



# Religion(s) and the Enlightenment

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Despite its long-standing reputation for skepticism and irreverence, the Enlightenment took religion quite seriously. Historians have long recognized this fact, and have often represented the intellectual history of the eighteenth century in terms of the struggle between religious faith and philosophical skepticism. One common view of the period holds that religious dogmatism and intolerance, memorably condemned by Voltaire as *l'Infâme*, served as the negative pole against which the positive Enlightenment ideals of secularism, reason, and tolerance were articulated.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a century ago, Ernst Cassirer characterized this view (which he did not entirely share) by writing, "French Encyclopedism declares war openly on religion," accusing it of "having been an eternal hindrance to intellectual progress."<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, Carl Becker argued that the eighteenth-century *philosophes* sought to recast the "heavenly city" imagined by church fathers such as St. Augustine into a vision of a terrestrial utopian future.<sup>3</sup> A generation later, Peter Gay described the *philosophes* as "modern pagans," who "used their classical learning to free themselves from their Christian heritage."<sup>4</sup> For such scholars, the historical significance of the Enlightenment lay in its break with religious tradition and embrace of "modernity", defined primarily by secularism and rationality.

This interpretation still holds considerable currency today and continues to inspire significant contemporary scholarship. Jonathan Israel has recently sought to complicate the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion by positing a difference between a "moderate" mainstream Enlightenment, which sought to reconcile reason and faith and to reform the pillars of existing society rather than destroy them, and what he calls the "radical" Enlightenment, inspired by Spinoza and by the erudite libertinism of the seventeenth century, which "rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely."<sup>5</sup> While Israel differs from predecessors such as Cassirer, Becker, and Gay in casting the most prominent French *philosophes* as moderates rather than radicals, and characterizing the intellectual landscape of the eighteenth century in terms of a three-way struggle rather than a binary one, he shares their general contention that the



“radical” Enlightenment’s break with religious and political authority played a pivotal role in the transition to modernity.

The transition from Enlightenment to Revolution, itself an essential and oft-debated topic, has also frequently been analyzed in terms of religion. Jeffrey Merrick and Dale Van Kley have each argued that the “desacralization” of the French monarchy, of which they cite Damiens’s attempted assassination of Louis XV as a prime example, helped to make revolution thinkable.<sup>6</sup> In a more recent study, Van Kley has sought to reveal “the religious roots of the French Revolution” in two centuries of struggle between Calvinists, Gallicans, Jansenists, and Ultramontanes.<sup>7</sup> In another influential study, Mona Ozouf claimed that the revolutionary festivals of the 1790s brought a “transfer of sacrality” from the church to the institutions of the revolutionary state.<sup>8</sup> In these formulations, the French Revolution appears as the final, decisive act in a transformation set in motion by the Enlightenment, bringing about the transition from tradition to modernity, with religious faith supplanted by faith in abstract reason and the perfectibility of man and of human institutions. This interpretation has been accepted by those who deplore such a transformation as often as by those who applaud it.

While most scholarship on the relationship between the French Enlightenment and religion has focused on Christianity, and more specifically on the Roman Catholic Church within France, numerous scholars have highlighted the importance of the Enlightenment engagement with other religions to its formulation of a universalist, secular ethos. The Enlightenment encounter with the Jews, the most prominent non-Christian minority group in early modern Europe, has been studied by Arthur Hertzberg, Ronald Schechter, and Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, among others.<sup>9</sup> While these historians differ on several important points, they concur that Jewish particularism posed a conceptual threat to Enlightenment universalism and that enlightened advocates of Jewish “emancipation,” such as the abbé Henri Grégoire, assumed that the Jews had to be “regenerated” and required to renounce specific cultural markers in order to be assimilated into a citizenship defined along universalist lines. Europe’s encounter with the Islamic world has also generated a great deal of scholarly debate, with Edward Said arguing for the complicity of “Orientalism” with the advance of colonial ambitions in the Near East.<sup>10</sup> This new scholarly interest in Enlightenment representations of other religious traditions has broadened our understanding of eighteenth-century cultural and intellectual history and opened fruitful new lines of research. In many cases, however, it also serves to reinforce the assumption of the basic incompatibility of the Enlightenment and religion.

While some older works examined the Enlightenment encounter with Islam and other religions of the East—Raymond Schwab’s *La Renaissance orientale* comes to mind<sup>11</sup>—Said’s admittedly polemical work has drawn more attention to the role of cross-cultural encounters in the emergence of Europe’s understanding of itself and its place in the world; more recent studies

of the period have also stressed the importance of such encounters for the emergence of enlightened thought in the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> For example, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt have argued that the comparative study of world religions in the early eighteenth century led to a new spirit of tolerance and cultural relativism, transforming “belief in one unique, absolute, and God-given truth into ‘religion’, that is, into individual ceremonies and customs that reflected the truths relative to each people and culture.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Guy Stroumsa argues that the comparative study of world religions sparked “a genuine revolution in knowledge and attitudes” that redefined religion as “a universal phenomenon, with a strong emphasis on ritual, rather than on beliefs.”<sup>14</sup>

The articles in this volume seek to extend this scholarly conversation on the relationship between “religion,” broadly defined, and the French Enlightenment. They argue that religion remained central to how eighteenth-century French scholars and statesmen understood the physical and spiritual constitution of human beings, the origins of society and of social institutions, the roots and causes of cultural difference, and the nature of political authority. Rejecting the notion of a binary opposition between religious dogmatism and philosophical anticlericalism, they maintain that the creative tensions between religion and *philosophie* led to creative new understandings of human nature, cultural difference, and historical progress.

In the first essay in this volume, Jeffrey Burson examines the vitalist philosophy of the abbé Claude Yvon, a contributor to the *Encyclopédie* and a participant in the eighteenth-century process he has referred to as “theological enlightenment”. Burson argues that labels like “counter-Enlightenment” or “radical Enlightenment” fail to capture the complexity of figures such as Yvon, who argued, against long-established church doctrines, that the human soul could be both material and immortal. Yvon maintained that the ancients had made no ontological distinction between matter and spirit, a position that allowed him to embrace the sensationalist epistemology of Locke and Condillac while remaining (to himself if not in the eyes of others) a devout believer in the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Burson argues that Yvon’s belief system “defies many scholarly taxonomies,” and suggests that the radical, moderate, and the Catholic Enlightenments were not fully distinct movements but variations on a common process.

In the second article, “The Rise of Modern Paganism? French Enlightenment Perspectives on Polytheism and the History of Religions,” David Allen Harvey examines the ways in which four Enlightenment authors—Charles de Brosses, Nicolas Boulanger, Antoine Court de Gébelin, and Jean-Sylvain Bailly—interpreted ancient and modern “paganism”. Unlike their more devout predecessors and contemporaries, who perceived polytheism as a corruption of the “true” faith of a primeval natural religion of monotheism, these four thinkers saw religion as a human creation, one that they interpreted respectively as the sign of a prescientific “primitive” mentality, as the invention of priestcraft to explain and appease the destructive forces of

nature, as didactic allegories meant to teach eternal truths, and as the epic narrative of the original civilization of humankind. Harvey concludes that these new ways of understanding religion led the Enlightenment away from a dualistic view of truth versus error and toward a tolerant cosmopolitanism that saw religion as a human creation and a source of cultural meaning.

In the third article, "Rousseau's Turban: Intimate Encounters of Europe and Islam in the Age of Enlightenment," Ian Collier takes incidents in the life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—a chance encounter with a mysterious traveler from the Near East in his youth and his decision to be painted in exotic costume (with a turban and flowing robe) in his later years—as entryways into a broader examination of the cultural meanings of the Islamic Orient in Enlightenment France. Collier challenges scholarly theories of Orientalism and identity that draw binary oppositions between self and "Other", arguing that such theories err through "the overemphasis of representations at the expense of the lived experiences of people themselves, the occlusion of intermediary categories, and the continued privileging of conceptions of fixed society over relations of mobility." Drawing upon a series of interesting vignettes from Rousseau's family history and his literary works, Collier demonstrates that these "intermediary categories" and "relations of mobility" render binary constructions of identity unstable and unconvincing. He also demonstrates that the Islamic Orient evoked many different and conflicting connotations to eighteenth-century Europeans, ones that cannot be simply reduced to the familiar trope of "Oriental despotism". Much as was the case with the Enlightenment encounter with classical paganism examined in Harvey's article, Rousseau's encounter with Islam led him to reflect upon religion as a cultural system, and to distinguish those beliefs and values held across confessional divides from the culturally specific practices that divided East and West.

The fourth article, Ronald Schechter's "The Holy Mountain and the French Revolution," takes us forward from the Enlightenment to the tumultuous final decade of the eighteenth century. Schechter argues that, despite the (justifiably) irreligious image of the Jacobins and sansculottes who made the radical revolution, many of the most ardent partisans of the new age fell back upon the rhetorical imagery of the Christian past to describe the transformations they sought. Schechter notes that references to the Jacobin faction of the convention as the "*sainte Montagne*" recalled the biblical Mount Sinai, from which Moses brought down the tablets of the holy law, and suggested a similar process of moral and political regeneration was at work in revolutionary France. Other allusions to the Holy Mountain depicted it as a powerful force of nature and instrument of divine wrath, the source of thunder, lightning, and lava that would destroy the wicked and regenerate the body politic. Schechter concludes by noting the importance of quasi-religious rhetoric to revolutionary politics, which spoke of the "salvation" (*salut*) of the nation and the creation of a purified new order upon the debris of the corrupt old society.

In the epilogue to this volume, Margaret Jacob argues against Jonathan Israel's thesis of a sharp dichotomy between "radical" and "moderate" Enlightenment, maintaining that the relationship between religion, politics, and philosophy in the eighteenth century was far more complex than this formulation allows. One might, as she aptly demonstrates, be a "moderate" in religion and a "radical" in politics, or vice versa. Instead, Jacob contends that the religious and philosophical ferment of the Enlightenment created new social spaces for creative syncretism, social critique, and reform proposals both pragmatic and utopian in character. She presents as an example the proliferation of esoteric Masonic orders in the late eighteenth century, which created new, sometimes bizarre, origin myths and quasi-religious legends; offered new models for social interaction; and challenged in a variety of ways the legitimacy of the absolutist state.

Although diverse in chronology and subject matter, the articles that comprise this special issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* are united by the common thread of the persistence of religion in Enlightenment and Revolutionary France and its continued importance as a category of analysis, source of rhetorical imagery, and marker of identity. As each article demonstrates in different ways, members of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters neither blindly embraced the religious traditions handed down from the past, nor made as clean a break with them as is sometimes supposed. Rather, they relentlessly interrogated religious systems as systems of meaning, sought to reconcile them with one another and with the growing body of knowledge compiled by experimental science, and recycled old terms and categories to serve new purposes, putting new wine in old bottles, so to speak. The results of this dialectical relationship between religion(s) and the Enlightenment include the scholarly study of comparative religion, an increasingly ecumenical and cosmopolitan perspective on cultural diversity, a new cognitive psychology transcending the increasingly sterile duality between matter and spirit, and a sanctified public sphere that sought transformation and regeneration of the social community in the here and now, and not merely in the hereafter. It is the hope of the authors of the articles that follow that this special issue will contribute to the ongoing reappraisal of the significance of religion, understood in the broadest sense, to the cultural and intellectual history of the eighteenth century.

## Notes

1. Voltaire's polemical designation of organized religion in general and Catholicism in particular as "*l'Infâme*" is well known to scholars of the period. Voltaire remarked in 1762, "I conclude all my letters by saying *Ecr[asez] l'inf[âme]* ... as Cato always said, 'It is my opinion that Carthage must be destroyed.'" Cited in Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, volume I, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), 392. For a general overview of this

- aspect of Voltaire's thought, see Ben Ray Redman, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. Ben Ray Redman (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1977), 24–27.
2. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz Koelln and James Pettegrove (1932; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 134.
  3. Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 31.
  4. Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 8.
  5. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11.
  6. Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Dale Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Old Regime* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).
  7. Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).
  8. Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
  9. Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715–1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
  10. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
  11. Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale* (Paris: Payot, 1950).
  12. See, for example, the essays in two recent edited volumes: Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni, eds., *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); and Felicity Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). A recent general survey of the Enlightenment that highlights the role of voyages of exploration and cross-cultural encounters to the new philosophy is Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
  13. Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's "Religious Ceremonies of the World"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–2.
  14. Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2–3.