized Christianity was a cold, calculating fraud. Churchmen, they often hinted, did not even themselves believe all their mumbo-jumbo,

but, like cunning conjurors, knew very well that long words in Latin, sleight of hand, and pomp and circumstance conferred power over the people. Explaining the rise of the Church under the Roman Empire, Gibbon pictured the early Christians as a gang of ruthless zealots, intent upon aggrandizing themselves, no matter what cost to social peace. By cynically cooking-up doctrines such as purgatory and the system of pardons to go with it, the Medieval church had manipulated minds, waged war upon its enemies, and become Europe's richest multinational organization.

The Church, as outraged *philosophes* saw it, had thus been not merely mistaken or unscrupulous, but positively evil. Hypocritically preaching peace, it had sown discord and strife. The religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had spilt oceans of blood. Every year the anniversary of the St Bartholomew's Eve massacre made Voltaire physically sick.

Even in the eighteenth century, so the *philosophes* believed, the perverted teachings of Christianity were still warping minds, for instance by seducing young men and women into joining monasteries and nunneries, and by gratuitously terrifying children with fears of damnation. Here the Calas case (1762) offered perfect publicity to the *philosophes*. The Calas family were Toulouse Protestants. Their eldest son was found dead. Rumour had it that he had been planning to convert to Catholicism, and that, to prevent this 'disgrace', his father had murdered him. A trial of dubious legality found the father guilty, and he was executed.

Voltaire took up the cause. For him, the affair revealed the monstrous evils of religious bigotry, whatever precisely had happened. If the father had indeed murdered his son in the name of the upholding of the Protestant faith, it proved how grotesquely religious sectarianism could undermine family feeling. If the father were innocent – as Voltaire, of course, believed – it showed the malice of confessional strife amongst those who prided themselves upon being the bringers of peace. Cases such as this enabled *philosophes* to quote the Roman poet Lucretius: '*tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*' (how great the evil which religion induces men to commit).

What angered the *philosophes* above all was that churches – opulent, and a drain on the economy – were still exercising mind-control and political power. The Catholic Church in particular continued to outlaw other faiths. It largely monopolized the

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education system, from infant schools to seminaries and universities (both Voltaire and Diderot had had excellent Jesuit educations, and never forgot it). It censored books: most of the *philosophes'* works found their way onto the Index of Prohibited Books. In such *causes célèbres* as the trial of Galileo, the Church had arrested the progress of knowledge. Some one hundred and fifty years later, in the 1770s, the leading French natural historian, Buffon, was still being required to answer to the holy fathers of the Sorbonne for arguing that the Earth was much older than the Bible implied. Where Throne granted Altar the sword, as in Spain, the result was appalling intellectual and scientific stagnation. Only where the wings of churches had been clipped by the civil authorities, as notably in the Dutch Republic and England, was progress assured.

Ultimately, then, the ferocity of the *philosophes'* onslaught arose from their own personal experience and circumstances. From the 'dark ages' onwards, they argued, the clergy had dictated the intellectual life of Europe and exercised a mind police. But things were changing. With the rise of literacy, the spread of education and the greater circulation of books, a new secular intelligentsia was flexing its muscles and finding its feet, challenging the clergy for the ear of the people. The *philosophes* saw themselves as the advanced guard of this body of writers and thinkers. They were demanding free expression for themselves. They aimed to replace the clergy as the mouthpieces of modernity.

In its campaign against *'l'infâme'*, the Enlightenment offered a new deal for the European mind. *Philosophes* demanded an end to censorship, and celebrated the printing press as a genuinely liberating technology. Yet in their turn, they also ironically mirrored the clergy they were aiming to supplant. They too formed their cliques, their 'holy circles'; often they too cultivated a taste for secrecy, and some took great pleasure in developing their own intimate rituals and occult symbols. Not least, many *philosophes* were early and enthusiastic members of freemasons' lodges, which were newly emerging at this time. Such lodges were secret gentlemen's clubs, congenial centres of fraternal solidarity, which bound their members with bizarre entrance rituals that sometimes blasphemously parodied the rites of the church [84; 85]. Some *philosophes* believed in the need for mass religion as an 'opium of the people'. And the very slogan *'Écrasez l'infâme'* itself

echoed the bloody war-cry of the crusader, only this time that of the *'philosophe militant'*.

In some ways, therefore, the 'little flock' of the *philosophes* could be said to be creating a new religion of its own, a religion of humanity. It remains true, nevertheless – as will be further discussed in the final chapter – that the eighteenth century marks a major stage in the secularization of Europe, a development for which the *philosophes* at least provided all the main arguments.