

EARTHLY POWERS

THE CLASH OF RELIGION
AND POLITICS IN EUROPE,
FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
TO THE GREAT WAR

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HarperCollins e-books

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INTRODUCTION

The simplest way to explain the aims of this book is by describing how it was first conceived, so as to reveal some of the alternative architectures that initially underpinned its surface. The intention was to discuss some notorious ‘political religions’, notably the civic cults of the Jacobins during the French Revolution, and the no less bizarre festivals and spectacles of the Bolsheviks, Fascists and National Socialists. These were meant to forge a sentimental community – in which emotional plangency was the norm – by refashioning space and time to envelop ‘the masses’ within a dominant ideology. This would involve wider discussion of related utopian projects, based on the creation of a ‘new man’ or ‘new woman’ from the old Adam, an exercise that presumed that human personality is as malleable as wet clay.

Some of this initial structure has been retained, which is why the book starts with the Enlightenment, when many of these projects assumed secular guises – for the notion of a ‘new man’ is surely related to Christian rebirth through baptism. However, so many important questions arose that the discussion of twentieth-century totalitarianisms had to be relegated to a future volume. In the present book, the final chapter merely introduces two harbingers of what was to re-emerge after the Great War, in the form of the extreme rightists Charles Maurras and Paul Anton de Lagarde, nineteenth-century prophets of the twentieth century’s stranger gods.

In the original scheme, the interval of more than a century between the French Revolution and modern totalitarianism would have been filled with some familiar ruminations on the symbolic world of nineteenth-century European nation states, their festivals, monuments, statues, myths and patriotic songs. In its thoroughness, this process of ‘nation-building’ echoed Europe’s conversion to Christianity during the Dark Ages, or more particularly the battle for hearts and minds during

the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, when indelible religious identities were formed.

This starting point, traces of which are to be found throughout this book, was reached after extended reading of those who worked in these fields before most of us were born. They were writing under difficult circumstances about the totalitarian regimes that had ruined their lives. It seems appropriate to begin with a homage that also identifies our main concerns, and then to work backwards towards remoter harbingers of the less familiar periods that are at the heart of this book.

Two of the most compelling, and widespread, ways of analysing the dictatorships of the twentieth century have been to compare them as ‘totalitarianisms’ or as ‘political religions’. An influential minority of scholars dislike the term ‘totalitarian’ for two reasons. They object that it makes the messy, fractious reality of power in these dictatorships too streamlined, as if they operated in accord with the technical drawings of a malign engineer. This commonplace criticism avoids the argument that Communism, Fascism and Nazism *aspired* to, and fantasised about, levels of control unprecedented in history’s autocracies and tyrannies, but which are familiar from the world of religion with its concerns with minds and rites. Critics do not even address the ways in which the totalitarian movements resembled Churches, or how, by transcending the separation of Church and state, they represented a reversion to ancient and primitive times when deity and ruler were one. Secondly, being on the liberal left themselves, such critics feel that their own subscription to progressive ideals is sullied whenever Communism, an offshoot of the Enlightenment and French Revolution, is associated with the predatory nihilism of National Socialism. However, since the BBC, the *Guardian* and *New York Times* routinely and rightly use the term ‘totalitarian’, this may be said to be a battle that has been lost except within parts of the Academy.¹

The term ‘political religion’ has a more complicated genesis, and has similarly met with scepticism from secular-minded academics, notably those who wish to evaporate the messianic features of early socialism and Marxism, roots they do not care to be reminded of.² The one licensed exception is the current fascination with the theatrical spaces of modern politics, a field which dovetails with many postmodern concerns with representations and symbols.³ Again, judging by the increasing currency of the term ‘political religion’, this is a battle that the academic liberal left are losing, at least in continental Europe, where

history is not so determinedly divorced from either philosophy or theology.⁴

The term ‘political religion’ has a more venerable history than many may imagine. It came into widespread use after 1917 to describe the regimes established by Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. The religious analogy was usually with orthodox or heterodox Christianity, although occasionally – as in the case of Bertrand Russell writing in 1920 about Bolshevism – it was with generic Islam.⁵ We need not tarry over Russell’s historically jejune ratiocinations. In the space of a single paragraph the Bolsheviks reminded him of anchorites in ancient Egypt and Cromwell’s Puritans. In a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell that revealed two of his silly prejudices, Russell also wrote that the Bolsheviks reminded him of ‘Americanised Jews’ and ‘a mixture of Sidney Webb and Rufus Isaacs’. He omitted that bizarre observation from the *New Republic* articles that he reconfigured for his not entirely worthless instant book.⁶

A century earlier the aristocratic scholar Alexis de Tocqueville had made a similar comparison with Islam when he wrote about the Jacobins during the French Revolution, in what many regard as the greatest study of these events yet written. The idea came to him after reading Schiller’s account of how early modern religious wars spilled across political boundaries, which reminded Tocqueville of the ideological struggle between Jacobins and counter-revolutionaries in late-eighteenth-century Europe. In a passage that reveals Tocqueville’s shifting thoughts he wrote:

Because the Revolution seemed to be striving for the regeneration of the human race even more than for the reform of France, it lit a passion which the most violent political revolutions have never before been able to produce. It inspired conversions and generated propaganda. Thus, in the end, it took on that appearance of a religious revolution which so astonished contemporaries. Or rather, it itself became a new kind of religion, an incomplete religion, it is true, without God, without ritual, and without life after death, but one which nevertheless, like Islam, flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs.⁷

By the 1930s, the term ‘political [or secular] religion’ was adopted by several thinkers in various countries. One of the earliest was the Expressionist writer Frank Werfel, husband of Alma Mahler, who was strongly attracted to Roman Catholicism. In a series of lectures in Germany in 1932,

Werfel described Communism and Nazism as ‘substitutes for religion’ and as ‘forms of beliefs that are anti-religious surrogates for religion and not merely political ideals’.⁸ Many of the 1930s writers we admire nowadays worked in rented rooms and with their worldly goods crammed into a suitcase. That erratic, urgent, pared-down quality, based on memories of libraries they had lost, is what recommends such books, in addition to their authors’ qualities of mind and imagination.

These thinkers include the Austrian historian Lucie Varga, the brilliant French sociologist Raymond Aron, the German Catholic journalist Fritz Gerlich, the Hungarian screenwriter René Fülöp-Miller, the Russian-Jewish exile Waldemar Gurian, and the Italian Catholic priest–politician Luigi Sturzo, who wrote astute critiques of the contemporary worship of class, state, race and nation. The American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr also produced influential analyses of the ‘new religion’ of Soviet Communism, suggesting that such an approach was an ecumenical one.⁹

For many of these people, ‘political religions’ were not merely academic. Gerlich, for example, was badly beaten in Munich’s Stadelheim prison, and then murdered in Dachau during the ‘Night of the Long Knives’ in June 1934, because of his searing journalistic criticisms of Nazism. As the author of a path-breaking account of Communist millenarianism, he would have met the same fate in Stalin’s Soviet paradise.

The most sustained use of the term ‘political religion’ was by a formidable scholar also writing with personal experience of one. As a young man, the Cologne-born scholar Eric Voegelin had published analyses of the erotic and violent dramas of Franz Wedekind. He won his first academic post in Vienna, on the eve of the 1938 Anschluss with Nazi Germany. This was inauspicious. He lost his job as a political science professor in the law department shortly afterwards, though he was neither Jewish nor a man of the left, as he later explained to perplexed American acquaintances. When the Gestapo began snooping around his private library, Voegelin suggested they confiscate Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* along with the *Communist Manifesto* as suspect literature. He decided to flee abroad. Encountering too many spiritual totalitarians among the liberals in East Coast Ivy League universities, he settled for the Hoover Institution at Stanford, which houses his papers, and then a quiet life at the State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where his collected works swelled to over thirty-four volumes.¹⁰

In 1930s Austria the austere Voegelin had become a marked man. An

early book had condemned the dogmas of race, while his second major publication had argued that whereas the inter-war Catholic authoritarian state of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg might have evolved into a democracy, there was no such possibility north of the border in Hitler's Germany.¹¹ A clear-eyed acknowledgement of evil as a real power in the world is one clue to Voegelin's thought:

When considering National Socialism from a religious standpoint, one should be able to proceed on the assumption that there is evil in the world and, moreover, that evil is not only a deficient mode of being, a negative element, but also a real substance and force that is effective in the world. Resistance against a satanical substance that is not only morally but also religiously evil can only be derived from an equally strong, religiously good force. One cannot fight a satanical force with morality and humanity alone.

Voegelin is a complicated thinker – to whom most ancient and many modern languages were familiar – with an expanding contemporary circle of admirers in Europe and America. His thought is expressed in theological terms, although his lectures and essays adopt a clearer and more polemical style. That obscurantism does not invalidate his use of the concept of 'political religions'. Raymond Aron used the analogous term 'secular religions', without subscribing to Voegelin's cosmic perspective on human affairs, hostility to the Enlightenment or 'pre-Reformation Christian' pessimism about human affairs.

Voegelin's aim was to show that Communism, Fascism and National Socialism were not simply the product of 'the stupidities of a couple of intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . [but] the cumulative effect of unsolved problems and shallow attempts at a solution over a millennium of Western history'.¹² In his initial stab at these problems, he ventured much further back in time. The crucial distinction he made in his short 1938 book *The Political Religions* was between 'world-transcendent' and 'world-immanent' religions, or in other words the false worship of earth-bound fragments of the former. It was the difference between a god and an idol. Voegelin embarked on a deep archaeological excavation. He burrowed down, so to speak, through Puritan Britain, to medieval Gnostic heresies, until he reached the Nile valley four thousand years ago.

The first 'world-immanent' religion was under pharaoh Amenotheps IV,

who in about 1376 BC introduced a new sun religion, declaring himself the son of the sun god Aton. He adopted the name Akhenaton. The phase passed; things reverted to normal. Next, Voegelin turned to the modern era in which the divine basis of political power was rejected, and Church and state gradually separated, but which also witnessed the 'sacralisation' of such collectives as race, state and nation. Put differently, medieval Christendom had been superseded by sovereign nations that ceased referring to divine right, while man sought meaning in the world, attaining ultimate knowledge of it through science. However, these new collectivities of race, state and nation also perpetuated the symbolic language that once linked political life on earth with the next world, including such terms as hierarchy and order, the community as 'church', a sense of collective chosenness, mission and purpose, the struggle between good and evil transmuted into secular terms, and so forth. In secularised forms, medieval millenarian Gnostic heresies contributed a narrower set of pathologies that reappeared as totalitarian ideologies and parties. Voegelin's book ended, where it began, with Akhenaton modernised as the sun-lit 'Führer' bursting through the clouds over Greater Germany: 'The god speaks only to the Führer, and the people are informed of his will through the mediation of the Führer.' Although these ideas may seem preciously remote from the hard thud of the jackboot, and rely upon the alleged identity of 'essences' that are thousands of years apart, it is important to recall that Voegelin interspersed them with powerful accounts of the delirious mass excitations and intoxications, or what in German is called the *Rausch*, of Communism, Fascism and Nazism that he had witnessed first hand:

The transition from rigid pride to merging into and flowing with fraternity is both active and passive; the soul wants to experience itself and does experience itself as an active element in breaking down resistance; and at the same time, it is driven and swept along by a flood, to which it only has to abandon itself. The soul is united with the fraternal flow of the world: 'And I was one. And the whole flowed' . . . The soul becomes depersonalised in the course of finding and unification, it frees itself completely of the cold ring of its own self, and grows beyond its own chilling smallness to become 'good and great'. By losing its own self it ascends to the grander reality of the people: 'I lost myself and found the people, the Reich.'¹³

In American exile, after a war spent arguing that there was something inherently wrong with his fellow Germans, Voegelin returned to the theme of Gnostic heresies as the key to understanding totalitarianism. Their elite salvific doctrines corresponded with the ideological certitudes of the totalitarians of his time. He used the phrase, typical of his writings, ‘radical immanentizing of the echaton’ to describe how class, nation, state or race forged a sense of sentimental community, giving spurious meaning to the chaos of existence through the substitution of a dream-world for reality. As a seventeenth-century Puritan *Glimpse of Sion’s Glory* (1641) promised the dispossessed: ‘You see that the Saints have very little now in this world; now they are the poorest and meanest of all; but when the adoption of the Sons of God comes in its fullness, then the world shall be theirs . . . Not only heaven shall be your kingdom, but the world shall be theirs . . . Not only heaven shall be your kingdom, but this world bodily.’¹⁴ Gnostic ideologies were also inherently violent, since there was nothing above or beyond them to limit their activities within the dream turned nightmare. There were no restraints. Voegelin wrote: ‘In the Gnostic dream world . . . nonrecognition of reality is the first principle. As a consequence, types of action that in the real world would be considered as morally insane because of the real effects that they have will be considered moral in the dream world because they intended an entirely different effect.’ Those dry, limpid observations encompassed the mass murders of Lenin and Stalin, and the Jewish Holocaust. The British scholar Norman Cohn and the French historian Alain Besançon would develop them in their respective studies of millenarian heretics and the Gnostic affinities of Leninism.¹⁵

The remarkable contribution of British intellectuals to the analysis of totalitarianism is routinely undervalued in favour of the wall-eyed many who worshipped ideas transformed into unadulterated power.¹⁶ We know too much about, for example, Sidney and Beatrice Webb – the admirers of Stalin who co-founded the London School of Economics – and too little about people who combated totalitarian dictatorships with the pen and their lives.

The English Catholic intellectual Christopher Dawson was not afraid to stand up to Nazi bullies when he encountered them. In 1932 he joined among others the historian Daniel Halévy and Stefan Zweig at a conference on ‘Europe’ in Rome. Speaking to an audience that included Mussolini and Hermann Göring, Dawson said:

The relatively benign Nationalism of the early Romantics paved the way for the fanaticism of the modern pan-racial theorists who subordinate civilisation to skull-measurements and who infuse an element of racial hatred into the political and economic rivalries of European peoples . . . If we were to subtract from German culture, for example, all the contributions made by men who were not of pure Nordic type, German culture would be incalculably impoverished.¹⁷

A few years later that process of racial excision and subtraction was German state policy. In his 1935 *Religion and Modern State*, Dawson traced the rise of the modern imperial state which sought to colonise areas of existence that ‘the statesmen of the past would no more have dared meddle with than with the course of the seasons or the movements of the stars’. This applied, Dawson claimed, to the benignly soft totalitarianism of the modern bureaucratic welfare state, as well as to the malignly hard police states of Communists and National Socialists. Politics replicated the absolutist pretensions of religion, enveloping ever wider and deeper areas of life in the political, simultaneously constricting the private. Like a Church, such movements orchestrated hysterical enthusiasm and mass sentimentality, while dictating morality and taste, and defining life’s ultimate meanings. Unlike Churches, they also tried to suppress religion itself, pushing Christianity into the hitherto unaccustomed role of defending democracy and pluralism. Using more accessible language than Voegelin, Dawson saw that:

this determination to build Jerusalem, at once and on the spot, is the very force which is responsible for the intolerance and violence of the new political order . . . if we believe that the Kingdom of Heaven can be established by political or economic measures – that it can be an earthly state – then we can hardly object to the claims of such a State to embrace the whole of life and to demand the total submission of the individual . . . there is a fundamental error in all this. That error is the ignoring of Original Sin and its consequences or rather identification of the Fall with some defective political or economic arrangement. If we could destroy the Capitalist system or the power of bankers or that of the Jews, everything in the garden would be lovely.¹⁸

While in 1938 Voegelin was wrestling with Akhenaton and Hitler, an altogether more practical mind was collecting impressions of Nazism derived from a spell as Berlin correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*. Frederick Voigt was an Anglo-German and Protestant graduate of Birkbeck College's German Department. He was also the journalist who exposed Trotsky's covert connivance with Weimar Germany's illegal rearmament with aircraft, poison gas and tanks. Transferred to Paris shortly before the advent of a Hitler government in 1933, he kept abreast of events in Germany with the help of clandestine correspondents, before returning to London as his paper's chief foreign correspondent in 1934. In that year, Voigt, who in the interim had become a Burkean neo-Tory, largely because he found the left's use of 'Fascism' flat, unimaginative and underwhelming, published a remarkable book called *Unto Caesar*. In one passage he compared totalitarianisms with religions:

We have referred to Marxism and National Socialism as secular religions. They are not opposites, but are fundamentally akin, in a religious as well as a secular sense. Both are messianic and socialistic. Both reject the Christian knowledge that all are under sin and both see in good and evil principles of class or race. Both are despotic in their methods and their mentality. Both have enthroned the modern Caesar, collective man, the implacable enemy of the individual soul. Both would render unto this Caesar the things which are God's. Both would make man master of his own destiny, establish the Kingdom of Heaven in this world. Neither will hear of any Kingdom that is not of this world.¹⁹

If we reformulate some of these points, we can see that a simple study of such 'political religions' as Jacobinism, Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism involves looking at the Christian world of representations that still informs much of our politics, and, in a wider sense, at the anthropological basis of the symbolic world of the nation state, the worker's movement, Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism. This means going deeper than a superficial contemporary concern with President George W. Bush's or Prime Minister Tony Blair's use of 'evil' and various messianic turns of phrase, and indeed beyond the constitutional worries about Church and state that arise over 'faith schools', Muslim headscarves or prayer breakfasts in the White House. By now, all the major figures began to appear blocked out on the canvas: political religions, utopians,

the 'new man', heresy and ideology, and so forth. At that point the equally important blank spaces between these figures began to become worrisome.

The notion of 'political religions' raises a further set of problems – specifically, the implicit assumption that they were surrogates for traditional religion in an age of increasing disbelief or doubt. Voegelin was certainly concerned to show that 'political religions' were a decadent product of secularisation, but he also believed they were an anthropological necessity, in which the religious 'instinct' would always out, merely with another content camouflaged in (symbolically related) guises. In short, he was updating the history of idolatry, in line with George Bernard Shaw's pithy comment that 'The savage bows down to idols of wood and stone; the civilised man to idols of flesh and blood.' In the land of Durkheim, the French sociologist Raymond Aron adopted a more functional approach, when he argued: 'I propose to call secular religions the doctrines that in the souls of contemporaries take the place of a vanished faith, and that locate humanity's salvation in this world, in the distant future, in the form of a social order that has to be created.'²⁰ This defines religion so broadly that it could encompass old graffiti about the pop star 'Eric Clapton is God' or fans' 'worship' of Manchester United football club. One of the most elusive subjects that this book all too briefly addresses is when, why and how such things as high art (or by implication mass sport) became sources of this-worldly redemption, offering spiritual consolation and refreshment in an age without God, within autonomous and segmented areas, of which religion has itself become a subdivision of 'new age' and psychotherapy in bookshops.²¹

This is why the history of European secularisation is carefully and repeatedly woven into this narrative. It was not a straightforward, linear process, resulting in the present age of nihilism, residually tepid Christianity and confused liberalism that works for many of us in Europe and on the two 'Blue' coasts of the USA. That is not to detract from the many virtues of the core 'Red' heartlands, which it is impossible to replicate in European conditions. This process came about in fits and starts, and for complex reasons, many stemming from liberalised religion rather than science, with significant regressions towards the 'great transcendencies' of the traditional society whose break-up begins this book. It happened at a different pace in each individual country, and the regions that comprised them.²² It was not the ever receding tide imagined by Matthew Arnold in his poem 'Dover Beach', but a movement of

complex currents washing over a craggy shore, where the rock pools have been constantly replenished.

For much of the time, people managed to juggle religious and secular values and views, much as nineteenth-century German socialist workers felt no incongruity in having images of their leader August Bebel and Field Marshal Moltke, the hero of the Franco-Prussian War, pinned to their walls. But there were subtle transformations. Educated people ceased to believe in the Day of Judgement and the fiery reality of hell, focusing on progress within a world whose end reached to infinity when the planet would disappear into the sun. That applies to many educated Christians too, who adopted what is called ‘cultural Protestantism’, combining a Christianity reduced to a code of ethics and stripped of allegedly implausible elements, together with militant anti-Catholicism and a broad range of cultural interests that spoke to a certain religiosity. Friedrich Nietzsche described the Protestant bourgeoisie of his time in these terms: ‘They feel themselves already fully occupied, these good people, be it by their business or by their pleasures, not to mention the “Fatherland” and the newspapers, and their “family duties”; it seems that they have no time whatever left for religion . . . they live too much apart and outside to feel even the necessity for a “for or against” in such matters.’²³

In a parallel world, the more intellectual leaders of the European labour movement similarly abandoned their own Edenic vision of heaven on earth, of happy workers striding along the Yellowbrick road to the Red sun. Their uneducated followers continued to subscribe to a revolutionary Judgement Day, in which the rich and powerful would be doomed, and an egalitarian version of Christian ethics, before, confronted by the resilience of capitalism, they too abandoned such apocalyptic revolutionary illusions in favour of the pragmatic amelioration of life on earth. That is why there is a parallel discussion of both Christian and socialist abandonment of the apocalyptic big bang of last days, in favour of the communitarian ethics on which so many European Christians and socialists find so much common ground nowadays.²⁴

If the great transcendencies have nowadays collapsed into the atomised and plural outlook of myriad individuals (which makes that condition sound more inviting than its reality), then could it be that ‘political religions’ represent some halfway stage in times when the symbolic world of Christianity was still a known reality, albeit challenged by secular creeds so untried that their dangers were not widely apparent? Few of us, after all, regard ‘science’ with the same uncritical esteem as people

living on the other side of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, although neither (very different event) should be regarded as the ultimate index of the human experience.²⁵

If the fitful, rather than inexorable, history of European secularisation is integral to this story, it also incorporates more classical concerns. These include the relationship between Church and state, the ‘culture wars’ fought between Christians, liberals and socialists, and how religious institutions, for better or worse, intervened or shaped political life. For much of the century or so discussed in this book, the latter involved a rearguard attempt to perpetuate the traditional alliance of ‘throne and altar’. As Chapter 4 shows, this reached its doctrinal zenith with the reactionary ideologues of a Restoration that in turn succumbed to liberal revolutions. This period also saw the beginnings of Catholic and Protestant involvement in the ‘Social Questions’ engendered by industrialisation, and the emergence of various forms of Christian Socialism on the political left and right.²⁶ That is why there is a lengthy account of the Churches’ accommodations with, and adjustments to, this new form of society, in which, it should be noted, they were clearly a force for good.

Turning from the modestly practical to the impossibly megalomaniac, the book also gives detailed attention to the utopian philosophical religions of the nineteenth century, from Saint-Simon, via Robert Owen, to Auguste Comte and Karl Marx. These projects mainly involved filling the void left by the decline in religion with the no less absolutist and totalising worship of humanity itself, although there was little ‘humanity’ evident when some of these ideas became a ghastly reality for hundreds of millions of people.²⁷ This necessitated a lengthy detour into the more outré fringes of sectarian terrorist violence in tsarist Russia. The Gadarene ‘devils’ so brilliantly evoked in fictional form by Dostoevsky, James and Conrad, whose insights are unrivalled, are still among and around us, even though the religious tradition that partly informs them is not our own. I am not a literary critic, and do not claim to have advanced this particular discussion beyond some excellent books by, among others, James Billington, Joseph Frank and Franco Venturi. Incredibly, what might have been regarded as an eccentric digression has assumed ghastly saliency in a world where religious fanatics crash hijacked aircraft into skyscrapers or saw off the heads of hostages in scenes too terrible to show on western television.²⁸

If much of this book consists of a discussion of the politics of religion

and the religion of politics, it also includes examples of civil religions, the area that is most potentially relevant to those who may think atomistic pluralism and multiculturalism have gone too far, which would include Germany, France and the Netherlands, and many people – outside the well-paid oligarchs of the race-relations industry – in the UK. We have actually been here before. It is very striking how talk of civil religions coincides with periods of intense crisis, of what Durkheim called ‘effervescence’ in a nation’s affairs. The term gained widespread currency in the 1970s, following a 1967 essay by the distinguished American sociologist Robert Bellah. It was no coincidence that he wrote about American ‘oneness’, election and messianic purpose at the time of alternative cultures, student protests and the divisive passions of the Vietnam War.²⁹ What did Bellah mean by civil religion?

If the messianic vision of the ‘city upon a hill’ derived from displaced English Puritans, the concept was Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s. In 1762 he notoriously advocated ‘a purely civil profession of faith . . . social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject’. Bellah was also influenced by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who thought that any human group is forged into a community by religious belief, a line of thought that acquired urgency as the Dreyfus Affair bitterly divided Catholic and secular France.³⁰ Bellah argued that this civil religion existed parallel to the Churches and official religious bodies of the modern USA. Its essence was the idea of America as a chosen nation, with a mission to uphold certain God-given principles and values. It was present, he claimed, in the Declaration of Independence of 1776, and in John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address: ‘With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.’

According to Bellah, this civil religion, consisting of beliefs, rituals, sacred spaces and symbols, ‘is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as [humans] can make it, and a light to all nations’. As the Great Seal of the United States proclaims: ‘annuit coeptis, novus ordo seclorum’ (‘He [God] gave his approval to these beginnings, a new world order’). At the heart of Washington DC, the major elements of this civil religion have been mightily and movingly rendered in stone, nowhere more so than in Arlington National Cemetery, with an eternal flame commemorating Kennedy himself. The addition of

the sheer black Vietnam War memorial or the federal government Holocaust Memorial Museum suggests the adaptability and flexibility of American genius. Even the high-technology Apollo moonlandings could be incorporated as ‘one small step for mankind’, the fate too of the disastrous Challenger mission that blew up in mid-air, prompting one of Ronald Reagan’s greatest speeches.³¹

Civil religion means the incorporation into political culture of a minimal religious reference, especially in societies, such as the USA, where there is a constitutional separation of Church and state. It also includes the creation of a civil ideology – such as secular republicanism – in countries, such as France, that aggressively seek to exclude religion from political life altogether. A monarch who is head of the state Church complicates understanding of this concept in Britain, where the notion seems alien. It is worth noting that Bellah did not conceive of his ‘civil religion’ as a form of American nationalism. Nor was he connected with the conservative thinker Leo Strauss, or the necessary ‘noble lies’ that appeal to neo-conservatives and so shock film-makers from the BBC even as they blithely compare the former with Islamist terrorist fanatics.³²

Bellah was certainly no conservative of any hue. He thought American civil religion obliged people to oppose the Vietnam War. At the end of his essay, he expressed the hope that what he described would become ‘simply part of a new civil religion of the world . . . A world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not as a denial of American civil religion. Indeed, such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of American itself.’³³

The challenge represented by international Islamic terrorism, with which some members of European domestic minorities are in varying degrees of sympathy, has made civil religions particularly pertinent in Europe. According to immigration minister Rita Verdonk, The Dutch government plans to send would-be immigrants a video including tulips and windmills, a biography of William of Orange, topless women sunbathers, and a homosexual wedding to convey the ‘essence’ of modern Dutch life. Commentators and policymakers have been asking the following questions. Can any nation state survive without a consensus on values that transcend special interests, and which are non-negotiable in the sense of ‘Here we stand’? Can a nation state survive that is only a legal and political shell, or a ‘market state’ for discrete ethnic or religious communities that share little by way of common

values other than use of the same currency? Can a society survive that is not the object of commitments to its core values or a focus for the fundamental identities of all its members? Should the indigenous multi-ethnic population also be encouraged to learn something of the values that immigrants are being obliged to adopt before becoming citizens? Should this incipient civil religion ignore the fact that Britain and Europe have been overwhelmingly Christian cultures for the last two millennia, something that surely shapes who they are? How do monarchies with subjects incorporate notions of citizenship derived from more recent republics?

The recent battles over how to acknowledge this in the draft European constitution indicate the problems involved. Even Aleksander Kwasniewski, the atheist president of Poland, remarked: 'There is no excuse for making references to ancient Greece and Rome, and to the Enlightenment, without making reference to the Christian values which are so important to the development of Europe.'³⁴ The way in which history is taught is significant here. Perhaps we need less exposure to the Second World War, and more on such themes as how Christianity came to be the dominant creed, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, relations between Church and state, and the deep causes of present-day secularity. Not least because, without any of this, entire reaches of our common culture will simply become inaccessible and there will be ghettos of the unassimilated many.³⁵

The British government has recently instituted public ceremonies for new 'citizens' although the British are in fact 'subjects' and one shudders at the thought of what a Dutch-style video might contain. In local town halls, people swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen and pledge 'loyalty to the United Kingdom and to respect its rights and freedoms', before adding, 'I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen.'³⁶ Strikingly, this very secular conception of the obligations of citizenship omits any reference to the constitutional position of the Queen as Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, a position her likely successor may modify in favour of 'Defender of the Faiths'. In a wider sense, new citizens will remain largely ignorant of the ways in which Christianity permeates our culture, whether in the streets named after such obscure saints as Elmo or Maur, or in house numbers that jump from 12a to 14. To take one example, the second-century

Syrian bishop Erasmus or Elmo was martyred by having his innards wound out on a windlass. For this reason he became the patron saint of mariners, giving his name to the phenomenon of ‘St Elmo’s fire’, the electrical effects on the mastheads of ships.³⁷

While many people are probably comfortable with the notion of civil religion, especially when, as in the US, it can reinvent itself in sensitive adaptation to non-Christian minorities, stereotypically through the substitution of ‘the holidays’ for Christmas, others wonder whether such a civil religion is necessary at all. In a detailed criticism of Bellah’s ideas, the Princeton theologian Richard Fenn has argued:

Secular societies have no need for an idol that reduces the uncertainty and complexity within or around itself. Such a society refuses to reduce its awareness of the stakes and the risks, of the opportunities and also of the dangers that come from existing in an open, pluralistic world of rival groups and ideals. Indeed, idolatry is the antithesis of the openness and flexibility that are required if societies are to encounter each other in a global field of influence and communication that remains open to suggestion from all quarters and open as well to the future.³⁸

Readers may wonder whether, writing before 11 September 2001, Professor Fenn imagined that global communication would involve his pluralistic groups, in this case largely consisting of deracinated Saudi Arabians, crashing aircraft into tall buildings in the name of a pathological Wahhabist strain within one of the world’s monotheistic religions. American readers may also baulk at the idea that their inclusively subtle civil religion has much to do with ‘idolatry’. It is actually an immensely sophisticated way of integrating a society constantly replenished by immigration. It is one of the many lessons Europeans, who desperately need immigrants too to counteract their demographic extinction, could learn from America.

The main civil religions discussed in this book are not the evanescent cults of the Jacobins and Directory, whose sudden eruption into the traditional religious world still seem as disturbing, jarring and perplexing as when the quaint streets of Paris seemed to Charles Dickens indelibly stained with blood. Nor were they the idiosyncratic schemes of the major utopians, whose following never rose above the cranky and tweedy crowded into back-street Comtean Temples of Humanity. Rather they were the myths and monuments of the classical European nation states

(and of Washington DC across the Atlantic) some of which – like Whitehall’s Cenotaph – are still profoundly moving, others – such as the giant Hermann the German in the Teutoburger Forest or the Victor Emmanuel I monument in Rome – bombastic and pretentious to our cooler tastes. However, in some key respects even these stone temples of the modern nation state were under-freighted with ambition. They were not concerned with defining good or evil or the making and unmaking of humanity, even if they provided an altar upon which more sinister idols were set up. Like the official days of national self-celebration, they were never universally respected or admired. The nineteenth-century limited state lacked the coercive means to clear the public space of any dissenting alternatives that was so characteristic of the Communist, Fascist and National Socialist states that arose within them. There were no parallel subcultures under Hitler or Stalin.

This brief introduction has staked out some of the overly ambitious ground that this book seeks to cover. It remains to mention a few remote harbingers of the 1930s thinkers we began with. One of them enjoyed some esteem among leading Bolsheviks before the Revolution. The religious–socialist Maxim Gorki introduced the exiled Lenin to a utopian tract called *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella when Lenin visited the writer at his villa on Capri for two weeks in 1908.³⁹ The Italian original of this had begun circulating in manuscript from 1602 onwards, but only in 1623 had a Latin translation been published, to be followed by endless editions. Although hostile to religious mysticism, Lenin was apparently so taken with Campanella’s vision of omnipresent slogans and visual propaganda (imagined by an author who had died in May 1639), that he wished to inscribe Campanella’s name on the refashioned Romanov Tricentennial Obelisk in Moscow. The connection is tenuous, but it serves the purposes of our discussion. Who was this early modern inspiration?

Born in 1568, Tommaso Campanella was a swarthy, warty-faced Calabrian Dominican friar who spent twenty-seven years in the dungeons of the citadels that loom above the gay shoreline of the Bay of Naples. A portrait shows a grim-looking fellow, which Campanella had every reason to be. The worst eight years’ confinement were spent chained up in a dank and slimy darkness, although the breaking point had been a continuous forty-hour session of appalling torture that involved a choice between dislocation of the arms and relaxing on to a chair covered in sharp spikes. He survived an ordeal designed to test

whether he was simulating insanity, for if he was mad he would not be burned as a heretic. Because of these grievous injuries Campanella would never be able to sit on a horse again.

The thirty-year-old Campanella had daringly crossed two lines. He had fallen foul of his own order, which, because of his obsession with magic, had charged him with such things as communicating with a demon under one of his fingernails. In 1594 he was arrested and tortured by the Holy Office, partly because he had discussed the faith with a converted Jew. In 1595 he was detained and tortured again on charges of heresy, an experience repeated in 1597 when he was denounced by a condemned Calabrian bandit. Undeterred by these horrors, in 1598 Campanella made the gravest mistake of his life. Although the details are obscure, insurgent bandits and peasants allegedly made use of the millenarian prophecies of various radical Dominican friars like Campanella in their bid to overthrow the Church and Spanish monarchy with the treasonable assistance of the Turkish fleet. Campanella was arrested, although whether he should be tried for heresy or sedition was a judicial confusion that saved his life.⁴⁰

Although such rich and powerful men as the Fuggers of Augsburg and the future emperor of Austria endeavoured to improve the conditions of Campanella's captivity, his extraordinary stream of writings were clearly produced in unimaginable circumstances whenever he could acquire pens, paper and the light of candle. He became Europe's first convict celebrity, an essential stop-over for intelligent tourists who could purchase tickets to visit the friar's cell.

Not the least bizarre aspect of this affair was that Campanella was a budding propagandist for both the papacy and the Spanish monarchy. He had written a tract called *Della monarchia di Spagna* shortly before his longest imprisonment. This was an elaborate blueprint for Spanish universal monarchy, including recommendations for the cultural 'hispanisation' of the world through the universalisation of 'honour'. Campanella was eventually released from the dungeons of Naples in 1626. After a month of liberty, he was rearrested and sent in chains by galley to Rome. He did not regain his freedom until 1629, by which time the opportunistic friar-sage had insinuated his way into the good offices of pope Urban VIII, who regarded him as an astrologer and poet. Campanella devised a magic room in the pope's palace, where aromas, candles and silks signified astrological forces that would alleviate his holiness's ailments. In 1633 Campanella learned that the authorities in Naples

were seeking his extradition for his role in further conspiracies. Heavily disguised, he fled to Marseilles, and then on to Paris. As a cross between Rip Van Winkle and an intellectual celebrity, Campanella soon moved in august circles, especially when his labile loyalties coincided with war between France and Spain. He was warmly received by Louis XIII – who remarked ‘Très bien venu’ – and granted the friar a pension. The ever itinerant Richelieu usually contrived not to pay it, and had a desperate Campanella perpetually at his heels.

Campanella set up his one-man authorial factory in the Dominican convent of the Jacobins in the Rue St Honoré. By the mid-1630s, he had exchanged his enthusiasm for the universal monarchy of the Habsburgs for that of the French. France, he now wrote, was to be the long arm of the pope. So favoured was the Calabrian friar that in 1638 Richelieu summoned him to draw up the astrological charts for a naked royal infant: the future Louis XIV. In one of the most brazen acts of authorial self-interest ever recorded, Campanella hoped that the future Sun King would build his fabled City of the Sun. He died in 1639 and was buried in the convent of the Jacobins. His monument fell victim in the 1790s to the de-Christianising fury of those who turned the Paris convent into the headquarters of their eponymous political club.⁴¹

Campanella was the first individual to refer to ‘political religions’, primarily as a result of his ambivalent response to the writings of Machiavelli. The Florentine thinker simultaneously divested the art of politics of traditional moral or religious restraints, while continuing to regard religious belief as an indispensable social cement, even if this involved lying about whether the poultry used in auguries to decide whether to go into battle had really been seen to peck by the priest-poultrymen.⁴² Machiavelli also contrasted the civic virtues which ancient cults encouraged with the Christianity of his own time:

the old religion [paganism] did not beatify men unless they were replete with worldly glory: army commanders, for instance, and rulers of republics. Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action. It has assigned as man’s highest good humility, abnegation, and contempt for mundane things, whereas the other identified it with magnanimity, bodily strength, and everything else that conduces to make men very bold. And if our religion demands that in you there be strength, what it asks for is strength to suffer rather than

strength to do bold things. This pattern of life, therefore, appears to have made the world weak, and to have handed it over as a prey to the wicked, who run it successfully and securely since they are well aware that the generality of men, with paradise for their goal, consider how best to bear, rather than how best to avenge, their injuries. But, though it looks as if the world were to become effeminate and as if heaven were powerless, this undoubtedly is due rather to the pusillanimity of those who have interpreted our religion in terms of laissez-faire, not in terms of virtù.⁴³

While Campanella agreed with Machiavelli that religion had an important binding function in societies, he contrived to be appalled by the amoral world of the Prince, though he was pretty amoral himself. The results of political amorality were all too apparent. This was not simply a matter of unscrupulous rulers who, for example, would murder anyone who got in their way, but of German princes who changed their religion as if changing a cloak, or the avarice the Spanish unleashed on America in the name of God. The advent of vicious inter-confessional strife in the wake of the sixteenth-century Reformation had also led to a redefinition of the meaning of 'religion' as an external reality divorced from fear and love of God. In the works of Machiavelli politics had slipped its transcendental moorings too; the result was that religion had become a political convenience rather than an end in itself. Instead of using religion to direct men towards God, rulers were using religion to advance worldly goals.⁴⁴ By contrast with Machiavelli's ground-breaking assertion of the autonomy of the political, Campanella thought that the state should be absorbed into the universal theocracy of the Roman Church, with Spanish or French universal monarchy as its secular arm. The state should encourage ceremonies in which priests would inculcate Christianity as the public religion.

Then there was Campanella's fantasy city. In his utopian dialogue, *The City of the Sun*, written in 1602, ultimate power resided with a supreme priest called 'the Metaphysician' or 'Sun' who would make all important decisions and act as supreme judge. Three other high priests called Power, Wisdom and Love (or Pon, Sin and Mor) would assist the Metaphysician. The ideal city was constructed within seven ascending concentric walls that were a stone reflection of the seven planets. A vast round temple rose within the highest ring. There was a huge celestial

globe on the sun-shaped altar. Every available wall space in the city was covered with depictions of the natural world, science and such moral exemplars as Moses, Alexander, Christ, Caesar and Mohamed.

Goods and life were held and lived in common. The adult inhabitants wore an overall which they could exchange for other costumes at various times of the year. Diet and sex were regulated, the latter performed in accordance with complex astrological calculations and the rules of stock-breeding since Campanella had once been impressed when he visited an aristocratic stud-farm. Homosexuality was proscribed. An initial warning to homosexuals involved being publicly paraded for two days with a shoe around the neck. Those who defaulted again faced death. Those who injured the republic, God or the ruling officials met a similar fate through burning or stoning. As Campanella had once confronted the stake, he thoughtfully provided the condemned with a package of gunpowder to shorten their ordeal.⁴⁵

The City of the Sun, or Solaria, could be called a proto-totalitarian environment, with a state religious cult. Its creed was based on confession and sacrifice. The Metaphysician conducted the latter, which involved winching a worthy person up to the temple dome to fast and suffer for twenty or thirty days in expiation of the sins of the community. Twenty-four priests lived, prayed and studied in the dome, only descending for medicinal sex. The entire population spent the time after communal dinner in singing and prayer, followed by dancing. There were public festivals, as the sun entered Aries, Cancer, Libra and Capricorn, as well as when the moon was full or new. The content of the public religion was a conflation of astrology, astronomy and Christianity.

Although there were other important contributions, from among others Thomas Hobbes, the themes which Campanella identified acquired renewed urgency when Europe was convulsed by the French Revolution. Christoph Martin Wieland was an Enlightened German scholar and writer who edited a periodical then called *Teutschen Merkur*. He moved in the orbit of Goethe at Weimar. Along with many of his contemporaries, Wieland welcomed the French Revolution as an opportunity to translate the principles of the Enlightenment into practice. Disillusionment soon set in since an imperialist tyranny had eventuated from the unlimited sovereignty of the people. He realised that democratic sovereignty was a 'million-headed beast', his own preference being for an enlightened aristocracy or monarchy. As a man of the Enlightenment, Wieland regarded religion as a private matter, and not

something that should be compelled by the state. He was especially appalled by what he called ‘a type of new political religion’, which was being ‘preached by [French generals] at the head of their armies’. They worshipped the idols ‘freedom and equality’ with a degree of intolerance that reminded Wieland of ‘Mohamed and the Theodosians’: ‘Whoever is not with them, is against them. Whoever fails to regard their concepts of freedom and equality as the only truths, is an enemy of the human race, or a reprehensible slave.’ That, as we shall see, was characteristic of most utopian projects, as it would be of the totalitarian regimes with which we started. With Wieland we have reached the approximate chronological and thematic starting point of the book in the mid-eighteenth century. Rather than anticipate what it says, we turn first to the traditional society that the Revolution erupted within and to the implementation of visions that, looked at soberly, were no stranger than the imaginings of an imprisoned seventeenth-century Dominican friar. That involves going to eighteenth-century France.⁴⁶



CHAPTER 1

Age of Reason, Age of Faith

I ELDEST DAUGHTER OF THE CHURCH

We begin with the illusory stability of a Church with venerable roots but whose spiritual dynamism arguably lay in the past too. Since the time of St Louis (1226–70) French kings have been ‘the most Christian’, a term extended to France itself. Since the reign of Philip the Fair (1285–1314), France was known as ‘the eldest daughter of the Church’ and the French as God’s chosen people. The Church and the French monarchy were linked in a hierarchy that reached down from God in His heavenly kingdom. Throne and altar were inseparable, with senior clerics omnipresent at solemn public occasions well into the French Revolution.¹

Higher clergy dominated the coronation ceremonies at Rheims. On the afternoon of 10 June 1774, Louis XVI attended vespers to prepare him for the following day’s long proceedings. The cathedral had already filled at four in the morning for ceremonies that commenced at six a.m. Louis took several oaths, silently praying as he carefully emphasised each word in Latin. He promised to protect the Church and to extirpate heretics, dipping his voice for this part since it did not accord with the sentiments of the late eighteenth century. The regalia were blessed and Louis was girded with the sword of Charlemagne, with which he was obliged to protect the Church, widows and orphans. He prostrated himself on a square of violet velvet, while the litanies of the saints were said over him. Kneeling before the aged archbishop la Roche-Aymon, Louis was anointed with six unctions, his gloves and ring were blessed, and he was handed Charlemagne’s sceptre. He could touch people for scrofula, which he did a few days later.

The coronation proper was attended by the massed peerage. As the crown was held just above Louis XVI's head, the archbishop proclaimed: 'May God crown you with the crown of glory and of justice . . . and you will come to the everlasting crown.' Sitting on his throne in his new blue robe with the fleur-de-lis, Louis was now the 'rex christianissimus', the most Christian King of the Church's 'eldest daughter' of France. The doors were opened to enable the people to see the new king. Birds were released and trumpets blew as the archbishop declaimed: 'Vivat rex in aeternum.' The ceremonies finished with a mass and the Te Deum.²

Clergy were very visible in eighteenth-century France, especially in the towns. To take one not untypical example, there were twelve hundred in Toulouse, a city of about fifty-three thousand people. In Angers, one in sixty of its thirty-four thousand inhabitants were clerics, not counting seminarians and the like. Clerics participated in all major public occasions, singing Te Deums to celebrate a royal birth or military victory; they interceded with God to avert man-made and natural disasters. Chaplains accompanied the fleets on dangerous voyages and administered the last rites to soldiers dying on the battlefields. Dedicated religious orders negotiated with pirates and Islamic rulers who had enslaved Christian captives. Unfortunates condemned to death received sacramental consolation even if they did not want it. Since we have been effectively deafened by ambient noise it is easy to forget that this was a sensitive auditory culture. The peal of church bells marked sacred days, invasions, fires and storms.³ The feasts of the Church gave the year articulation and meaning. The French clergy were not like Lutheran pastors in Frederick the Great's Prussia, who had become little more than state officials, but they had various quasi-governmental functions.⁴ In the countryside, priests relayed government pronouncements after the Sunday sermon, often literally interpreting the high French of officialdom into the low patois (or foreign languages such as German or Spanish) spoken by their parishioners. Priests recorded the most rudimentary information on the lives of the king's subjects. Religious orders virtually controlled education, with many future revolutionaries indebted to Jesuit or Oratorian schoolmasters for their easy Latinity and knowledge of the politics of Roman antiquity.

The clergy were responsible for setting the moral tone in society in general, with these functional merits of religion being blindingly obvious even to sceptics such as Voltaire. There was virtual unanimity on the need for Hell to stop the servants stealing the spoons: anyone who cast

doubt on the reality of eternal torment was certain to experience it.⁵ The clergy tried to enforce Sunday as a day of rest and prayer and the Lenten fast, fighting back the pernicious influence of village tavern-keepers who offered men rival consolations. They denounced games of chance, loose women and rotten literature. They had to walk a fine line between curbing practices that made the Church look ridiculous to smart opinion in an age so concerned with reconciling reason and revelation, and alienating their flocks by outlawing customs which made abstract belief meaningful and tangible to them.

Historians have made various attempts to test the depth of religious conviction, an exercise as precise as encountering warm and chilly areas while swimming in an ocean. There seems to have been an increase in bastards born to servants, judging by the numbers of foundlings left outside the church doors. This was probably more indicative of rising grain prices than what these servants believed. Likewise, more and more couples resorted to contraception, but this may have reflected an upward valuation of children. The diminution in testamentary demand for masses for the repose of one's soul may speak to changes in how people regarded their own deaths, with the Church failing to convince them of the imminence of hellfire. It has been equally well argued that, urban sophisticates apart, most people may have had a more intelligent and personal comprehension of their faith than at any time since the Middle Ages.⁶

The clerical Estate was self-administering and self-taxing. Its 130,000 members were exempt from taxation, instead voting 'free gifts', amounting to up to 12 per cent of their revenues, at its five-yearly General Assemblies to bellicose or spendthrift monarchs. Between 1715 and 1788 this gift amounted to 3,600,000 livres, rising to an annual average of 5,700,000 livres under Louis XVI. Land and tithes meant that the Church was immensely rich, although this wealth was so unevenly distributed as to cause widespread resentment. The incomes of the 135 bishops varied immensely, from ten thousand livres per annum to two hundred thousand. One bishop in 1789 was from a bourgeois background; the rest were aristocrats, 65 per cent of them from families whose nobility emerged in illustrious mists before the year 1400. Bishops from leading aristocratic dynasties started well up the income scale, making a couple of strategic leaps to achieve the big money on offer at Rheims or Strasbourg. They pursued a variety of vocations according to their class, inclinations and temperaments. A few, such as Bernis or Brienne,

continued the tradition of Mazarin, Richelieu and Fleury as first-rate administrators, diplomats and politicians. Brienne was sufficiently indistinguishable from his enlightened friends that in 1781, when his candidacy for promotion was being canvassed, Louis XVI famously averred 'that it was necessary that an archbishop of Paris should at least believe in God'.

Most bishops were efficient administrators of their dioceses, keeping their clergy up to the mark, or improving the local infrastructure with canals and roads. A few had the stereotypical vices of their class, preferring feasting, hunting or loose women, the stock-in-trade of anticlerical jibes over the centuries. Some of them never condescended to visit their dioceses, with a fifteen years' absence being a record many thought scandalous, although that did not mean they were not profitably employed, just that they did not like life in the provincial boonies or sticks. However, the majority organised diocesan seminaries or clerical conferences and routinely visited their clergy with sufficient investigative rigour as to be widely resented. The remainder of the six thousand or so higher clergy consisted of cathedral canons. These were aristocratic oligarchies, of say fifty canons per cathedral, whose function was to ensure that worship there was appropriately magnificent. This left them with much time on their hands for such hobbies as antiquarianism, botany, charity or visiting relatives, which, taken together with combined incomes of, say, the 3,500,000 livres that ninety canons shared at Chartres, caused envy.

Half the French clergy were regulars, that is, monks or nuns, indeed 60 to 70 per cent of regulars were women. After 1768, monks had to be over twenty-one, nuns aged over eighteen. There was a decline in entrance to the traditional orders, some of whose houses were inhabited by fewer than ten monks. Across eighteenth-century Europe monarchs cast a beady eye over religious orders whose wealth might be used to extend the network of parishes, provide education, once the monks had been converted into teachers, or boost the state's revenues in general. In France a commission on the regulars led to the suppression of eight orders, and the closure of 458 monasteries out of the three thousand or so in the country. The very wealthy abbeys and convents of France represented a supplementary source of income for aristocratic bishops. The bishopric of Orléans brought in forty-two thousand livres per annum, but two abbeys added a further sixty-five thousand livres to the bishop's income.⁷ Apart from being the source for bread doles to the

indigent, abbeys and convents were useful places to beach an illegitimate daughter or a libertine uncle. Many monks had abandoned habits for coats, stockings and the pleasures of very well-laid tables. Monks and nuns came in for the special scorn of the philosophes, the incipient intelligentsia of their day, although the regular clergy were rationalised and reformed during the late eighteenth century. Much eighteenth-century pornography was set in abbeys and convents. Indeed in French slang ‘abbaye’ is still a synonym for whorehouse. Pornography could also simultaneously be philosophy; notably the novel *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) in which the heroine is so appalled by a lascivious Jesuit that she abandons her faith and embarks on a life of copulation and discussions of ontology with an equally libidinous philosophic count. The anticlerical philosophe–pornographers had less to say about pious women who led exceptional lives as nurses in non-conventual communities, without whose ministrations the lives of the blind, foundlings, orphans, the sick and the elderly would have been unfathomably wretched.⁸

The sixty thousand parish curates or curés and their insecure and often indigent vicars were the real clerical workhorses, exempt from the opprobrium that enlightened opinion heaped on their sybaritic superiors and idle regulars. Since every candidate for priestly ordination had to have a minimum of a hundred livres independent income, these men were usually the sons of affluent artisans, manufacturers or such professional people as lawyers and notaries. The curés admonished, advised and consoled their parishioners, and as learned men brought a little agricultural or medical knowledge to places bereft of it. They promoted vaccination for smallpox, or lightning conductors on their village’s tallest structure. Dominique Chaix, a country cleric in the Gapençais who was too poor to own a horse, was an authority on alpine plants, which he sold to buy the occasional book. This background enabled him to practise herbal medicine. Almost imperceptibly the clergy’s role shifted from the care of souls to improving the brutish manners of their parishioners, although the artistry involved working with, rather than against, the grain of the old Adam. From here it was but a short step to offering opinions on what to do about such social issues as begging. Keeping parish records often led to an interest in local history, as they livened up their registers with events and happenings. The clergy were part of the intellectual culture of their time. Twenty-nine per cent of elite Academicians were clerics; and so were seven hundred of the twenty thousand freemasons, whose lodges were often the hubs of local intellectual

activity. By the eighteenth century many of them had quite considerable libraries, of a hundred books or more, the majority being liturgical manuals or collections of sermons rather than anything as unearthed as theology. Some of them were notorious drunkards or gluttons, although standards had markedly improved since the previous century, due to the institution of diocesan seminaries. Reports on pastoral visits and the records of diocesan courts in the seventeenth century revealed any number of drunken, brawling, whoring secular clerics; by 1720, the roll-call of such delinquents had fallen to 5 per cent of the total. In fact, most secular clergy had spent about sixteen months in a seminary, and took their Counter-Reformation inspired status as part of a strict hierarchy watched over by God-as-judge seriously.

The majority were overworked and underpaid, and were respected by many philosophes for their work with the poor, with whom the latter rarely made any acquaintance. Clerical incomes derived from tithes and ancillary sums from land or surplice fees. Where he did not hold tithing rights, the priest received a much more meagre handout from the bishop, chapter or monastery which did, called the 'portion congrue'. Reformers thought that fifteen hundred livres would represent a living commensurate with the dignity of the clerical office. While some received over four thousand livres, the majority had to make do with about eight hundred, and sometimes considerably less. Demands on their slender resources were constant. They had to maintain a housekeeper and a horse to reach outlying areas, to contribute to the pension of the previous incumbent, and to anyone seeking emergency sustenance. The number of ordinations fell, especially among young townsmen, the result being the creeping countrification of the parochial clergy. By 1770, some 70 per cent of the clergy were from villages or small country towns.⁹

II JESUITS, JANSENISTS AND PHILOSOPHES

We need to go back to the exalted heights where Church and state met. The French monarchy enjoyed a supremacy over the Church that was as real as that exercised by Henry VIII in England, but without the deeper social support that came with Protestant nationalist messianism. The French monarchy negotiated rather than seized these rights. Gallicanism, as it is known, was the complex of agreements and traditions that served

to limit or repulse the papacy's pretensions to power in France, beginning with the Concordat of Bologna in 1516 that enabled Francis I to nominate appointments to the most senior ecclesiastical positions. His successors never looked back. This monarchical ascendancy characterised several other Catholic countries in the eighteenth century. The substantial spectre of Henry VIII haunted the papacy's increasingly fraught dealings with an exceptionally independent-minded array of eighteenth-century Roman Catholic sovereigns. The popes had nothing to say anywhere about who should be king, that being a matter of dynastic lottery. By contrast, the ambassadors and crown cardinals of the major European Catholic powers could frustrate the election of candidates to the throne of St Peter, if they were thought unsympathetic to their respective national interests. In extreme circumstances they could exercise their right of veto.¹⁰ In France, the pope had no power to intervene between king and clergy, usually approving the appointment of abbots and bishops, who were routinely aristocratic beneficiaries of royal patronage. Publication of a papal bull on doctrinal questions was dependent upon royal approval.

The preceding two centuries had experienced terrible religious civil wars between Catholics and Protestants and international wars with a powerful religious dimension.¹¹ Memories of these conflicts haunted enlightened opinion, rather in the way that the ghosts of recent genocides help shape the contemporary imagination if not international conduct. As the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 brought major inter-state religious wars to an end, rulers still had to decide the fate of religious minorities within their own borders. In 1731 the archbishop of Salzburg scandalised Protestant Europe by giving all Protestants over twelve years of age eight days to pack up and go, which resulted in twenty thousand people being resettled by the Prussians.¹² The empress Maria Theresa also believed in confessional homogeneity and was prepared to deport Protestant 'heretics' to achieve it. But in England Christianity had ceased to be a compulsory society. Its state Church had a genius for accommodating a variety of opinions, while formal sanctions against religious dissenters were flouted with official connivance. This more tolerant atmosphere spread to what had been bastions of orthodoxy. Joseph II, Maria Theresa's heir, argued that 'with freedom of religion, one religion will remain, that of guiding all citizens alike to the welfare of the state. Without this approach we shall not save any greater number of souls, and we shall lose a great many more useful and essential people.' His

1781 Edict of Toleration allowed dissenters to worship privately, and Calvinists, Lutherans and Greek Orthodox Christians to have churches without steeples. Frederick the Great of Prussia thought that the best way of integrating his burgeoning territories and of enhancing their prosperity was to tolerate Jews, Catholics and Calvinist immigrants in his predominantly Lutheran polity, one of the reasons why there are so many French surnames in the Berlin telephone book.

In France the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly of public worship, but there were Lutherans in Alsace and a croissant-shaped scattering of Calvinists, stretching southwards from Poitou towards the Languedoc and then upwards again into the Dauphiné. The wealth of Protestant bankers, shipbuilders and traders in cities such as Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Marseilles and Nîmes, and their utility to the crown in raising its improbable loans, militated in favour of grudging toleration, provided Protestants were not too ostentatious in practising their faith. Wealth and religious difference combined were powerful incentives to resentment. The Edict of Toleration in 1787 legitimised Protestant marriages, inheritance and burial in exclusive or mixed cemeteries, while forbidding Protestants to worship in public. France's small Jewish community of forty thousand people consisted of Sephardim in places like Bordeaux and Carpentras or Paris, who hankered after integration, and yiddish-speaking Ashkenazis in Alsace, who wished to retain their communal independence. Enlightened opinion about the Jews ranged from Voltaire, who saw Judaism as the source of religious backwardness and fanaticism, to the abbé Grégoire who sought to 'reform' the Jews by opening up to them a range of professions including farming in return for their abandonment of their particularisms.

Censorship, lax in practice but all the more resented in theory, as well as ferocious blasphemy and sacrilege laws, sought to compel orthodoxy. The philosophes tended to highlight the most extreme cases, often omitting crucial details that might have modified their starkly contrived contrasts. In 1765 the chevalier François-Jean de la Barre was arraigned for defacing a crucifix on the bridge at Abbeville and various other instances of blasphemy and sacrilege, such as not doffing his hat to passing Capuchin friars on the ground that it was raining. The first charge did not stick, but that he had worn his hat in the presence of the sacrament, mocked priestly practices and had illicit books was proven. After the parlement of Paris confirmed his sentence, executioners spent twelve hours tormenting La Barre before striking off his head. In fact,

individual malice by a lay legal official had led to his prosecution, with the parlement of Paris going the whole way in order to counter the reputation for anticlericalism it had accrued from its vindictive pursuit of the Jesuits. Senior clerics had actually intervened to commute La Barre's sentence; the Assembly of French clergy requested clemency, and the papal nuncio said a year in jail would have sufficed.¹³

The Gallican Church faced several threats. They were live or latent, from within as well as from without. Across Europe Catholic rulers in the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, Portugal and Tuscany were bent on conforming 'their' respective Churches to their enlightened definitions of national interest. A sort of Reformation from above took place, driven by reason rather than Protestant theology. Under the emperor Joseph II, half the monasteries in Austria were suppressed, with the financial dividend passing to a central fund designed to increase and upgrade the secular clergy and to boost popular education. Joseph's brother Leopold carried out an equally sweeping reform programme in Tuscany, crushing the Inquisition and turning hospitals over to laymen.¹⁴

Despite the absence of a successful Protestant Reformation, the French Catholic Church experienced something similar in spirit. In response to the challenge of Protestantism, Catholic reformers, many of them Jesuits, had re-emphasised the efficacy of good works and priestly intercession. The Jesuits' mission was in the world, to which they brought an optimistic faith that could find a solution to any spiritual crisis. They were adaptable and modern. But to many people the Jesuits were suspect on several levels and not only in Protestant countries where they had long acquired quasi-demonic status as crafty, fanatical conspirators. Since a high proportion of French Jesuits were from Normandy, this image dovetailed with the Normans' proverbial reputation among Frenchmen for a certain guileful shiftiness. As is implicit in what follows, some of the paranoia that attaches to Jews and freemasons was also evident in the case of the Jesuits.

As the Counter-Reformation Church's most militant representatives, the Jesuits epitomised papal interference in national affairs. They were easy to portray as meddling foreigners, as when in his famed fifth *Provincial Letter* the seventeenth-century Jansenist mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal has his imaginary Jesuit interlocutor reel off the names of theologians he used to confound the Church Fathers. "They are very able and famous men," he said. "There is Villabos, Coninck, Llamas, Achoker, Dealkozer, Dellacruz, Vera-Cruz, Ugolin,

Tambourin, Fernandez, Martinez, Suarez, Henriquez, Vasquez, Lopez, Gomez, Sanchez, de Vechis, de Grassis, de Grassilis, de Pitigianis, de Graeis, Squilanti, Bizozeri, Barcola, de Bobadilla, Simancha, Perez de Lara, Aldretta, Lorca, de Scaria, Quaranta, Scophra, Pedrezza, Cabrezza, Bisbe, Dias, de Clavasio, Villagut, Adam a Manden, Iribarne Binsfeld, Volfangi a Vorberg, Vosthery, Strevesdorf.” “Oh Father!” I said, quite alarmed, “were all of these men Christians?” Of course, there was not a name readily identifiable as being French among them, a trick that would also be used by antisemites in subsequent centuries.¹⁵

As Pascal showed, the Jesuits’ fabled casuistry seemed like a convenience designed to exculpate the sins of the rich, who could leave the confessional for a masked ball without over-straining their consciences. The philosophes of the Enlightenment refined Pascal’s sceptical position on this issue. In his fifty-seventh *Persian Letter* Montesquieu has a confessor ‘dervish’ explain to an Usbek: ‘I am telling you the secrets of a trade in which I have spent my life, and explaining its finer points. There is a way of presenting everything, even things which seem the least promising.’¹⁶ Pornographers, such as the author of *Thérèse philosophe*, gave this a sexual twist, in the sense that the Jesuit villain of the story uses the Cartesian dichotomy of body and spirit to persuade a young woman to indulge his sadistic fantasies in order to liberate her spirit from the body he is flogging. The Jesuits were also too keen to educate the elites, in such collèges as Louis-le-Grand in Paris that had queues of bourgeois applicants keen to follow in the footsteps of Voltaire. The educational establishment in the hidebound universities did not like them. For all but six years between 1604 and 1764 the Jesuits provided all the confessors to the kings of France. Some of these men, like Louis XIV’s confessor, a Norman called Michel Le Tellier, actually looked sinister, or as someone remarked: ‘you’d have been scared if you met him in the corner of a wood.’ This tendency to haunt the corridors of power suggested untoward political influence. Physical proximity to power became ominous once disparate, and rather routine, Jesuit writings by the Italian Bellarmine and the Spaniards Suarez and Mariana justifying tyrannicide in the case of heretical rulers were said to have guided the hands of French assassins – from Ravailiac, who killed Henry IV, to Damiens whose knife went three inches into Louis XV, for which crime Damiens died an excruciatingly painful and protracted death.¹⁷

The Jesuits tried to prove that the servant Damiens had been motivated by quasi-republican ideas he had ingested in the houses of Jansenist

magistrates for whom he had worked; the magistrates responded by highlighting Damiens' two years as a servant at Louis-le-Grand, where the Jesuits had indoctrinated him for a mission designed to discredit their enemies in the parlements. If the Jesuits were accused of expanding their influence at home, overseas they were thought to be running their own satrapies. Happenings in exotic places further tarnished the image of the order in Europe. In China, Jesuit missionaries tried to incorporate as much Confucianism as possible to smooth the path of conversions. This outraged less doctrinally elastic missionaries, notably their old foes the Dominicans, and fuelled the Jesuits' European reputation for amoral expediency.

In faraway Paraguay, the Jesuits seemed to have created their own proto-totalitarian state, although the reality was that they were trying to subtract the indigenous Indians from the oppressions of their Creole masters. The local bishops were aggrieved since their writ did not run in these Reductions, which rumour claimed were an excuse secretly to mine precious metals. A 1750 treaty altering the borders between Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Latin America involved shifting some of the Indian settlements. They rebelled and the Jesuits were associated with their defiance. The Jesuits did not help their cause by calling the devastating 1755 Lisbon earthquake divine retribution upon the king of Portugal. An attempt to shoot king Joseph I in 1759 provided the Portuguese state with a pretext for outright war. The ruthless reforming ministry of the marquis of Pombal struck at the Jesuits in Portugal, deporting over a thousand Jesuits to the Papal States. The French Jesuits were the next to suffer when they were deemed corporately liable for debts accruing from ill-judged trading operations in the West Indies by a maverick member of the order. Thousands more French Jesuits joined their Portuguese brethren in exile. In Spain, the Jesuits were used as a scapegoat for riots against Charles III's attempts to force the Spanish to look like Frenchmen by wearing wigs under three-cornered hats. More shiploads of disconsolate Jesuits headed for Civita Vecchia, where the Pope refused to accommodate them. Further expulsions followed from Naples and the little duchy of Parma. Clement XIII balked at the clergy being pushed around by this upstart midget. Parma's decrees were declared null and void and its officials excommunicated. Bourbon armies occupied papal territories in response. They also engineered the election of a new pope, Clement XIV, whom they then prevailed upon to abolish the Jesuit order. Whenever the pope prevaricated in this course, a tough Spanish ambassador

reminded him that ‘Toothache can only be cured by extraction.’ On 21 July 1773 Clement XIV signed the brief *Dominus ac Redemptor* suppressing the order. Anticipating Stalin’s dictum by nearly two centuries, an English commentator observed that ‘The Pope has no fleet to support his Jesuits.’ Paradoxically, the only monarchs to extend a welcoming hand to the Jesuits were the Protestant Frederick the Great of Prussia and the Orthodox Catherine the Great of Russia, who valued the Jesuits’ role as teachers, or at least the part they might play in pacifying their Roman Catholic minorities.

These multiplying animosities, culminating in Catholic monarchs press-ganging the pope to suppress the order, explain why the Jansenists, the Jesuits’ main theological opponents within the Catholic Church, were regarded sympathetically. The seventeenth-century cardinal Giovanni Bona once described Jansenists as Catholics who disliked Jesuits. The future Benedict XIV thought that Jansenism was a ghost invented by the Jesuits. Jansenism began as a theological tendency and ended up as a quasi-political programme.

Jansenists were followers of the seventeenth-century Flemish divine Cornelius Jansen, who from 1636 until his death four years later was bishop of Ypres. He has been well described as a Catholic Lutheran. Jansen’s Augustinian views on predetermined damnation or salvation echoed the teachings of Calvin, but from within the Roman Catholic Church itself. Jansenists were like puritans within the Catholic fold, exclusive and severe people. Jansenism was an austere, rigorous creed that stressed individual study of the scriptures in the vernacular, the need for sincere contrition rather than mere fear of eternal damnation, the infrequency of Communion, and the remoteness of God from a concupiscent humanity. This set Jansenism on a collision course with baroquely lax Catholicism in which the Jesuits could allegedly finesse everything this way or that. Jansenism also mutated into a theory of Church government when it subsumed the ecclesiology of Edmund Richer, who regarded councils as the highest authority in the universal Church and argued that clerical synods should elect bishops. Christ had seventy-two disciples and not just the twelve apostles. Two writers, G. N. Maultrot and Henri Reymond, were responsible for developing Richerism into a coherent body of teaching on the dignity and rights of the lower clergy, whose essence was that a more democratic Church would be a more spiritually effective Church.¹⁸

Inevitably, these obscure theological issues attracted lay supporters so

that Jansenism acquired political overtones, both because it was popular among some of the lawyers in the parlements and because Jesuit and papal attempts to crush it could be construed as an assault on the historic rights of the Gallican Church. Jansenism in France was propagated by the devout Saint-Cyran and Antoine Arnaud, whose family had a history of battling with St Ignatius' foot soldiers. Disconcertingly, Jansenism attracted many people of immense talent, some of whom abandoned glittering secular careers to practise its solitary rigours, like the lawyer Antoine Le Maître. Jansenist genius included the mathematician Pascal, the playwright Racine and the painter Philippe de Champaigne. A decade-long vacancy in the Paris see and then an archbishop who sat on the fence enabled these doctrines to flourish among the Parisian clergy. Skilful Jansenist propaganda, notably Pascal's *Provincial Letters*, in which he poured mounting scorn on Jansenism's Jesuit opponents, was the jewel in a slew of polemics.¹⁹ Later, the formidable Jansenist propaganda machine was augmented by the newspaper *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* (Ecclesiastical News), a mine of dirt on the Jesuits. Of course, those characteristics that led intellectuals like Pascal to live on water and vegetables while wearing a spiked belt next to his skin may also have repelled lesser mortals by making the achievement of salvation seem hopeless.

The Jansenists' independence of mind and ramified network within sections of society preternaturally inclined to defend their privileges eventually galvanised Louis XIV into taking action against them. In 1709 the aged nuns of the austere fashionable suburban convent of Port-Royal, to which many eminent people had repaired to read and garden, were dispersed for refusing to abjure Jansenism. In 1711 the convent itself was obliterated and the bones of its three thousand former denizens disinterred and reburied in common graves to extinguish all memory of its existence. In 1713 Louis persuaded pope Clement XI to issue the bull *Unigenitus*, a comprehensive condemnation of 101 erroneous or heretical Jansenist propositions unearthed in the writings of Pasquier Quesnel. This simultaneously touched the nerve of Gallican autonomy, the zealously guarded prerogatives of the parlements and indeed the sympathies of plain people. The pronouncedly ascetic and intellectual faith of Jansenism had also begun to inspire popular convulsionaries who sought miraculous healing while shaking near the bones of François de Pâris, a devout Jansenist buried in the cemetery of Saint-Médard in a grim Parisian suburb. Some convulsionaries took things

further, having thin nails repeatedly driven through their hands and feet. The cemetery was forcibly closed in 1732. These convulsionaries put the established Church in an awkward position vis-à-vis the philosophes, for how would it manage to discredit 'heretical' miracles without discrediting miracles in general?

Between 1614 and 1789 France had no national representative institution capable of challenging the monarchy. However, densely meshed local, sectional and regional privileged bodies could obstruct it. The parlements were appeal courts staffed by venal office-holders that were somewhat less than parliaments and something more than mere courts of law as a modern Briton might understand them. Responsible for scrutinising royal legislation, they could remonstrate if they found it incompatible with existing law, until the king overrode their opposition in a ceremony called 'the bed of justice'. Clashes with the Crown were like an exquisite pas de deux passing from respectful remonstrances all the way to the ritual expulsion and temporary exile of the offending magistrates.²⁰

The parlements objected to the manner in which the bull *Unigenitus* had been forced upon the Church in violation of its Gallican privileges and procedures. They also suspected orthodox bishops of trying to exclude the parlements from any say in the affairs of the Church. Hence lay magistrates aggressively supported those Jansenist clerics who appealed against *Unigenitus*. In 1730 the government tried to force obedience by declaring *Unigenitus* a law of the state that all clergy were compelled to accept by taking an oath. Clergy who refused were to be denied the sacraments, while dying laymen had to produce a certificate of orthodoxy from the last priest from whom they had received absolution. The parlements took up the torch on behalf of those facing eternal damnation, forbidding parish priests to withhold the sacraments. The faith itself had become a matter of dispute between rival clerical factions that were attached to rival political camps.

A religious dispute had become highly political; an exceptionally austere creed was on the way to becoming the religion of opposition lawyers, although there would be a mere three Jansenists in the National Assembly. Louis XIV associated Jansenism with sedition, much as his English predecessors had done with Puritanism in a Protestant context. It was no coincidence that during these conflicts leading Jansenist lawyers claimed that these parlements were actually 'parliaments', allegedly coeval with the monarchy. This was historically fanciful since such institutions

were unknown in the times of Clovis or Charlemagne. It was but a short step to claiming that the parlements were the guardians, indeed the incarnation, of the nation's 'fundamental laws' which the monarchy had flouted, despite the fact that the guardian—magistrates had themselves purchased their own offices and were hardly paragons of virtue.

These religious quarrels, which dragged on for over a century with varying degrees of intensity, undermined the claim that the Bourbon monarchy had imposed religious peace after decades of confessional warfare. They were not as lucky as their English fellow monarchs in having a Church with enough rooms to contain a broad range of clerical opinion, while finding ways of exempting Nonconformists from the theoretical rigours of legislation. Although by 1789 these were dying quarrels, Jansenist ideas persisted, albeit transformed into ostensibly secular ideologies, into the Revolution. There had been no internally generated reform of the French Church. Now it would come from outside like a whirlwind.

III DARING TO KNOW

This more serious challenge to the Church coalesced from several existing tendencies and novel developments that are known as the Enlightenment. At the height of the parlements' battles with the Jesuits, the philosophe d'Alembert had the temerity to claim credit for their destruction. This outraged Jansenists, one of whom observed: 'What is a true Jesuit if not a disguised philosophe, and what is a philosophe if not a disguised Jesuit?' Actually, the Jansenists and philosophes had more in common than this suggests. There was not a great gulf between Jansenists who believed that God had turned away from a corrupt world and philosophical Deists who claimed that, in the absence of providential intervention after the initial act of creation, the natural world functioned like a clock according to laws which science might uncover.

By the 1740s an identifiable family of thinkers had emerged across Europe and North America. Modern secular intellectuals like to trace their lineage to its luminaries, although as Carl Becker implied in 1932 that may be to overlook the former's limitless credulity towards irrational creeds, not to speak of that of the philosophes of the eighteenth century who may have been less secular-minded than we or they imagine.

Up to the early eighteenth century writers either had another source of income, as aristocrats, clerics or men of affairs, or depended upon a wealthy patron if their means were modest. Voltaire had silk- and watch-manufacturing operations on his estate at Ferney in Lorraine and lent money at interest to individuals and governments. His cadaverous, toothless face also enabled him to take out multiple life annuities at favourable rates even though – to the chagrin of his actuaries – he lived to eighty-three.²¹

Neither of these types disappeared, but their ranks were swelled by people who lived by the pen, whether compiling entries for dictionaries and encyclopaedias, or journalism and translation. Literary contracts could be enforced at law, ensuring that pirate editions would not appear so freely. The business of writing became professional. While censorship still existed, it was not thought prudent to exercise it too heavy-handedly, and books could always be printed and smuggled in from Britain or the Netherlands after having been written by authors who lived anywhere and everywhere. Only the advent of the internet and ‘bloggers’ has released such subversive potential upon complacent oligarchies.

The controversy and esteem these writers enjoyed presupposed something called public opinion, semi-detached from, and poorly controlled by, the traditional sources of cultural and intellectual authority, such as the Court, the Church and the universities. Eventually, public opinion, figuratively depicted as enthroned and dispensing laurel leaves, would displace the actual authority of the person occupying the throne.²² Fame, the opinion of posterity, displaced the judgement of God. As Diderot wrote: ‘Posterity is to the philosopher what the next world is to the religious man.’ Academies, cafés, lodges and salons were where the intellectual action was, breeding grounds for a sort of lateral intellectual solidarity detached from the hierarchy represented by the Court. The authorities could, and did, try to meet like with like by hiring their own propagandists, but these had to compete in a market of rival ideas. Of course, the literary world had its own pecking order. Beneath the cosmopolitan and successful luminaries of the Enlightenment lay a subterranean world of literary journalists and hack writers, who vulgarised the ideas of the former, just as the major figures were very often doing no more than popularising the thought of their seventeenth-century British or Dutch precursors. Below them was an underworld of purveyors of outright libels and salacious gossip who may have done much to discredit established authority through smears, smut and scandal,

which resurfaced as a mania to cleanse, persecute and purify during the Revolution, that singular accomplishment of moralising lawyers, renegade priests and hack journalists.²³

The Enlightenment was described by Immanuel Kant as man's coming of age, a freeing of the mind from external controls. *Sapere aude* or 'dare to know' is as good a definition as any. It meant a belief in man's natural goodness, an optimistic faith in reason and a confidence in empirical research, whose enemies were political tyranny, religious fanaticism, moral hypocrisy and prejudice. Notwithstanding the existence of a Catholic Enlightenment, which was ready to reform abuses within the Church and to condemn superstition also with the aid of reason, it is undoubtedly the case that the philosophes often combined anti-clericalism (itself no invention of the eighteenth century) with Deism, materialism or in some cases atheism. While the clergy might have been at one with the philosophes on the need to extirpate popular superstition or to reform ecclesiastical institution, they could not easily accommodate the mocking tone and outright scepticism that Voltaire and others brought to their fundamental beliefs. This was difficult for Catholic apologists who often lacked the fervour and moralising self-righteousness that characterised opponents gripped by the belief that the winds of change were with them. One could try to rewrite a 'reasonable' Christianity, one of the central preoccupations of the age, but where did enlightened insistence on the natural goodness of mankind leave original sin, or science the Christian miracles? Comparative religion, as we would call it, also brought other dangers.

Most modern readers will find little shocking in the entry 'Abraham' in Voltaire's 1764 pocket *Philosophical Dictionary*: 'Abraham is one of the names famous in Asia Minor and in Arabia, like Thoth among the Egyptians, the first Zoroaster in Persia, Hercules in Greece, Orpheus in Thrace, Odin among the northern nations, and so many others whose fame is greater than the authenticity of their history.'²⁴ Actually, that flourish of anthropological erudition is deadly enough, before it delivers the sting in its tail by juxtaposing legend with 'history'.

As the products of recent centuries during which pagan antiquity was 'rediscovered', and of a fine classical education at the hands of Jesuit or Oratorian clerics, the philosophes were keen on those parts of the classical heritage that Christianity had discarded as surplus to doctrinal requirements.²⁵ Regarding nothing as being beyond rational scrutiny, except their own deepest prejudices, the philosophes were interested in

the construction and social functioning of religion. Several classical authors had taken an instrumental, utilitarian view of religion, merely going through the motions of cults, whose primary function was to integrate conquered peoples and to keep their own lower orders quiescent. As Gibbon put it: ‘The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.’²⁶

The Scots philosopher David Hume devoted his *Natural History of Religion*, published in 1757, to the social and psychological exploration of the origins of religious belief. It is worth reiterating what he had to say in this elegantly learned essay. Arguing that primitive polytheism preceded sophisticated monotheism, Hume claimed that ‘the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind’. These ‘gross apprehensions’ included:

the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature . . . men scrutinize, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

There were gods for everything, as each new event demanded a separate supernatural explanation. Some of these gods were allegorical personifications of vice and virtue; others the apotheosis of once living kings and heroes. Having no scriptures, ancient religions could cope with inconsistency, and were fundamentally tolerant. The emergence of one dominant ruler in human society was echoed by the elevation of one god above the host of lesser divinities who were in any case all too human. A remote God, supported by scriptural authority, encouraged the abasements of monks and persecutory intolerance. Hume did not see this as a simple progression. Since everything is ‘a flux and reflux’, the remoteness of this sole divinity from human concerns in turn led to worship of lesser gods: ‘The Virgin Mary, ere checked by the reformation, had proceeded, from being merely a good woman, to usurp

many attributes of the Almighty: God and St Nicholas go hand in hand, in all the prayers and petitions of the Muscovites.' All Gods, including the Judaeo-Christian God, combined mixed moral characteristics – here Hume cites a Catholic author who traduced Protestants by comparing them with anthropomorphising pagans: 'The grosser pagans contented themselves with divinising lust, incest, and adultery; but the predestinarian doctors have divinised cruelty, wrath, fury, vengeance, and all the blackest vices.' Likewise, formal religious zeal may not be incompatible with the grossest cruelty: 'it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere'. Family or friendship engender one set of moral obligations; some then add more austere virtues 'such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance, or integrity'. Religion is irrelevant to this: 'a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery'. Hume 'happily' made his escape 'into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy'.²⁷

Enlightened thought was haunted by the bloodshed of the Wars of Religion (1569–94). The desire, fanatically pursued, to eradicate the infamy of fanaticism was a reflection of these collective memories. Voltaire, who awoke from his sleep in a feverish state every anniversary of the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day, constantly contrasted what he imagined to be the reasonableness and toleration of Roman antiquity with the bloodshed and irrationalism of the succeeding Christian centuries. Here he is on the subject of 'martyrs':

Thinking to make the ancient Romans odious they made themselves ridiculous. Do you want good, well-attested barbarities; good, well-authenticated massacres; rivers of blood that really ran; fathers, mothers, husbands, women, children at the breast really butchered and piled up on each other? Persecuting monsters, seek these truths only in your annals: you will find them in the crusades against the Albigenians, in the massacres of Mérindol and Cabrières, in the appalling day of saint Bartholomew, in the Irish massacres, in the valleys of the Waldenses. It well becomes you, barbarians that you are, to impute extravagant cruelties to the best of emperors, you who have inundated Europe with blood, and covered it with dying bodies, to prove that it is possible to be in a thousand places at once, and that the pope can sell indulgences! Stop slandering the Romans, who gave you

your laws, and ask God's forgiveness for the abominations of your fathers.²⁸

The Revolution simplified these battle lines, in ways that were not especially typical of how sinuous Catholic apologists had reacted to the philosophes during the eighteenth century. One could argue by using the techniques of empirical scholarship to support biblical truths, or one could vacate that terrain, where the philosophes excelled, falling back instead to arguments based on faith, revelation and tradition.²⁹ Others of a less serene disposition pummelled the philosophes in their own books and tracts, in some respects providing the conceptual building blocks for what after 1789 would be the ideology of the conservative counter-revolution. Decades before the Revolution, anti-philosophes indiscriminately bundled their enemies together, accusing them of conspiring to subvert throne and altar and of undermining public morality. Some of these writers prophesied the onset of anarchy, and congratulated themselves when it duly reared its monstrous head. The anglomania of many leading philosophes, such as Voltaire, and their deference towards such British progenitors as Locke enabled their opponents to draw upon the poisoned well of Counter-Reformation anti-Protestant polemics, for example, when they portrayed the philosophes as a fanaticised cabal or sect of conspirators, a discourse easily adapted to antisemitism.³⁰

What the religious of the time found impossible was to explore what the philosophes owed to the Christian tradition without being conscious of it. Like the Christians, the philosophes ransacked the past to illustrate a story whose outcome they knew in advance. Christianity, with its Garden of Eden, the Fall and Judgement Day, replicated each man's individual passage from innocent infancy, via the vale of tears of middle years, and on to the uplands of resigned old age. Judgement Day would finally right real wrongs and the rich man would not easily pass through the eye of a needle. The philosophes made large claims to the empirical nature of their philosophical history. But in reality they transposed their own Garden of Eden on to the classical Golden Age, from which a mankind haunted by priests and demons was then expelled into the long night of the Middle Ages. Like the Christians they also wanted a happy ending, but could not believe in a transcendental heaven. In the new religion of humanity, heaven would be the perfect future state that a regenerated mankind would create through his own volition. The ultimate arbiter would no longer be a divine judge, but rather future genera-

tions of happier mankind vaguely defined as ‘posterity’. Self-fulfilment became a form of atonement, love of humanity a substitute for love of God.³¹

Conservative contemporaries were so traumatised by the French Revolution and its repercussions that they thought more about its relationship with the antecedent Enlightenment than they did about what the latter may have owed to religious modes of thinking. Because the Enlightenment preceded the Revolution, it was tempting to ascribe paternity. Counter-revolutionaries, such as the abbé Barruel, were quick to think along those lines, combining divine punishment of a decadent France with dark conspiracies by philosophes in the classical temples of the freemasons. Edmund Burke gave this literature a peculiarly British emphasis, though he shared many of the local assumptions of French counter-revolutionaries. Burke was not an unqualified supporter of the French ancien régime; he approved of the reforms it had undergone in 1787–8 and thought it had equipped itself for peaceful constitutional progress. After 1789 his key insight was to realise that ‘a theory concerning government may become as much a cause of fanaticism as a dogma in religion’.³² Here Burke’s thoughts drifted to an earlier English historical analogy. He drew upon an Anglican discourse about ‘enthusiasm’ as applied to the dissenting sectarians of the mid-seventeenth century. Although the following extract from Burke is, superficially speaking, a routine denunciation of the philosophes (in other circumstances Burke might have been one himself), it also draws upon the vocabulary of High Anglican disdain for the religious precursors of modern ideological ‘fanatics’:

The literary cabal had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal which hitherto had been discovered only in the propagators of some system of piety. They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence, by an easy progress, with spirit of persecution according to their means. What was not to be done towards their great end by any direct or immediate act, might be wrought by a longer process through the medium of opinion. To command that opinion, the first step is to establish dominion over those who direct it. They contrived to possess themselves, with great method and perseverance, of all the

avenues to literary fame . . . These Atheistical fathers have a bigotry of their own; and they have learnt to talk against monks with the spirit of a monk. But in some things they are men of the world. The resources of intrigue are called in to supply the defects of argument and wit. To this system of literary monopoly was joined an unremitting industry to blacken and discredit in every way, and by every means, all those who did not hold to their faction. To those who have observed the spirit of their conduct, it has long been clear that nothing was wanted but the power of carrying the intolerance of the tongue and of the pen into a persecution which would strike at property, liberty, and life.³³

Writing from beyond the Revolution, its greatest historian Alexis de Tocqueville was similarly appalled by the dangerous hubris of the secular intelligentsia:

Every public passion was thus wrapped up in philosophy; political life was violently driven back into literature, and writers, taking in hand the direction of opinion, found themselves for a moment taking the place that party leaders usually hold in free countries . . . Above the real society . . . there was slowly built an imaginary society in which everything seemed simple and coordinated, uniform, equitable, and in accord with reason. Gradually the imagination of the crowd deserted the former to concentrate on the latter. One lost interest in what was, in order to think about what could be, and finally one lived mentally in that ideal city the writers had built.³⁴

He added: ‘What is merit in a writer is sometimes vice in a statesman, and the same things which have often made lovely books can lead to great revolutions.’

This may have been to exaggerate the lines of division and the importance of the philosophes. To begin with, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, clergy and laity shared a taste for the same authors. In 1778 Marie Antoinette attended the opening night of Voltaire’s last play, doubtless disappointing the gaggle of clerical demonstrators. Her consort, Louis XVI, read Montesquieu and Voltaire, along with Corneille and La Fontaine, in the Temple where he was imprisoned. Clerics were avid readers of the philosophes, and mixed easily in the provincial

academies and masonic lodges, which, together with salons, were the institutional hubs of enlightenment. The Jesuit monthly *Journal de Trévoux* included admiring and intelligent reviews of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, archly indicating which entries had been lifted from a Jesuit encyclopaedia and a Jesuit philosopher without appropriate acknowledgement. Counter-Enlightenment authors were not slow to adopt Rousseau when it came to challenging the icy supremacy of reason over faith and feeling.

Any political movement, including those that seek to abolish the past, sooner or later seeks to fabricate a lineage. The French Revolution was no exception. The Revolution adopted Voltaire and Rousseau as its intellectual parents, translating their earthly remains to the Pantheon, in 1791 and 1794 respectively, with elaborate ceremonies that echoed religious processions. One can see this crude appropriation in low-grade revolutionary catechisms:

Question: Who are the men who by their writings prepared the revolution?

Answer: Helvétius, Mably, J. J. Rousseau, Voltaire, and Franklin.

Question: What do you call these great men?

Answer: Philosophers.

Question: What does that word mean?

Answer: Sage, friend of humanity.³⁵

In politics, the philosophes were interested in enlightened reform rather than violent revolution. Since Voltaire, friend of monarchs, had written supporting chancellor Maupeou's 1771 'coup' against the parlements, and was contemptuous of literary hacks, it is improbable he would have viewed the brief rise to power of the pockmarked gargoyle Marat with equanimity. He had a very exclusive view of who might be safely enlightened. Writing to Frederick the Great he argued: 'Your Majesty will do the human race an eternal service in extirpating this infamous superstition [he meant Christianity] I do not say among the rabble, who are not worthy of being enlightened and who are apt for every yoke; I say among the well-bred, among those who wish to think.'³⁶ The philosophes wanted rulers to see the world as they saw it and to act accordingly although their role was as unimpressive as that of most intellectuals in politics. Anne-Robert Turgot, the only physiocrat, the economist sub-species of philosophe, briefly to exercise political power, triggered so-called flour wars after the institution of a free market in grain led to massive price rises.³⁷

In a sense, the philosophes were the beneficiaries of those Calvinists and Jansenists who had propelled an infinitely good God further away from this corrupt world. The latter became autonomous, observable and potentially malleable, its links with the celestial hierarchy attenuated to invisibility.³⁸ Some philosophes thought that their ideas could only be implemented in small city-state republics, others by enlightened rulers, or on the vast blank canvas of North America. The philosophes were divided about whether it would be best to constrain monarchical power to lessen the likelihood of despotism and tyranny, or to increase it so as to brush aside vested interests, such as the aristocracy, Church or guilds, that frustrated their modernising reforms. Only two issues brought complete unanimity and promised worthwhile reforms: the need for religious toleration, and the need for a less barbaric criminal law not reliant upon judicial torture or cruel and unnecessary punishments.

The assault on the Church served to undermine one of the essential supports of monarchical authority, namely the supernatural element we began with. Incessant criticism, some of it well below the belt, led to gradual disenchantment with both throne and altar. Louis XIV had filled France with a huge sun-lit cloud of power. Neither Louis XV nor Louis XVI could occupy that space. A family monarchy in which children were slow to appear, while the king required sexual counselling by the Austrian emperor to connect penetration with ejaculation, was a contradiction in terms. A pornographer's delight too, for where did the Austrian queen satisfy her allegedly voracious carnal appetites? Over time, the very language of political debate shifted, so that notions like 'the nation' came to be contested between a patriotic family monarchy (the alternative to Louis XIV's cosmic display of power) and patriotic opinion as embodied in the embattled parlements, vying to be that nation's sole incarnation.

These were the incipient battle lines as a bankrupt monarchy was forced to resort to an Estates General after the failure of short-term solutions and a 175-year interval. Almost effortlessly, much of the Gallican Church switched tracks, like a train gliding over points, aligning itself with the moderate constitutional revolution. But the irreconcilable residue was permanently identified with counter-revolution, an identification which led to spoliation and persecution as moderation ceased to be the Revolution's watchword. Even those clergy who sought to collaborate with the Revolution were eventually persecuted too. As the Revolution embarked upon building a secular republic as the prelude to the

messianic regeneration of mankind, a Church whose own history provided the only known exemplars for the compulsory imposition of a creed posited upon 'rebirth' was almost destroyed. This remarkable turn of events will occupy the following two chapters. The first looks at the Church during the opening phases of the Revolution; the second at the attempt to convert the Revolution itself into a form of religion. The results were disastrous, leaving the Church deeply hostile to any future invocations of equality, liberty, nation or people.