

Chapter Thirty-five

Enlightenment, Secularism and Atheism, to 1789

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, in parts of Europe, in Britain, and in the English colonies in North America the first half of the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of secularism, while at the same time new religious movements began that are still with us. Toward the end of the eighteenth century came a violent explosion of secularism and atheism in the French Revolution, which was immediately followed outside of France by yet another religious revival and a strong reaction against secularism and atheism. Altogether, the spectrum of belief widened considerably. One end of the spectrum was occupied by agnostics and self-declared atheists. At the other end - especially in the new United States of America - were large and growing numbers of Christians who believed that God had shone upon them a "New Light" from Heaven.

The Kirk and the Scottish Enlightenment

In the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century the Scottish universities at Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen stood near the center of the Enlightenment. David Hume was the dominating figure, and participated in a wide array of theological and philosophical debates. Although he was denied a faculty position at both Edinburgh and Glasgow because of his supposed atheism, he was made Librarian of the University of Edinburgh in 1752, by which time his writings and ideas were well known throughout Britain and on the European continent. Many in Scotland deplored his tenets, but many others accepted them.¹

The Scottish Enlightenment produced other important figures, although less spectacular than Hume. One of these was Joseph Black (1728-99), who earned a degree in medicine at the University of Glasgow. Although he practiced as a physician he was above all an academician, becoming a professor of chemistry first at Glasgow and then at Edinburgh. As his reputation grew, his lectures attracted crowds of students. Black was the first to define and characterize carbon dioxide. He also did experiments showing that heat could be latent, and in those studies he collaborated with James Watt and helped him to improve the steam engine. Another eminent Scottish scholar was James Hutton (1726-97), a deist who is often hailed as the father of geology. Educated at Edinburgh, Paris and Leiden, Hutton's two-volume *Theory of the Earth* barely mentioned the biblical creation story. His theory of "uniformitarianism" proposed that the same processes that in the distant past produced odd rock formations - with vertical strata sometimes underlying horizontal strata - are still operative today. The odd formations were not the result of sudden catastrophes but of uniform and chronic forces. Hutton's uniformitarianism required that the earth was far older than the thousands of years in which catastrophists reckoned. As Hutton saw it, at least tens of thousands of years, and more likely hundreds of thousands or possibly even millions of years were required to explain the features of the earth. Hutton first delivered his theories as lectures in 1785. A brief written text followed in 1788, and then the full two volumes in 1795. In the nineteenth century geology became not only a standard subject

in universities, but in several respects the most important of the sciences.

Yet another star in the Scottish Enlightenment was Adam Smith (1723-90), a professor of logic and moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776, the same year that the first volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* appeared. Smith's book helped to found the study of economics, a discipline that the ancient Greeks and Romans had never explored and that is fundamental for modern civilization. An important step toward an understanding of economics had been taken in France in 1769-70, when Turgot published in serial form his *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses*, from which Adam Smith learned much. Some underlying assumptions for both Turgot and Smith were that self-interest is the engine that produces wealth, and that freedom - including especially laissez-faire policies of the state, and a free market - is conducive to the creation of wealth. The state, Smith argued, is not nearly so effective in promoting the public's material good as is the free market. Attempts by the state to keep the market price of a commodity below its natural price reduces the supply of the commodity. *Wealth of Nations* was also a very practical book. For example, its first chapter ("Division of Labour") demonstrated that eighteen men in a pin factory's assembly line could produce many times more pins than could be turned out by eighteen men, each working by himself. By 1776 the Industrial Revolution was already under way, and for English speakers Smith's book became the Bible of capitalism.

An important factor in the development of the Scottish Enlightenment was the diminished power of the Presbyterian Kirk. For almost a century and a half Presbyterianism had de facto been the established church of Scotland. The Scottish parliament, thoroughly Presbyterian, not only had excluded other religious denominations but also had controlled the press and public discourse. At Edinburgh in 1697 the youthful Thomas Aikenhead was hanged for blasphemy, and his execution aroused wide interest and criticism in England. The Kirk's power was much more limited after the Acts of Union. In 1712 the British parliament ordered that the Anglican and all other Protestant denominations that were protected in England receive the same protection in Scotland. In the eighteenth century Scottish deists and even atheists were therefore tolerated to an extent that would have been hard to imagine in the seventeenth century. Queen Anne and then the Hanoverian kings "protected" the Presbyterian Kirk, but they also pushed it toward tolerance. Roger Emerson has noted that "in the long run this made for a more docile church, but also one in which the men appointed to Church livings would become more moderate and enlightened in outlook as they came to resemble their patrons more than their pious parishioners."²

The beginnings of the Unitarian church in Britain and America

Through most of the eighteenth century the spectrum of religious belief kept widening in English-speaking lands, although not yet reaching to agnosticism and atheism. While Methodism and revivalism were energizing many Protestant Christians, a smaller number made a sharp break from traditional Christianity. In the eighteenth century non-trinitarian views spread in English academic and clerical circles, although only professed trinitarians were eligible for appointments in the Church of England and in British universities. In 1710 William Whiston, a

distinguished scholar, was dismissed from the Cambridge faculty because of his “Arian” publications. Two years later Samuel Clarke, who was both a cleric and an eminent philosopher, published *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*. As a result Clarke was rebuked as an Arian and Socinian, and although he suffered no civil punishment for his views his career went into decline. More fortunate was Benjamin Hoadly (1676-1761), an Anglican bishop. Hoadly promoted a thinly disguised Arianism but enjoyed the personal support of King George I and then George II and so moved from one episcopal see to another.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century English Arianism gave rise to the Unitarian church. Through at least its first few decades the Unitarian church was quite Christian: although they did not believe that Jesus was God, the early Unitarians professed that he was the Son of God and the Redeemer of the world. Formally the Unitarian church came into being soon after the British parliament, by a large majority, turned down the Feathers Tavern Petition in 1772. The petitioners, two hundred and fifty of them, had requested the parliament to require that every person intending to assume a civil or academic position swear an oath of fidelity to the scriptures rather than to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican church. Although turning down the petition in 1772, the parliament made the desired change in 1779 (and in 1813 decided that denial of the trinity was not a crime).³ By that time, however, the Unitarian church had been launched. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), whose experiments as a chemist led to the discovery of oxygen, was originally a nonconformist Presbyterian, but in his career as a natural scientist he came to value intellectual exploration over faith. In 1774 Priestley and Theophilus Lindsey organized a non-dogmatic church in London, which they named “Unitarian.” The term, “monotheism,” had been coined in the seventeenth century by the Cambridge Platonists, and the term and the doctrine were happily adopted by the Unitarians. Lindsey went on to publish his *An Historical View of the State of the Unitarian Doctrine and Worship from the Reformation to our own Times* (1783). Priestley lived for years in Birmingham, where England’s Industrial Revolution was centered. There he wrote *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), a book that greatly influenced Thomas Jefferson. As a result of Priestley’s criticism of trinitarian Christianity and - more importantly - his sympathy for the French Revolution a mob in 1791 burned down his house and forced him and his wife to flee Birmingham. In 1794 they emigrated to the U.S.A, where an informal unitarianism (small “u”) was not uncommon, and for the rest of their lives Priestley and his wife lived peacefully in Pennsylvania.

In colonial America Arianism - or at least doubt about the doctrine of the trinity - was fed both by philosophical speculation and by intense reading of New Testament. It was especially strong in New England, where the structure of Congregationalism - unhampered by hierarchy and creeds - allowed individual congregations to move in various doctrinal directions. Anglicans from Britain who visited Boston were surprised, in the second half of the eighteenth century, to find there so few clergymen who were committed to trinitarianism. Jonathan Mayhew (1720-1766), the minister of Old West Church in Boston, was both a Congregationalist and a unitarian. Mayhew wrote as well as preached that God was One, and that Jesus was subordinate to the will of God. Outspoken in his desire for more autonomy from Britain, Mayhew was politically influential. Charles Chauncy was the minister of First Church in Boston from 1727 until his death sixty years later. Contemptuous of the Great Awakening and of Jonathan Edwards, Chauncy deplored emotionalism and defended intellectualism. His Christianity was

decidedly unitarian. Believing in the eventual salvation of all people, he was also an early proponent - along with some Socinians - of what came to be called "universalism." Another eminent Congregationalist with unitarian views was Samuel West, of Dartmouth (New Bedford) Massachusetts. From 1761 until 1803 West was the minister of the Dartmouth church, which was Calvinist at the outset but quite unitarian by the end of his service.

The freethinkers and Voltaire

"Freethought" was an offshoot of Christian deism, and at the opposite pole from fideism. It flourished especially in England, the Netherlands and France, and to a lesser extent in the English colonies in America. The freethinkers proclaimed that they had complete confidence in reason and that they believed only what met the standards of reason. They declared themselves, that is, free from the shackles of religious dogmas. Despite their claims, however, the early freethinkers were very much in the Christian tradition, retaining many beliefs shared by a variety of Protestants. Like the deists, the early freethinkers considered themselves liberal and informed Christians, although some of them took pride in belonging to no organized church. They were certainly not atheists, supposing that the universe itself was sufficient evidence for God's existence.

The term, "freethinking," was popularized by Anthony Collins (1676-1729). Collins was himself a freethinker and a deist.⁴ In 1713 he published in London a little book, *A Discourse of Freethinking, occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect called Freethinkers*. It combined traditional Christian assumptions with exhortations to think for oneself. Collins did not deny divine revelation, declaring that "the Bible contains a Collection of Tracts given us at divers times by God himself."⁵ Freethinking and an enlightened form of Christianity, he supposed, were what God had in mind for everyone: it is "the design of our Blessed Saviour" to establish his religion throughout the universe. This imposes on all of us "the Duty of Free-Thinking. The Design of the Gospel was, by preaching, to set all Men upon Free-Thinking, that they might think themselves out of those Notions of God and Religion which were everywhere establish'd by Law."⁶

Freethinking deism did not lose its attachment to Christianity until the second half of the eighteenth century. A prime contributor to this separation was Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet, 1694-1778). Neither a philosopher nor a scholar, Voltaire was a brilliant writer, whose wit and style attracted a wide following. He was also an ardent deist: he believed that the universe was a powerful proof of the existence of a Creator God, who then let his creation take care of itself. At the same time, Voltaire was a tireless critic of Christianity, which he regarded as absurd. He used humor with telling effect, making sport of the Biblical stories and admonitions, especially those found in the Christian Old Testament. One of his most popular works was his novel *Candide*, which parodied Leibniz's *Théodicée*, but the work into which he poured most time and effort was his *Dictionnaire philosophique*. He arranged for the *Dictionnaire* to be published anonymously in Geneva, the first volume appearing in 1764 and selling out immediately. On some of the several hundred subjects that he treated Voltaire wrote quite seriously. The article *Divinité de Jésus*, for example, is devoid of humor, as it argues that neither Paul nor the Gospel writers nor the early Church Fathers made Jesus God, an *idée*

monstrueuse that did not become part of Christianity until the fourth century. Nor was Voltaire playful in dealing with *Persécution*, focusing not on Diocletian or other emperors of pagan Rome, but on the Protestant Pierre Jurieu for persecuting Bayle, and on the Catholic establishment for persecuting Protestants.

Other articles in the *Dictionnaire* were scandalous, especially those dealing with Old Testament characters. Voltaire found much to enjoy, for example, in the story of Abraham, who was constantly mistaking his wife for his sister and who fathered no child until he was 86 years old. Especially entertaining was the episode (Genesis 21) of Sarah and God instructing the hapless Abraham to send away into the desert his concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael, whom Abraham had finally begotten. Abraham was terribly wealthy, Voltaire pointed out, having an army of 318 shepherds in his employ, and could have afforded to be generous in parting from Hagar and Ishmael. “Had I been Abraham, I would have sent my old girlfriend Hagar off with a pair of sturdy donkeys, a flock of sheep and goats, a camel to carry her belongings, several changes of clothing, and at least two domestic servants to keep her and our son from being devoured by wolves. But no, the Father of all Believers sends his old lover and their infant son into the desert on foot, with nothing but a loaf of bread and a bottle of water between them.”⁷ Voltaire’s implication was that intelligent people could not believe such stories.

In the *Dictionnaire* Voltaire included an article on *Liberté de penser*, “freedom to think.” The article takes the form of a dialogue between an English officer named Boldmind and a Portuguese count named Médroso, both of them nursing their wounds after a battle during the War of the Spanish Succession. Boldmind is a freethinker, who praises the freedom of the English people to say and write what they think. Médroso, in contrast, fears that although the Gates of Hell cannot prevail against the Church, freedom to think would thoroughly undermine its foundations. Boldmind, of course, has the last word.

During his younger and middle years Voltaire was occasionally exiled (once to England, whose freedoms he much appreciated) or even jailed, but by his sixties he was sufficiently celebrated and wealthy that he enjoyed relative peace. He built a chateau for himself at Ferney, on the French side of the Swiss border. He also owned a house or two on the Swiss side, so that when in trouble with the Catholics he could live in Switzerland and when he had irritated the Calvinists of Geneva he could live in France. At Ferney he also built a deist church, placing above the keystone of the arched entrance an inscription: DEO EREXIT VOLTAIRE MDCCLXI (“Voltaire built [this] for God, 1761”).

Denis Diderot and the *Encyclopédie*

Ephraim Chambers in 1728 published his two-volume *Cyclopaedia, or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*. Chambers included many articles on “the mechanical arts and the several sciences.” Because nothing quite like this was available in the French language (Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* had emphasized philosophy, literature and history) André Le Breton, a Parisian book-seller, decided to have Chambers’ volumes translated into French. As supervisors for that task Le Breton hired Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Jean d’Alembert.

Soon after signing on, Diderot and d'Alembert persuaded Le Breton to abandon the project of translating Chambers' work, and to support instead the creation of a more up-to-date and a much more substantial encyclopedia in French. Le Breton agreed, and as editors Diderot and d'Alembert began finding dozens, and ultimately hundreds, of contributors to a massive encyclopedia.⁸ Among them were Voltaire, Holbach, Rousseau, and many other *philosophes*. After d'Alembert left the editorship Diderot carried on alone, often against considerable opposition. The result of all this was the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* ("Encyclopedia, or systematic dictionary of the sciences, the arts, and the crafts"). Men who were expert in their fields - many, but not all, being professors at universities - wrote articles, and draftsmen drew thousands of illustrations to accompany the articles. The Industrial Revolution having begun, many of the articles were devoted to tools, machines, and mechanical processes.

History, philosophy and the humanities were also treated in detail, but these articles stirred much criticism from the Catholic establishment. The underlying assumption of Diderot and d'Alembert, and of most of the contributors, was that humankind should be guided by reason rather than by religion. As Diderot expressed it, the *Encyclopédie* was intended to change the way in which people thought. In its design and its effect it was the quintessential product of the Enlightenment: the Encyclopedists' goal was the truth, and when truth and religion were seen to be in conflict, as was often the case, religion had to yield to truth. Much of the work was done in semi-clandestine circumstances. The first volumes were published *avec approbation et privilège du roy* ("with the king's approval and special dispensation"). That royal approval and privilege was formally withdrawn in 1759, but Louis XV made little effort to stop the work and it had much support within France and elsewhere (Catherine the Great, empress of Russia, was a generous benefactress). Twenty-eight volumes of the *Encyclopédie* were published between 1751 and 1772, and thousands of people bought the entire set. The era of expert information in easily accessible form had arrived.

Erosion of belief in God: Baron d'Holbach and atheism

After divine revelation, Satan, Hell, and even miracles had lost their credibility for educated Christians, a few individuals in western Christendom let it be known that they had also lost their belief in God. Paul Heinrich Dietrich, or Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) is often described as the first self-declared atheist in modern times.⁹ From the 1750s through the 1770s he held, at his house in Paris, a salon frequented by many of the most distinguished writers and thinkers of the time. Holbach died in January of 1789, just a few months before the beginning of the French Revolution. To the revolution itself, and especially to the anti-religious violence and the outburst of atheism that accompanied the Reign of Terror, Holbach's salon and his writings had contributed significantly.¹⁰

As a student at the University of Leiden, Holbach had begun his wide reading in theology and natural science, and by his late thirties he had come to the conclusion that we have no evidence for God's existence. Although he described himself as an atheist, and was so known to his many friends and acquaintances, he was not harassed by royal and ecclesiastical officials. This was largely because his published works - other than his translations - were either

anonymous or pseudonymous. After his death more than ten years passed before it was established that Holbach was indeed the author of various anti-religious books. Also contributing to Holbach's security was his exemplary character: he was a man not only of considerable eminence but also of a rare humanity. Although in his writings he ridiculed the ignorance of the masses, personally he was modest and generous. He and his wife were especially helpful to the villagers who lived near his country estate, a few miles southeast of Paris. In a long eulogy that filled most of the Feb. 9, 1789 edition of the *Journal de Paris*, Jacques-André Naigeon (a frequent participant in Holbach's salon) wrote that "à une extrême justesse d'esprit il joignait une simplicité de moeurs tout-à-fait antique et patriarcale" ("he combined absolute rectitude with a simplicity of manners that was quite old-fashioned and genteel").

Holbach was born in the village of Heidesheim, not far from Karlsruhe on the Rhine river. His father was a wealthy German baron, who brought the twelve-year old boy to Paris to receive a good education and to live with his uncle. In the French language Paul-Heinrich Dietrich became Paul-Henri Thiry (*Thiry*, or *Thierry*, was the French equivalent of *Dietrich*, both colloquial renderings of the ancient *Theoderic*). To his associates and correspondents, however, he was simply "Holbach," or "de Holbach." By the time that he reached his thirtieth year both his father and uncle had died, and from them he inherited his title and considerable wealth.¹¹ He used much of his money to hold a salon - including dinner - every Thursday and Sunday for almost three decades. Denis Diderot was perhaps the most faithful participant, but Rousseau, the marquis Nicolas de Condorcet, historian Charles Duclos and a long list of other members of the French intelligentsia were often in attendance. Voltaire, a deist, sampled the offerings but was irritated by the atheism of Holbach and most of his guests. Among the many English writers who attended when visiting Paris were Adam Smith, Lawrence Sterne, Horace Walpole, Edward Gibbon and - very often - Hume.¹² Benjamin Franklin was an occasional guest. Thomas Jefferson may have met Holbach (about whom he wrote some warm compliments) but when Jefferson arrived in Paris, in August of 1784, Voltaire, Rousseau, Turgot and Diderot had died and Holbach was no longer hosting a salon.¹³

Holbach was himself a prolific writer and translator. In the 1750s he produced French translations of various German books on hydrology and especially on mines, minerals, and metallurgy. He followed these, in the 1760s, with translations of deistic English writers: John Toland, Thomas Gordon, Anthony Collins and others (he also produced a French translation of Swift's history of Queen Anne's reign).

In 1761 Holbach published his *Le Christianisme dévoilé ou Examen des principes et des effets de la religion Chrétienne. Par feu M. Boulanger*. The identification of the author, "by the late Monsieur Boulanger," was a red herring designed to get the book past the royal censors and protect Holbach from charges of blasphemy. Nicolas Boulanger (1722-1759) was a known skeptic who had left several manuscripts that Holbach had acquired and had published. *Christianisme dévoilé*, however, was written by Holbach himself. It was a scathing attack on religion generally and Christianity specifically, and with its sarcasm and hyperbole it was undoubtedly intended to outrage believers. The book was published in Nancy, a city ruled by Stanislaw, Duke of Lorraine, who was the elected ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

and was also the father-in-law of King Louis XV of France. When Stanislaw's agents learned of the book they confiscated and destroyed all but a few copies. Holbach then began looking for a Dutch printer, and after some effort an edition was published and sold in Amsterdam in 1767. Copies were smuggled into France and there fetched a very high price, but French book-sellers caught with the book were severely punished.¹⁴ An English translation was made by W. M. Johnson, which in the U.S.A. was published in 1793 by printers Robertson and Cowan in New York. Johnson's translation was titled, *Christianity Unveiled: being an Examination of the Principles and Effects of the Christian Religion*, and was identified as a translation "from the French of Boulanger," making no mention of Baron d'Holbach.

In this book, after an introductory chapter, Holbach presented a brief and selective "Sketch of the History of the Jews," emphasizing the savagery with which - fortified by their devotion to Jehovah - the Israelites massacred the Canaanites and appropriated their land, slaughtered other Gentiles, and attributed any defeat to some error in ritual. His summary was entirely negative:

The history of the Jews, at all times, shews us nothing but kings blindly obedient to the priesthood, or at war with it, and perishing under its blows. The ferocious and ridiculous superstitions of the Jews rendered them at once the natural enemies of mankind and the object of their contempt.¹⁵

Having disposed of the Judaeans, Holbach took on the Christians. His third chapter ("Sketch of the History of the Christian Religion") begins thus:

In the midst of this nation, thus disposed to feed on hope and chimera, a new prophet arose, whose sectaries in process of time have changed the face of the earth. A poor Jew, who pretended to be descended from the royal house of David, after being long unknown in his own country, emerges from obscurity, and goes forth to make proselytes. He succeeded amongst some of the most ignorant part of the populace. To them he preached his doctrines, and taught them that he was the son of God, the deliverer of his oppressed nation, and the Messiah announced by the prophets. His disciples, being either imposters or themselves deceived, rendered a clamorous testimony of his power, and declared that his mission had been proved by miracles without number. The only prodigy that he was incapable of effecting, was that of convincing the Jews, who, far from being touched by his beneficent and marvelous works, caused him to suffer an ignominious death. Thus the Son of God died in the sight of all Jerusalem; but his followers declare that he was secretly resuscitated three days after his death. Visible to them alone, and invisible to the nation which he came to enlighten and convert to his doctrine, Jesus, after his resurrection, say they, conversed some time with his disciples, and then ascended into heaven, where, having again become the equal to God the Father, he shares with him the adorations and homages of the sectaries of his law. These sectaries, by accumulating superstitions, inventing impostures, and fabricating dogmas and mysteries, have, little by little, heaped up a distorted and unconnected system of religion which is called *Christianity*, after the name of Christ its founder.¹⁶

In the chapters that followed, Holbach did his best to debunk Christian sacraments, revelation and inspired texts, prophecies, martyrs, miracle-workers, and saints.

In *Christianisme dévoilé* Holbach showed that he had no belief in God of the scriptures. In a subsequent and more substantial work, *Système de la Nature ou des Loix du Monde Physique et du Monde Moral*, published in 1770, Holbach argued that the philosophers' God was not credible either. The title page identified *Système de la Nature* as authored by Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, a writer and scholar who had been safely dead for ten years. This book was emphatically atheist, explaining physical phenomena entirely in physical or material terms, and setting out an ethical system that was not based on belief in God. As Holbach saw it, the only realities are matter and motion. Human actions are determined by the physical laws of matter and motion, as are human feelings. Self-interest motivates our behavior: virtue is an intelligent pursuit and vice an ignorant pursuit of self-interest. Will, whether human or divine, plays no part in nature. In advocating a rigorous determinism Holbach argued that God is a figment of the imagination, and that belief in God is a relic of ignorance and superstition.

The Jewish *haskalah*

Until well into the eighteenth century Judaeans in Christendom were hardly affected by the intellectual ferment occurring around them. Judaism itself had already gone through significant changes - the publishing and spread of Kabbalah in late medieval times, and the various messianic movements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - and was in the 1750s and 1760s experiencing another great change with the beginnings of Hasidism in Ukraine and eastern Europe. Those changes, however, were internal to Judaism and only accentuated the separation of Judaeans from Gentiles. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, as had been the case since antiquity, Christians generally loathed Judaeans, suspecting them of heinous acts and knowing that they regarded the central doctrines of Christianity as nonsense. For their part, all but a few Judaeans still feared and despised the Christian majority among whom they lived. In what is today Ukraine, Belarus and Poland the separation between the Jewish and Christian populations was becoming more pronounced, as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth grew weak and began losing territory to Russia. The tsars and tsarinas had long excluded Judaeans altogether from Russia, but now that Catherine the Great (ruled 1762-1796) was beginning to annex from the Commonwealth lands with a sizeable Jewish population a different policy was required. Catherine therefore instituted her Pale of Settlement, drawing a strict line east of which Judaeans were forbidden to live. Within the Pale of Settlement she removed most Judaeans from her newly acquired cities and relocated them to small and entirely Jewish towns. At the end of Catherine's reign the typical *shtetl* had a few thousand inhabitants, few of them educated and most of them poor.

In central Europe and Britain, in contrast, two eighteenth-century developments tended to bring Judaeans and Gentiles somewhat closer together. One of the developments was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and a focus on economic growth. The dynamics of capitalism, explained by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 but dimly recognized well before that, persuaded some rulers and governments that Jewish bankers, financiers and merchants contributed much to a state's pursuit of wealth. An obvious corollary was that

repression of Judaism was not in a state's economic interests.

A second development was the decline of Christian faith. This can also be described as the emergence within Christendom of deism, secularism, religious skepticism, and finally even atheism. As we have seen, belief in Hell, Satan, miracles and divine revelation had eroded, and doubts about trinitarianism were being expressed, first in clandestine pamphlets and then more openly. As a significant number of Christians became skeptical about traditional Christian doctrines they became less hostile to Judaism and Judaeans.

With our retrospect on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust in the twentieth century we may find it surprising that in the eighteenth century some of the first steps in the assimilation of Judaeans to Gentile society were taken in Prussia. In 1701 Frederick I (ruled 1687-1713) promoted what had been the Duchy of Prussia to a new status, the Kingdom of Prussia, which extended from its original base in Königsberg westward through Pomerania and Brandenburg, where Frederick assumed the traditional title, Elector of Brandenburg. He decided to locate his capital in the center of Brandenburg, and selected for that purpose Berlin, which until then had been a relatively undistinguished city.

Judaeans had been expelled from Berlin and the rest of Brandenburg in 1571, and the expulsion remained in force for the next hundred years. In 1671 the elector of Brandenburg permitted fifty Jewish families to take up residence in Berlin, giving them the official status of *Schutzjuden* ("protected Jews"). They were restricted, however, to a few specified professions: banking, the importing and selling of luxury items and certain foodstuffs, and various crafts that did not directly compete with Christian tradesmen. The immigrants could gather for Sabbath worship but were not to build a synagogue. Frederick I enlarged this Jewish program, allowing the immigration of other Judaeans, all of whom were *Schutzjuden*. At the same time, he strictly limited the number of his Jewish subjects: only the oldest son in a family could inherit his father's "protected" status, and on reaching adulthood a second and third son could remain in Berlin or elsewhere in Prussia only by purchasing a *Schutzbrief* ("protection letter") at a high price. Further privileges - the freedom, for example, to dispense with the yellow badge that Jews were otherwise required to wear - could also be purchased from the crown, although again these were expensive. Despite these limitations and indignities, by the end of the reign of Frederick I about a thousand Judaeans lived in Berlin, a number that doubled by the middle of the eighteenth century. King Frederick William I (ruled 1713-1740) issued a series of "Jewry laws" that changed but did not significantly extend the range of professions for which the Jewish residents of Berlin and other Prussian cities were eligible. In 1714 he also permitted the building of a synagogue, the first in Berlin since the medieval period.

Frederick II ("the Great"), who regarded himself as a man of the Enlightenment, ruled Prussia from 1740 until his death in 1786. He lifted some of the restrictions that had for a long time been placed on Catholics in his kingdom. Like his father and grandfather, and like almost all other rulers at the time, Frederick the Great disliked Judaism and Judaeans. In his correspondence he complained about "the Jews", accusing them of sharp dealing, and he continued to place limits on the number of *Schutzjuden* living in Prussia. Because he knew, however, that wealthy Judaeans were useful to his kingdom, he continued to allow them to enjoy

- at a high price - many of the privileges enjoyed by his Christian subjects.

It was under such conditions, in the reign of Frederick II and in Berlin, that the Jewish “enlightenment” began.¹⁷ A few Jewish mavericks there began to embrace aspects of the Gentile world while at the same time retaining and even celebrating their ancient heritage. These Judaeans referred to their movement as the *haskalah*, a Hebrew word meaning “mind” or “intellect,” and usually translated as “enlightenment.” The Haskalah was not - as was the Enlightenment of Christendom - primarily a break from religion, although that was a part of it. The main agenda of the *maskilim* (“men of the Haskalah”) was to break away from the social patterns that for centuries had characterized and constrained Jewish communities in Christendom. This agenda necessarily impinged on the synagogue, because the *maskilim* urged their Jewish fellows to interest themselves in the wider world: unlike most of the rabbis, that is, the *maskilim* did not equate the life of the mind with the study of the Talmud and the Torah. The Haskalah did assume, however, that Judaism not only could coexist with a generous dose of secularism, but would be enriched by it.

The Haskalah was in large part set in motion by the efforts of two men, Naftali Wessely (1725-1805) and Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786).¹⁸ Mendelssohn was born to a poor family in Dessau but at the age of fourteen came to Berlin in the company of David Fränkel, who had been appointed chief rabbi of the city. Mendelssohn was a brilliant student and as a young adult was an accountant, a tutor, a published writer of philosophical treatises, and a friend of the poet Lessing. In his later years he was also a friend of Immanuel Kant and even of King Frederick. Naftali Wessely came to Berlin from Hamburg, where his family had considerable wealth (his grandfather had owned a weapons factory). Although Wessely aimed to be a rabbi, he was also much interested in the sciences and in poetry. Together, Wessely and Mendelssohn tried to extend the interests of their fellow Judaeans from purely Jewish affairs to the world, and from the past to the present. An essential part of their program was linguistic. Although they had spoken Yiddish as children, Wessely and Mendelssohn grew to regard it as a deformed language that kept Judaeans confined and disadvantaged. They therefore made it a point to speak standard High German at home and in their public affairs, and encouraged other Judaeans to do likewise. Toward that end Mendelssohn devoted several years to translating the Pentateuch and Psalms into German, while collaborators did the same for other books of the Tanakh. The High German translation, Mendelssohn hoped, would replace the seventeenth-century Yiddish translation done by Yekutiel Blitz, a version that Mendelssohn found disgusting.¹⁹

In order to teach Jewish children to speak High German instead of Yiddish the *maskalim* set up elementary schools. In 1778 a *Freischule* (“free school”) was organized in Berlin by David Friedländer, only twenty-eight years old. All instruction in the *Freischule* was to be done in standard German, and the school offered a relatively wide curriculum. Other Jewish “free schools” were soon established in Breslau, Wolfenbüttel, Frankfurt and other German cities.

Although the Haskalah encouraged the assimilation of Judaeans to German society and especially to German culture, it was certainly not intended to weaken the ecumenical or international Judaeans community. In order to reach Jewish readers throughout Christendom and even in the Muslim world the *maskalim* launched the revival of Hebrew as a spoken and written

secular language. An accomplished Hebraist, Mendelssohn loved the language for its beauty and worked to make Hebrew a language of communication for Judaeans everywhere in the modern world. Toward that end Wessely and his associates launched a periodical in the Hebrew language. This was *Ha-Me'assef* ("The Collector"), the first volume of which they published in 1784. The Me'assefim were the various writers who wrote for the journal articles - all in Hebrew - on science, literature, philosophy and religion. The writers took pride in mastering topics about which Judaeans had hitherto been ignorant. Many rabbis objected to the largely secular content of the journal, and the readership of *Ha-Me'assef* was evidently never very numerous.

Altogether, however, the Haskalah affected much of the Jewish population, especially in Prussia and other German-speaking lands. The increasing use of German provided a window opening onto a world much wider than the one to which Judaeans had traditionally been limited. The Haskalah in Prussia crested in 1812, when King Frederick William III granted citizenship (a relatively new concept, introduced by the French Revolution) to all Jewish inhabitants of Prussia, although still with restrictions that did not apply to his Christian subjects.

Relaxation of laws restricting or repressing Judaeans was not limited to Prussia. In Austria and the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg emperor Josef II (1780-1790) opened his reign with a series of edicts that removed the penalties that until then had been attached to non-Catholics. In 1781 Josef issued a Patent of Religious Tolerance that removed disabilities from Protestants. In 1782 his Edict of Tolerance did the same for Judaeans: they would no longer be required to pay "Jewish taxes" and to wear yellow stars, and they would now be permitted to attend the realm's secondary schools and universities. Josef's motivations in issuing these edicts of tolerance were mostly economic.²⁰

Jewish surnames

The use of surnames, or family names, in Christendom began as early as the eleventh century, and by the fifteenth century was common enough that some kings began requiring all of their Christian subjects to have a surname. In many cases the surname described the original holder's occupation: Hunter, for example, or Plumber, Sawyer, Smith and Wright. Some Judaeans had also adopted surnames, but more Jewish names continued to be true patronymics. Typically a Jewish man was so-and-so, son of so-and-so, and a Jewish woman so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so. The philosopher known to Christians as Maimonides was in Hebrew Moshe ben Maimon and in Arabic Musa ibn Maimun, "Moses, son of Maimon." As late as the eighteenth century these patronymics were still common nomenclature for Judaeans throughout Europe. In imitation of the Christian majority Judaeans who welcomed the *haskalah* in Germany adopted surnames for interaction with wider German society. Some of these surnames were simply translations of the patronymic into the local vernacular. Moses Mendelssohn, for example, who had initiated the *haskalah*, was as a young man in the synagogue at Dessau known as Moshe ben Mendel. After moving to Berlin he changed the patronymic into the legal surname, "Mendelssohn," which then was inherited by his children and grandchildren (one of whom was the composer Felix Mendelssohn). In 1787 the emperor Joseph II ordered all of his Jewish subjects in Austria to adopt surnames. Within the synagogue Judaeans continued to be

known by their patronymics, but the state identified them through their surnames. Many Judaeans adopted names that indicated their professions: *Kaufmann* (shopkeeper), *Schneider* (tailor), *Schreiber* (writer, scribe), *Schuster* (shoemaker), and so forth.

Anti-Jewish sentiment and “the Jew bill” in Britain

The circumstances of Jewish residents in Britain were also improved in the eighteenth century, although not without setbacks. The admission of Judaeans to England, after centuries of exclusion, had begun in Cromwell’s time. More Jewish immigrants arrived after the Glorious Revolution and by the middle of the eighteenth century “there was probably no county in Europe in which the Jews received better treatment, and Jewish merchants and financiers had attained positions of very considerable wealth and influence in England.”²¹

A variety of restrictions, however, put Judaeans at a distinct disadvantage. The right to own land, to own ships, and to conduct trade with the English colonies was limited to English natives. Although immigrants could be naturalized by law, the process required the immigrant to partake of the eucharist administered by an Anglican cleric. As a result, a Judaeans could become a naturalized “Englishman” only by converting to Christianity.

In early April of 1753 the House of Lords passed a bill, formally titled “Jewish Naturalization Bill,” that had been introduced by Prime Minister Henry Pelham. The bill allowed an individual Judaeans to apply for a special Act of Parliament that would permit him or her to be naturalized without partaking of the Christian sacrament. Petitioning for and securing an Act of Parliament for one’s self was a long and expensive procedure, and Pelham’s bill could have benefited only a very small number of wealthy Jewish residents in Britain. From the House of Lords the bill made its way to the House of Commons, where it encountered Tory opposition but with Whig support it was passed in early June. At this point, with a general election on the horizon, the *London Evening Post* - a strongly Tory newspaper - went into a full attack.²² Almost daily it editorialized or carried letters opposed to “the Jew bill” and denouncing - often with reference to gruesome stories from the Old Testament - a long list of vices and depravities of “the Jews.” More restrained but typical was a letter from “Old England,” as one regular contributor signed himself: “Had there been a law to inoculate the *Leprosy* upon every Man, Woman, and Child, throughout his Majesty’s *British* dominions, there had been less to complain of, than of this impure Conjunction with Jewish Blood, at the Expense of all that can be call’d Christian amongst us.”²³ A favorite theme of the newspaper and of the letters that it printed was circumcision. Old stories were resurrected of Jewish kidnappers taking off Christian boys in order to circumcise them, and fears were raised that once “the Jews” had sufficient power in Britain the parliament would pass a law requiring every English male to be circumcised.²⁴ In December, after months of such rabble-rousing, the House of Commons repealed “the Jew bill.” At that the furor abated, no new laws were passed repressing Judaeans, and in fact Jewish immigration to Britain increased in the last decades of the eighteenth century. But not until well into the nineteenth century would Judaeans in Britain be fully emancipated.

Secularizing the history of Christianity

For Protestants as well as for Catholics, the history of Christianity was still, for most of the eighteenth century, a sacred history: Although the two groups disagreed vehemently about what the form of Christianity should be, both were confident that Christianity was at the center of God's plan for humankind. All of history was supposed to be providentially designed, and Christianity - which began at the Fullness of Time, when the hinge of the eras turned from BC to AD - still seemed to be its central purpose. When Caesar Augustus was ruling the Roman empire God had sent forth his Son, and had thereafter seen to the establishment and growth of the Christian church, until paganism was vanquished and Christianity was the religion of the empire. In the early 1770s only a few people - of course including those who were attending the Baron d-Holbach's salon in Paris - supposed that the triumph of Christianity was the result of purely secular or natural factors.

Perspectives changed with the publication of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first volume of *Decline and Fall* was published in 1776 (the sixth and final volume appeared in 1789, a few months before the French Revolution began). In the last chapters - the fifteenth and sixteenth - of the initial volume Gibbon presented, for the first time, a history of Christianity in which God played no role.

Gibbon could not have written his secular history of Christianity had not the materials for it been painstakingly gathered by generations of devout Christian predecessors.²⁵ For over two centuries Protestant and Catholic scholars had been writing partisan histories, skirmishing especially over the process by which the bishop of Rome had become the leader of the Christian church in the western Roman empire. In this polemic the Protestants fired the first great volley. This was the "Magdeburg Centuries," or more formally the *Historia ecclesiastica* written by a collection of Lutheran scholars who convened at Magdeburg. It presented - century by century - a history of the Christian church from Jesus to 1298, the Centuriators thus covering thirteen centuries in thirteen volumes. The director of the entire project was Matthias Flacius, and the volumes were published from 1559 to 1574. The Catholic response to this Protestant version of church history was made singlehandedly by Cardinal Cesare Baronio (1538-1607). In his *Annales ecclesiastici*, in 12 volumes, "Baronius" was able - writing almost until his death - to bring the story down as far as 1198. Later in the seventeenth century Odorico Rinaldi brought this Catholic history down to 1534. These and lesser histories argued either for or against the proposition that God had all along intended that the pope should be the head of the Christian church. The partisan scholars were assiduous in gathering whatever documents and testimonies bolstered their respective theses, and omitting those that did not.

Much more balanced was a massive work composed in the later decades of the seventeenth century by an historian conventionally called "Tillemont."²⁶ Louis Sébastien le Nain de Tillemont (he had an estate at Tillemont, a town near Paris) produced in sixteen volumes his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles*. Alongside this ecclesiastical history Tillemont wrote a somewhat shorter secular history, in six volumes, of the Roman empire: *Histoire des empereurs et autres princes qui ont régné pendant les six premiers siècles de l'Église*. Together, the twenty-two volumes presented virtually everything that the ancient literary sources had to offer on the history of the Church and of the empire from the first through the sixth century. Most of the volumes were published after the author's death in 1698.

Although a fervent Jansenist and ordained as a Catholic priest, Tillemont did his best to be critical, recognizing that many of the miracles and pieties recounted by the ancient and medieval authors were unfounded. Indefatigable in scouring the primary sources, Tillemont distinguished between the better authorities (usually older) and the worse. The result was an encyclopedic history of Christianity, from the Apostolic Age to ca. 600. Tillemont sought no applause for literary style or for trenchant insights. Humble and self-effacing, he wrote his histories as a service to God and the Catholic church. After his ordination he found himself ill-suited for the priesthood. History fascinated him, and he believed that by writing a true history of the Church, and stripping it of falsehoods and misconceptions, he was serving Christ and healing souls. A full and accurate record, he assumed, would show to the world the greatest miracle of all: how God had established his Church. According to David Jordan, who made a detailed study of Tillemont and his works, “history was, for him, the palpable proof of God’s providence, and the historian’s task was to point out the working of this marvelous providence and thus induce piety in his readers.”²⁷ Separating the true from the false in this providential history was an essential part of the project: “Tillemont believed the history of Christianity was intrinsically holy, and it must be cleansed of fable, legend, and superstition. It must be restored to primitive purity. He believed it a crime against man and God to allow the history of the church to remain dubious or corrupt.”²⁸ Even Tillemont’s history of the secular Roman empire was important to him only because the empire was - as he saw it - the stage on which God had chosen to display his providence.

In his pious labors Tillemont became a recluse. Living monastically at his estate, and eschewing all worldly pleasures, he devoted himself to reading the vast corpus of Patristic literature and writing his chronicles. The very thoroughness of the *Mémoires*, and the dull prose in which they were written, doomed them to general neglect. While commending Tillemont’s diligence, humility and honesty, Jordan concludes that his shortcomings “place Tillemont in a long, if not honored, line of confessional historians.”²⁹

Very different was Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), a vain and brilliant man, and a deist.³⁰ Although he spent a year at Oxford, Gibbon received most of his education in Switzerland: at Lausanne from 1753 to 1758, he began to read the works of Montesquieu (1689-1755) and was fascinated by Montesquieu’s *L’Esprit des lois*. The laws that Montesquieu had explored were those that pertained to government and the stability of government. The most durable form of government, Montesquieu concluded, combined a strong executive branch with a legislative and a judicial branch, each branch being independent of the other two. Equally impressive on the young Gibbon was Montesquieu’s *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. Here Gibbon learned that the ancient Romans’ loss of *virtus* - of their civic humanism, their military tradition, and their participation in public affairs - was the reason for their decline under the emperors.

Gibbon was an elegant writer, in French as well as in English, and that was recognized immediately. His presentation was scornful and sardonic, much in the manner of Tacitus, and appealed to sophisticated readers. From the outset the *Decline and Fall* sold very well, and provided Gibbon with handsome royalties for the rest of his life. Gibbon was also a remarkable

historian, capable of seeing the evolution of historical processes that had escaped his predecessors. This ability was for some time obscured both by the admiration for his prose and by the heated controversy that surrounded his “infidelity,” or his disbelief in most of what his Christian contemporaries believed. Hugh Trevor-Roper observed that before Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* the study of history was not highly regarded in England: historiography was a branch of literature, with little philosophical value. The *Decline and Fall* showed that history could be a tool for enlarging human understanding, and should not be ignored by philosophers.³¹ Gibbon made good and constant use of Tillemont’s labors, in his footnotes citing Tillemont more than two hundred times. In sorting out one difficult problem in ecclesiastical history Gibbon paid his predecessor a high, although qualified, compliment: “The patient and sure-footed mule of the Alps may be trusted in the most slippery paths.”³² But in their overall understandings of history Gibbon and Tillemont were at opposite poles.

Decline and Fall expressed exactly Gibbon’s disillusion with Christianity in general and with Catholicism in particular (he had been a Catholic for a time during his adolescence): while contemporary Catholics revered Rome as the seat of the popes, Gibbon intended to show that the ascendancy of Catholic (and Orthodox) Christianity mirrored - and to a large extent accounted for - the decline of a great empire. Under the pagan Antonines the empire had reached from the Euphrates to Scotland, and by 1453 it was limited to the city of Constantinople. The ancient world, as Gibbon saw it, descended from high civilization in the second century to more than a millennium of “barbarism and religion,” from which western Europe and Britain had only recently recovered.

Readers of *Decline and Fall* were not entirely surprised that Gibbon found Christianity partly to blame for the Fall of Rome, because that charge had been made before. More unsettling was Gibbon’s account of the growth of Christianity. He identified what he saw as the five most important reasons for that progress:

- I. The inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses.
- II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth.
- III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church.
- IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians.
- V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire.³³

Christian readers of *The Decline and Fall* could readily agree with the fourth and perhaps the fifth factor proposed by Gibbon, but the first three put Christianity in an unfavorable light. Intolerant zeal was never a virtue, and in the Enlightenment was a dangerous vice. The doctrine of a future life, Gibbon argued, was a late feature of Jewish religion, not having been entrusted to Moses and the prophets but contrived by the Pharisees. To the Pharisaic doctrine of physical resurrection the Christians added the promise that Judgement Day was soon to arrive: Christ himself had prophesied that all the world would see “the glorious coming of the Son of Man in the clouds,” and had foretold that this would happen “before that generation was totally

extinguished which had beheld his humble condition upon earth.” Unfortunately, Gibbon reminded his readers, “the revolution of seventeen centuries has instructed us not to press too closely the mysterious language of prophecy and revelation.” Gibbon’s procedure here, as elsewhere, was implicitly to ridicule traditional beliefs.

As for the miracles ascribed to the primitive church, Gibbon detailed the endless credulity of the ancients and their eagerness to believe miracle stories. Referring favorably to the work of Conyers Middleton, Gibbon noted that from the second to the fourth century the most common miracle performed by Christians was the expulsion of a demon, but that miracles of healing were also frequently claimed and believed. Even the dead - so Irenaeus asserted at the end of the second century - were in his day still being raised here and there, and were living many years after to vouch for the reality of their resurrections. From the first of the Christian Fathers through all of their successors, “the effects of accident or contrivance were ascribed to supernatural causes.” Gibbon chose not to deal with the miracles of Jesus or the apostles, deciding instead to begin his account with the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE. But Gibbon strongly insinuated that the miracle stories in the New Testament are no better supported than the stories from later antiquity and the Middle Ages.

In short, Gibbon explained the dramatic growth of Christianity during the three hundred and fifty years after Jesus’ crucifixion as the result of factors that were strictly secular and mostly unflattering to Christianity. Miracles, divine intervention and divine revelation played no role in Gibbon’s history, but the *belief* in these things - or, more blatantly, superstition - played a huge role. Not surprisingly, *Decline and Fall* was attacked by Christian scholars. In 1778 Henry Edward Davis, of Balliol College at Oxford, published a book listing what he considered errors in Gibbon’s fifteenth and sixteenth chapters. To this and other attacks by Anglican clerics Gibbon responded in 1779, with *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Readers who hoped that the first volume of *Decline and Fall* would be overturned by more penetrating traditional scholarship were left without recourse after *Vindication*. As Trevor-Roper with some hyperbole summarized it, “The effect was devastating. Never has there been, in literary history, such a rout. Under that sustained and deadly fusillade, all of Gibbon’s clerical critics were laid prostrate.”³⁴ In the aftermath Thomas Bowdler, who had already published expurgated versions of Shakespeare’s plays, bowdlerized the *Decline and Fall*, making it less dangerous for devout readers.

After Gibbon, church historians had somehow to confront his secular explanation for the growth and ascent of Christianity. They could accept his secular narrative, or modify it, or reject it in favor of the traditional and confessional narrative. In any case, they could not ignore *Decline and Fall*, because it had made too deep and too wide an impression on the educated public. Gibbon’s history greatly accelerated the evolution of Christendom into modern civilization, or the rise - in Britain and then in western Europe and America - of an influential minority of skeptics alongside a majority of believers.

Celebration of reason, of progress, and of the Enlightenment

In the second half of the eighteenth century many Europeans - including all those who regarded themselves as *philosophes* - no longer believed in Satan, Hell and miracles, whether modern or ancient. Voltaire, Edward Gibbon and Immanuel Kant were the most widely published of the disbelievers, but dozens of lesser writers added their voices.³⁵ On the question of miracles some of these writers had been influenced by Hume, but others had independently arrived at the same conclusions.³⁶

More broadly, by the second half of the eighteenth century the “enlightened” had rejected the possibility of divine revelation, and based their world-view entirely on reason. Reason - *raison* in French, and *Vernunft* in German - was for many the touchstone for separating the false from the true. On a local scale the American revolutionaries Ethan Allen and Thomas (“Tom”) Paine made names for themselves as apostles of reason. Allen’s *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man: A Compendious System of Natural Religion* (1784) was a sizeable but not very profound book, pointing out the errors and contradictions in the Bible and in Christianity. Allen was forthright in condemning the belief in miracles: “In those parts of the world where learning and science have prevailed, miracles have ceased; but in those parts of it as are barbarous and ignorant, miracles are still in vogue.” Paine published his *Age of Reason* in 1794, after the atrocities of the French Revolution had begun to tarnish the image of rationality. He too objected especially to Christianity’s advertisement of miracles: “In every point of view in which those things called miracles can be placed and considered, the reality of them is improbable, and their existence unnecessary.”³⁷

An altogether more weighty discussion of reason was Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (“Critique of pure reason”), which he published in 1781. Here Kant argued that the object of reason is not the physical and perceptible world but reason itself, or the workings of the human mind. In a much earlier work Kant had argued that the debate about God’s existence must be based on reason alone, and not on claims of revelation or appeals to natural theology.³⁸

Aware of their break with the past, intellectuals in France referred to their eighteenth century as *le siècle des lumières* (“the century of lights”). In English it was “the Age of Enlightenment” and in German *die Aufklärung*. In 1784 Kant published a pamphlet, *Beantwortung der Frage, Was ist Aufklärung?* (“Answer to the question, What is Enlightenment?”). Kant’s answer to the question was, “Enlightenment is man’s leaving his self-imposed dependency. Dependency is the inability to follow one’s own understanding without someone else’s guidance.”³⁹ His formula was meant not for medicine, physics, or other sciences, but for religion.

Pride in the Enlightenment was mirrored by a growing belief in progress.⁴⁰ In 1750 a French student, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (who went on to pioneer the field of economics), delivered a lecture at the Sorbonne describing the progress of humanity over the millennia, and he published the lecture as a pamphlet.⁴¹ Even among the “enlightened,” of course, not everyone agreed that progress could be found in human history. Voltaire dismissed history as an endless chronicle of crimes, follies and disasters. After the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, however, and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth, there was no denying that great intellectual and material progress had recently been made, and

much more was expected. Shortly before his death in 1794 the Marquis of Condorcet, while in hiding, wrote his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795). Within a few years the book was translated into English and published as *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind: Being a Posthumous Work of the late M. de Condorcet*.

Although by the 1770s many of the more privileged people in western Christendom considered themselves “enlightened” and no longer Christian, the majority continued to believe in the traditional Christian doctrines, whether Catholic or Protestant. The “enlightened” minority was accordingly looked upon with some suspicion or resentment, and this hostility encouraged the formation of secret societies. In 1776 the Order of the Illuminati (“Enlightened”) was founded in Bavaria by Adam Weishaupt, who was the professor of canon law at the University of Ingolstadt. The Illuminati had ties to the Freemasons, and the order spread to many European cities. The poet Goethe and the philosopher Herder were probably among the several thousand men who joined the Order of the Illuminati. Many in the order were as contemptuous of their temporal rulers as they were of the churches, and it may be that some chapters had revolutionary ideas. However secret the order may have been at the outset, it became much more so in the 1780s, when it was repeatedly banned by Karl Theodor, Prince-Elector and Duke of Bavaria. In the late 1790s far-fetched rumors circulated that the French Revolution had been planned and instigated by the Illuminati.

In the English colonies in North America, where too the majority was devoutly Christian, the freethinkers tended to meet in private or secret societies. These flourished in the 1770s and 1780s, until the atrocities of the French Revolution dampened the enthusiasm for many aspects of the Enlightenment. Although most of the American societies lapsed in the aftermath of the French Revolution (and in the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820s), one that survived was the Phi Beta Kappa fraternity. The fraternity was founded in 1776 at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg, Virginia, by a group of students from the College of William and Mary. Evidently the students had ties to a Freemasons’ lodge. At such a time and such a place the revolutionary spirit of the “brothers” was certainly high. More salient, however, was the society’s embrace of the Enlightenment. Although not actively anti-Christian, the society was resolutely non-Christian and met in secret to avoid public or official censure.⁴² The Greek letters *ΦΒΚ* stood for the words, *philosophia biou kybernetes*, “philosophy is the helmsman of life.” Today, in Phi Beta Kappa chapters on college campuses across the U.S., that motto may seem a bland truism. Late in the eighteenth century, however, “philosophy is the helmsman of life” was an Enlightenment manifesto. While Protestants looked to the Bible for guidance in life and Catholics looked to their church, the founders of Phi Beta Kappa fraternity put their hope in philosophy, reason, and the unfettered exchange of ideas. A chapter of the society was added at Yale College in 1780 and at Harvard College in 1781.

The Enlightenment began in the Netherlands and England, in large part because of the relative freedom of the press there, and soon spread into French- and German-speaking lands. Through most of the eighteenth century the Enlightenment was limited to Christian society in western and northern Europe, Britain, and the English colonies in North America. By the 1780s

the Jewish Haskalah had begun in Prussia and other German-speaking lands. Eastern Europe was not yet much affected, as religious identities remained paramount there: most important were Catholicism in Poland, Orthodox Christianity in South Slavic and East Slavic lands, and one or another Hasidic tradition for Judaeans. The Muslim world experienced nothing like the Enlightenment until the 1920s, when Atatürk and his Republican People's Party abolished the Ottoman empire and established the Republic of Turkey. In western Christendom the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was the product of a broad evolution - economic, social, political, religious and intellectual - that had begun with the broadening of horizons during the crusades. By the 1780s western Christendom was on the threshold of modernity.

1. On the influence of Hume on his contemporaries see Stewart 2003, p. 54 : "By 1762 ... he is described as 'so well-known for the incredible mischief he has done to this age, by his loose and sceptical writings'."

2. Emerson 2003, p. 14.

3. Walker 1954, p. 495.

4. Israel 2006, p. 48, says that Collins' views were close to those of Spinoza, but it is difficult to find in Collins' *Discourse* statements so radical as those in the *Tractatus*.

5. *Discourse*, p. 10.

6. *Discourse*, p. 44.

7. *Dictionnaire*, article "Agar."

8. For a complete list see Frank Kafker, "A List of Contributors to Diderot's Encyclopedia," *French Historical Studies* 3 (1963), pp. 106-122.

9. I have taken much of my information on Holbach from Max Pearson Cushing's excellent Ph.D. dissertation, *Baron d'Holbach: A Study of Eighteenth Century Radicalism in France* (Columbia University: 1914). For other studies of Holbach see William H. Wickwar, *Baron d'Holbach: A Prelude to the French Revolution* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1968; reprint of the original 1935 edition); and Alan Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

10. Holbach's coterie, however, did not plot the French Revolution. On this myth see Alan Kors, "The Myth of the Coterie Holbachique," *French Historical Studies* 9 (1976), pp. 573-95. The abbé Augustin de Barruel's slanted history of Jacobinism, published in 1798, launched the conspiracy theory that Holbach's coterie - mostly atheists - had planned to rid France of the

Church and that to reach that goal they had planned the French Revolution. The émigrés who had fled France during the revolution took up Barruel's thesis and the myth grew in the 19th century.

11. Cushing 1914, p. 5.

12. According to Cushing 1914, p. 18, Hume was "a regular frequenter of his salon.... Hume and Holbach had much in common intellectually, although the latter was far more thoroughgoing in his rejection of Theism." On Smith and Gibbon see Cushing, p. 19: "Adam Smith often dined at Holbach's with Turgot and the economists; Gibbon also found his dinners agreeable, except for the dogmatism of the atheists."

13. In a June 13, 1814 letter to Thomas Law, Jefferson wrote that morality needs no religious foundation, and included Holbach along with Condorcet, D'Alembert and Diderot as atheists who were "among the most virtuous of men."

14. In a letter dated Oct. 8, 1768, Diderot wrote that a pedlar named Lécuyer, his wife, and an apprentice were all three arrested for selling *Christianisme dévoilé*, and that after being flogged and pilloried Lécuyer was sentenced to five years and the apprentice to nine years in the galleys, and Lécuyer's wife was institutionalized for life. See Cushing 1914, p. 40.

15. *Christianity Unveiled*, p. 27.

16. *Christianity Unveiled*, pp. 28-29.

17. Israel Zinberg, *The Berlin Haskalah* (1976, Ktav Publishing House. Translated from the Yiddish of 1937). This is the eighth volume in the English edition of Zinberg's *History of Jewish Literature*. Zinberg wrote in Yiddish this monumental history of Jewish literature from the tenth through the eighteenth century. The work was originally published in eight volumes at Vilna during the years 1929-1937. The English translation, in twelve volumes, was done by Bernard Martin with support from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

18. The first two chapters in Zinberg 1976 are devoted to Mendelssohn.

19. On Mendelssohn's decision to translate some of the Tanakh Zinberg 1976, p. 39, quotes from a letter that Mendelssohn wrote to a Christian friend, August von Hennings: "After much reflection, I have come to the conclusion that with the powers that remain to me I can benefit my own children and a significant part of my nation by giving them a good Bible translation with the proper commentary. *This will be the first step to enlightenment, from which my nation is, unfortunately, so far removed that one begins at times literally to despair of the future of the Jewish people.*" (Zinberg's italics).

20. See Rudolph Blitz, "The Religious Reforms of Joseph II (1780-1790) and their Economic Significance," *Journal of European Economic History* 18 (1989), pp. 583-594.

21. Cranfield 1965, p. 16.

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22. On all this see Cranfield 1965.
23. Cranfield 1965, p. 20.
24. On this see Dana Rabin, "The Jew Bill of 1753: Masculinity, Virility, and the Nation," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39 (2006), pp. 157-171.
25. For a detailed study of Gibbon's dependence on his predecessors, and his improvement on them, see Owen Chadwick, "Gibbon and the Church Historians," *Daedalus* 105 (1976), pp. 111-123.
26. For an analysis and appreciation of Tillemont's writings see David Jordan, "LeNain de Tillemont: Gibbon's 'sure-footed mule'," *Church History* 39 (1970), pp. 483-502. This is a masterful and beautifully written article (Jordan, at the University of Illinois at Chicago, went on to publish four books, one on Gibbon and three on French history).
27. Jordan 1970, p. 489.
28. Jordan 1970, p. 491.
29. Jordan 1970, p. 496.
30. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "Gibbon and the Publication of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* 1776-1976," *Journal of Law and Economics* 19 (1976), pp. 489-505.
31. Trevor-Roper 1976, p. 492: "His purpose ... was to create an altogether new kind of history, to put historical study on a new base, to give it a new philosophical dimension."
32. *Decline and Fall*, note 126 of Chapter 25.
33. From the opening paragraphs of Chapter 15, "Progress of the Christian Religion," of *Decline and Fall*.
34. Trevor-Roper 1976, p. 491.
35. Israel 2006, p. 43, enumerates about fifty such *philosophes* from the early and middle decades of the 18th century, half of whom wrote in French, the rest in Dutch, English, German and -rarely - Italian. According to Israel, "they broadly denied all miracles and revelations and rejected physico-theology, Lockean empiricism, and providential Deism."
36. This was pointed out by James Dye, "Hume and the American Deists on Miracles," a paper given at the "Hume and Eighteenth-Century America" conference held April 6-8, 1995, at Williamsburg, Virginia. Dye argued that in their denial of miracles American deists - especially Elihu Palmer, Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen - were largely independent of Hume. The text of Dye's presentation is available at <http://www.niu.edu/~jdye/miracles.html>
37. Paine, *Age of Reason*, Chapter 17.

38. Kant, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* (“The one possible basis for demonstrating God’s existence”), published in 1763.

39. “Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen.”

40. For an excellent overview of how the idea of progress developed and spread in the 18th and 19th centuries see John B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920).

41. The lecture was published. In its English translation it was titled *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*.

42. Riley 1918, p. 258, n. 29, noted that like other Freethinking societies in America and Europe, Phi Beta Kappa had its secrecy and mystery.