

The Enlightenment - who is criticising it and why

DAVID TRIBE

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APART from being a complex of concepts, the Enlightenment is an historical period. As such, it's subject to the following observations:

- names for historical periods are usually given by subsequent generations, and by scholars and opinion
- formers within these generations, and might have been generally unrecognisable by ordinary people at the time;
- these names represent a broad consensus of historians and are rarely if ever, universally accepted;
- there's considerable overlap, so each new period has forerunners in the previous periods and influences the subsequent period(s);
- publicity for anything significant - excluding sporting and artistic achievements - are usually given when it's widely attacked
- words can change their meanings to individuals, but a broad consensus exists in every time and place.

To illustrate the last observation, everyone has a tendency to emulate Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass (1871): "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less." Meaningful conversation, however, would be impossible if we all took this assertion literally. An example of confusion during the Enlightenment derives from Bishop Richard Watson's book, An Apology for the Bible (1796), and George III's comment: "Apology! I did not know that the Bible needed an apology."

To come to our topic, I'll begin with the definition given by the anonymous author of the entry for "The Enlightenment" in the 1990 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica Micropaedia; "A European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and man were synthesized into a worldview that gained wide assent and that instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and the celebration of reason, the power by which man understands the universe and improves his own condition. The goals of rational man were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness." So far so good. Unfortunately, the rest of this entry contains questionable assertions and a few mistakes.

These occur largely because the 17th-century Enlightenment was broadly different from the 18th-century one. In my essay "[On Consciousness](#)" in the current (Winter 2014) issue of [Australian Humanist](#), I encapsulate the difference: "The 17th century is also the start of the Enlightenment's association with British empiricists; the Enlightenment's 18th-century Age of Reason belongs to Franco-German rationalists. Empiricism relies on observation, comparison, experimentation and [a posteriori](#) (inductive) thought; rationalism depends on intuition, reflection, conceptualisation and [a priori](#) (deductive) thought. Confusingly, the great names of the Enlightenment are often described, or see themselves, as both materialists and immaterialists, so classification is challenging."

So much for a definition. Now to the guts of this paper: "Who is criticising it and why." Despite the Biblical assertion "Men loved darkness rather than light" (St John 3:19), virtually nobody admitted it and the Enlightenment, like motherhood, should have received universal approbation, sincere or not. But of course it hasn't, and one of the motivations for this seminar is a tacit recognition of this fact.

While some Humanists believe, as the British Humanist Association did in the 1960s and perhaps today, that we should work with and not against organised religion in all matters, ecclesiastical and social, it's an implacable critic of the Enlightenment and associated Humanist values. By "organised religion" I mean religious orthodoxy or fundamentalism, not genial and relatively dogma-free religious sects like modern Unitarianism and Universalism, which are regarded as part of the Humanist movement.

Religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism are found within all the world's religions, alongside their liberal wings, but I'll single out Roman Catholicism within Christianity as it has a clearly-defined hierarchical structure, is better known to Catholics and non-Catholics alike in Australia than other world religions are, and boasts an organisation approaching two millennia old. Indeed, this longevity is sometimes advanced as a reason why it must be true.

It's often assumed the RC Church is always on the side of right- wing, quasi- or overtly fascist regimes. The truth is that survival is the name of the game and the Church is happy - or at any rate content - to coexist with regimes of any and every ideology as long as they permit, and hopefully finance, its proselytising activities, especially among children. But, just as it knows its friends, it also knows its enemies, their agendas and consequences if successful. They too differ from time to time.

C2-16: moralistic sects critical of aspects of the creeds, canon law and the Biblical canon, and putting religious faith behind (good) works (the Church's magisterium (authority) would be undermined and many clerics defrocked); C16 and first 50 years of C17: Protestant Reformation, especially fundamentalist Protestants who said that all individuals had direct access to God and that purgatory wasn't Biblical (no place for priest craft and ultimately for the sacraments and the Church itself); late C16 and all of C17: rise of empirical science based on natural laws (implicit pantheism or deism and less need for the Bible and its interpreters, the priests); end of C17, all of C18 and early C19: explicit deism and some atheism (God not a granter or denier of prayers and no need for saints and relics with their custodial and fee-collecting priests, monks and nuns); end of C18 and intermittently during C19 and C20: revolutions in France (1789), European revolutions of 1830, 1848, 1870, 1905 and 1917, global colonial and post- colonial revolutions (ordinary people and their new leaders rejecting the domination of Church and State); all of

C19: "utopian socialism", with secular, albeit unsuccessful, communes (no use for priests); 2nd half of C19 and all of C20: Christian Socialism (predominantly Protestant) and preaching, if not practising, social morality, but fortunately for religion allowing large segments of the intelligentsia and the media to claim that our society is living on Christian moral capital (no sacramental role for priests); 2nd half of C18, all of C19 and first half of C20: Utilitarianism, advancing "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" through earthly endeavours (neglecting the greatest piety through priestly endeavours); 2nd half of C19 and C20 till 1990: "scientific socialism", called by the Vatican "godless communism" (no place for religion, and Marxists predicting that it would "wither away"); mid-C19 to today:

Secularism, originally associated with GJ Holyoake's this-worldly ethics, then with Charles Bradlaugh's atheism, republicanism and (Neo-)Malthusianism (birth control) and now with the separation of Church and State (secularity) (ethics deemed possible without dogmatic theology, atheism and probably republicanism rejecting religion, birth control not being called "embryonic murder", family planning preventing Roman Catholics from outbreeding other groups, and the separation of Church and State not accepting that the Church should dominate the State); latter C19 and intermittently to today:

Pragmatism, proclaiming that truth is "what works", not what the Bible and the Church preach); 1830 to mid-C20: Positivism and Logical Positivism (no place for otherworldly concerns); 2nd half of C20 and early C21: Postmodernism (emphasis on relativity, with its claim that one culture or belief is as good as any other and negating the RC Church's extra ecclesiam nulla salus (no salvation outside the Church)).

To sum up, the Church has now identified Secularism and Humanism, based on the Enlightenment values listed in the resolution passed the 2014 Council of Australian Humanist Societies Convention, as contributing to secularisation, with a decline in church-going, in single-minded belief in and adherence to Church doctrines, and in clerical vocations.

Apart from orthodox religion, the Enlightenment's natural enemy, there's another, perhaps surprising, critic: substantial segments of the scientific community. Their criticism is multi-faceted, chiefly empirical, but with a glint of politics. Since the 17th century philosophers have been debating whether human emotions or reason, however derived, is paramount in regulating behaviour.

Obviously, during the 18th-century Age of Reason the consensus was clear. But change loomed. The Romantic Movement at the end of the 18th century, Utilitarianism in the 19th, Existentialism in the 20th and Postmodernism at the beginning of the 21st put a premium on the emotions. Increasingly in academia Rationalism came under attack. Reason as a motivation of action proved hard to find in the Chaotic world of 20th- and 21st-century wars and civil wars. Of course there were always reasons, or rationalisations, for these conflicts, but the failure to resolve them through peaceful negotiation, compromise and collaboration was concerning.

Darwinism, with its concept of "the survival of the fittest", was seen to lead naturally to Social Darwinism, Eugenics and Economic Rationalism to the consternation of moral philosophers. But they too

were embarrassed by having to admit that Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) with its "invisible hand" of competition, was a professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University.

Conservative academics openly criticised the Enlightenment for its concentration on human rights to the neglect of human responsibilities. Outside academia, writers like myself were turning from the fashionable defence of freewill to the promotion of determinism.

In 1972 my Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society posited that the traditional sequence of awareness-will-memory should be reversed. Realists outside and inside academia increasingly conceded, as did the Academic Sceptics of ancient Greece, that we do have to reach day-to-day conclusions on the basis of received opinion without (apparently) undertaking an internal rational debate on what to do. In the 21st century, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) demonstrated that parts of the cerebral cortex that control motor activity become activated around half a second before those that control cognition (awareness of this activity).

Happily, studies of neural activity in sleep demonstrated a continuum of consciousness and "unconsciousness" and a way of reconciling rationalism with empiricism. Empirical science couldn't occur without the formulation of hypotheses to direct both observation and research, leading to the verification or falsification of assumptions. Thus, while our behaviour may be "impulsive" at the time it occurs, before then our rational mind has weighed up alternative actions and their likely consequences, so that for most of the time we behave sensibly and cooperatively.

In my Words and Ideas (2009), published by the Humanist Society of NSW, are listed twelve characteristics of the Enlightenment. Only four of these - formalism, secularism, Humanism and cosmopolitanism - are specifically named in the CAHS resolution, but close examination of it reveals all of them are implied. The Encyclopaedia Britannica entry referred to earlier concluded: "The high optimism that marked much of Enlightenment thought, however, survived as one of the movement's most enduring legacies: the belief that human history is a record of general progress." I'd like to end with Thomas Paine's declaration in Rights of Man Part I (1791): "My country is the world and my religion is to do good."

PLEASE NOTE:

I'd like everyone who obtains a copy of this address before it's given, as I may interpolate comments along the way, to refrain from reading it while I'm speaking. This isn't an ego trip, but recognition of the peculiarities of what psychologists "attention". It applies particularly to males.

David Tribe, Unit 12, 2B Wallaringa Avenue, Neutral Bay, NSW 2089