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# The World We Want

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*How and Why the Ideals  
of the Enlightenment  
Still Elude Us*

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## Introduction

The Enlightenment is the only historical period to be defined by a philosophical movement, and so philosophers can perhaps be excused for being a bit misty-eyed about it. However, Enlightenment philosophers were also more practical than many people realize. Ernst Cassirer, in his classic study *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, writes,

The fundamental tendency and the main endeavor of the philosophy of the Enlightenment are not to observe life and to portray it in terms of reflective thought. This philosophy believes rather in an original spontaneity of thought; it attributes to thought not merely an imitative function but the power and the task of shaping life itself. Thought consists not only in analyzing and dissecting, but in actually bringing about the order of things which it conceives as necessary, so that by this act of fulfillment it may demonstrate its own reality and truth.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Enlightenment philosophers also sought not merely to interpret the world but also to change it—indeed, they believed that it was their duty to do so. But although some of them were not shy in acknowledging that “Enlightenment is justly accused as the cause of revolutions,”<sup>2</sup> most Enlightenment intellectuals are correctly read as advocating peaceful change through free inquiry, public discussion, and institutional reform.

These latter strategies both overlap with and differ from “piecemeal social engineering.” Piecemeal social engineering shares with its more radical utopian and authoritarian relatives a strong desire to improve the human condition through intentional societal development and change, but unlike them it is always constrained by respect for basic human rights and democratic processes.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, although commentators often claim to have located the origins of social engineering (piecemeal or otherwise) in the Enlightenment,<sup>4</sup> the term “social engineering” is itself out of place here. No application of any specific “engineering” technique to society was advocated by any major Enlightenment intellectual. Even if one defines “social engineering” more generically as the attempt to improve human society by means of “the scientific method,” the label is still inappropriate (not to mention vague), for it is inaccurate to call Enlightenment social reform efforts “scientific.” At bottom, their reform efforts were motivated by moral rather than scientific concerns: their goal was not an engineered society administered by a technocratic state, but increased freedom and equality for all human beings. What is appropriate is an acknowledgment that Enlightenment philosophers and intellectuals were strongly committed to “the task of shaping life itself” and “actually bringing about the order of things” which they conceived as necessary, believed that specific institutions and social practices play key roles in shaping human lives, were convinced that initiating certain fundamental changes in human institutions and social practices would facilitate a deeper moral transformation in human life, and held that it was humanity’s duty to undertake these changes. Friends as well as foes of the Enlightenment tend to underappreciate these core commitments, plumping instead for sweeping statements and grandiose formulas that often have no demonstrable connection to anything Enlightenment intellectuals actually said or believed. Thus from one side we are informed that the Enlightenment’s professed universalism was in fact merely a cloak for Western hegemony and cultural imperialism,<sup>5</sup> while from another we are comforted with the news that economic globalization and contemporary democratization represent the fulfillment of Enlightenment hopes.

Indeed, in many intellectual circles at present discussion of the Enlightenment has sunk to the level of derogatory clichés. The influential critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, decreed that “Enlightenment is totalitarian” and that it ushered in “the administered world.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Michel Foucault concluded that Enlightenment efforts at social reform have led not to increased freedom but to the carceral society, a condition where the individual is “the effect of a subjection,” “the effect and instrument of a political anatomy.”<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, entered the fray later, proclaiming that “the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality” not only failed but “had to fail”;<sup>8</sup> and soon countless critics joined the chorus, denouncing alleged Enlightenment sins of racism, Eurocentrism, sexism, and colonialism. These sins, alas, are sometimes all too real, but the present fixation on them has often obscured what is most important and compelling about the Enlightenment.

The present work is written from a much different perspective, one closer (in certain respects) to that of earlier scholars such as Cassirer, who, shortly before the Nazis exiled him from Germany, tried valiantly to silence the slogan of the “shallow Enlightenment” that was then also in vogue. “Instead of assuming a derogatory air,” Cassirer wrote, “we must take courage and measure our powers against those of the age of Enlightenment, and thus find a proper adjustment. . . . We must find a way not only to see that age in its own shape but to release again those original forces which brought forth and molded this shape.”<sup>9</sup> We today also need to find a way to see the Enlightenment in its own shape, as well as to try to recapture some sense of its hope for the future of humanity.

Although the connections may not be immediately apparent, this study is an outgrowth of my earlier books *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* and *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. In the latter work, I argued that an important and under-explored part of Kant’s practical philosophy concerns the empirical study of human nature and culture, and that an integral aspect of Kant’s empirical study of human beings deals with the influence of social and cultural institutions on human moral character. In the present project I am casting my net much more widely, in part because I have become convinced that the Kant I focused on in *Kant’s Impure Ethics* is in some respects a less original Kant than I had earlier assumed. In arguing that the growth and spread of universal education, religious tolerance, republican government and the rule of law, free trade between nations, and the establishment of an international justice system would all jointly contribute to humanity’s

eventual moral transformation, Kant was clearly not a lone voice but part of a much larger intellectual ensemble. By means of his philosophy of history Kant injected more systematicity into these Enlightenment social reform projects, and in his practical philosophy (particularly in what he called “the second part of morals”) he also gave them a more robust rationale. But the proposals themselves do not originate with him. Kant arrives on the intellectual scene toward the end of the Enlightenment, and—at least in his applied practical philosophy, if not in his theoretical—he is integrating a wide number of earlier proposals made by other writers working not only in Germany, but also in France, Britain, the United States, and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

In *Morality and Moral Theory*, I defended an alternative conception of moral theory, one that owes several debts to contemporary virtue ethics and antitheory criticisms of formalist programs in moral theory, but one that also (or so I argued) more accurately reflects the actual moral theories of Aristotle and Kant. My goal was both to demonstrate the present need for more empirically informed moral theories and to show that the best moral theories of the past were in fact more empirically informed than their contemporary commentators and critics often make them out to be.<sup>11</sup> The present work is not directly a contribution to ethical theory construction, though in its concern with applied issues of moral development and the challenges of translating moral ideals into reality, it does offer an indirect contribution to theory. Indeed, part of what intrigues me about Enlightenment philosophers and intellectuals is precisely the extent to which they were able to overcome foundational and methodological differences in philosophy and moral theory and to reach agreement on more concrete issues of social and cultural reform. But in the present study I do continue my earlier efforts to show that classical moral philosophers were very much concerned both with how to make their theories efficacious and with how to change the world. That they are seldom understood in this way at present is more a function of contemporary philosophical tastes and interests than of what they actually wrote.

In the present work I examine critically a widely shared Enlightenment strategy for the gradual realization of basic social and moral ideals. One of my goals is to demonstrate certain shortcomings of this strategy, and here I employ a two-pronged method that focuses on means as well as on ends. In some cases, the means employed toward the realization of the ends are shown to be ineffective; in other cases, the ends themselves are called into question. A second goal is simply to register accurately the large gap that exists between Enlightenment ideals and contemporary realities, a gap

whose existence is often ignored or denied in many recent polemics about the Enlightenment. The pursuit of these two goals opens up additional questions as well: What are the causes of the large gap between Enlightenment ideals and present realities? How can we avoid past mistakes in this area? In cases where the means advocated by Enlightenment intellectuals are inefficacious, what more appropriate means for the realization of their ideals are available to us? And what remains in these ideals that we today need to recover and reassert?

*The World We Want*, while philosophically motivated, also involves a fair amount of historical and empirical research. The latter, though consciously mundane (my primary aim is not to uncover new facts, but to draw attention to, and then to reinterpret, certain well-established facts in making an argument about our failure to realize Enlightenment ideals), is needed at present. Philosophy, or at least the kind of philosophy undertaken here, “must involve more than abstract argument . . . it must engage itself in history. In this and other respects, philosophy cannot be too pure if it really wants to do what it sets out to do.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly any philosophical assessment of the legacy of the Enlightenment should engage itself in history, though in fact few such assessments have actually done so.

I examine actual Enlightenment proposals for cultural and institutional change, with the benefit of two centuries’ hindsight.<sup>13</sup> What specific proposals for cultural and institutional change did Enlightenment intellectuals put forward? How did they think their proposals were instrumental to the moral future they envisaged? To what extent are these proposals still appropriate to our own historical experience? How is our present world both similar to and different from the world they wanted? How and why do the ideals of the Enlightenment still elude us?

I do not intend to respond in detail to the attacks on Enlightenment ideals made by critics, in part because others have already done so, but also because, as noted earlier, most of these attacks are based on caricatures of Enlightenment ideals and are thus merely elaborate versions of a straw man argument. Rather, this study aims at an analysis and evaluation of the Enlightenment’s actual goals, and also of the means advocated for achieving these goals. I believe that it is important at present to reexamine and rearticulate what the Enlightenment’s hopes for the future actually were, in part because these hopes have often been distorted, and in part because by reflecting on them we are also led to give more thought to our own hopes for the future. Although I do endorse most of the Enlightenment’s hopes (indeed, I believe that a strong majority of people do, once accurate versions of them are presented), in the present work I speak primarily not



as an advocate of Enlightenment ideals but as an analyst and evaluator of them. What were these ideals? How and why have they still not been realized? Are better means toward the realization of these ideals available, and if so, what are they? What is still viable in these ideals, and what is not?

As a philosopher long intrigued by Kant, my own base of operations for approaching the Enlightenment is unavoidably Kantian. But in the present study considerable effort has been devoted to establishing clear points of contact and agreement between Kant's views and those of other important writers from the French, German, British, American, and sometimes even other Enlightenments. I remain partial toward the German Enlightenment, for "of all European variants of the Enlightenment, only the German one took up Enlightenment itself as a philosophical problem."<sup>14</sup> But I am also convinced—at least as regards the core ideals explored in the following pages—that substantial intellectual agreement existed between the different variants of the Enlightenment.

In stressing points of contact and agreement between different Enlightenments, I am conscious of the fact that my approach differs from that of many contemporary scholars, who tend to stress plurality and diversity over unity. G. J. A. Pocock, for instance, urges us to pluralize the Enlightenment "into a number of movements in both harmony and conflict with each other"; James Schmidt claims that "the very notion that there was a single thing called 'the Enlightenment' appears, more and more, to be an illusion."<sup>15</sup> On this central point, I side with Jonathan Israel: the currently fashionable claim

that there was not one Enlightenment but rather an entire constellation or family of "Enlightenments" . . . encourages the tendency to study the subject within the context of "national history" which is decidedly the wrong framework for so international and pan-European a phenomenon. Worse still, it unacceptably ignores or overlooks the extent to which common impulses and concerns shaped the Enlightenment as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, my stress on certain fundamental points of agreement between different Enlightenment intellectuals is not intended to support the claim that there was "a single thing called 'the Enlightenment.'" The international Enlightenment ideals with which this study is concerned by no means cancel out the existence of numerous conflicts, tensions, and divisions between different variants of the Enlightenment.

Nor should the intentionally broad scope of this study be confused either with surveys of "the" Enlightenment or its increasingly popular

cousin, “the inflated Enlightenment,” the latter of which has come to be “identified with all modernity, [and] with nearly everything subsumed under the name of Western civilization.”<sup>17</sup> Many issues directly relevant to both the Enlightenment and modernity (not to mention Western civilization) are not examined at all in what follows. For example, this is a book not about “the intellectual foundations of modern culture,”<sup>18</sup> but about something a bit more modest and concrete. I am concerned with a widely shared Enlightenment strategy for moral reform, and I wish to determine what is living and dead in this strategy. Put differently, the specific themes explored in this work are themselves a function of the late eighteenth-century intellectual consensus that existed regarding the best means for the realization of desired ends.

At the same time, any serious analysis and assessment of these means and ends does entail that we move beyond influential platitudes that assert that the ethos of the Enlightenment amounts to simply endorsing an attitude of a “permanent critique of ourselves.” For once we embrace this move we have created a hyperinflated Enlightenment that knows no temporal bounds: every philosophy student since Socrates who believes that “the unexamined life is not worth living” becomes an instantiation of the Enlightenment attitude. Contra Foucault, I do believe that some “faithfulness to doctrinal elements” is necessary: any significant investigation of the Enlightenment needs to investigate the specific means-ends story behind their hopes for the future.<sup>19</sup>

The method adopted in part I of this study is a simple and modest one, and it is important not to read too much into it. For each core theme introduced, I show that one finds expression and endorsement of it not only within the German Enlightenment (often, but not solely, established by means of Kant’s texts), but also in the French, British, and American Enlightenments (and occasionally elsewhere as well). However, this is not an exhaustive study of any of these Enlightenments, nor of any of the authors whose works are cited. Rather, I focus on key expressions of a select core of social and moral ideals, and then indicate some level of the international support that existed for these ideals during the Enlightenment.

The specific fields of investigation chosen for this study are religion, education, economics, politics, and international relations. This list is intentionally selective and builds off of a similar investigation pursued in *Kant’s Impure Ethics*. Although these five fields certainly do not exhaust Enlightenment intellectuals’ interests in cultural and institutional change, they do, I believe, constitute their primary areas of concern. Within each of

the five chapters in part I (“Then”), I focus on two or three core areas of agreement among Enlightenment intellectuals from different countries with respect to each relevant field of investigation. The aim, again, is not to show that there is one monolithic “Enlightenment Project” to praise or bash, but rather to indicate that, despite their numerous disagreements, Enlightenment intellectuals were surprisingly unified in their hopes for the future with regard to each of the five fields as well as in their commitments regarding the means needed for realizing these ideals.

In each of the five chapters of part II (“Now”), I examine the subsequent historical record, assessing to what extent the major changes and developments in each field do or do not correspond to those envisaged by Enlightenment theorists. In part II the post-Enlightenment historical record is also employed as a base for evaluating Enlightenment means and ends. In which cases does our own historical experience show that the means advocated toward Enlightenment ends have been ineffective? And in which cases does it suggest that the ends advocated simply do not fit with human nature? Finally, throughout part II as well as in my conclusion, I reassess the Enlightenment position in light of what has actually transpired over the past two hundred years in each field and offer what I believe are more accurate explanations than one finds elsewhere for why the ideals of the Enlightenment still elude us.

Three skeptical conclusions are reached in this study: (1) There is insufficient evidence to support the widespread Enlightenment assumption that external institutional change leads to desired internal attitudinal change. Moral transformation, if it is aided by institutional development, is much slower and more uneven within the human species than Enlightenment theorists assumed would be the case. (2) Several of the means advocated by Enlightenment theorists to realize their ideals—though strongly endorsed by later generations—have not led to their predicted results. The growth of free trade, for instance, has not reduced poverty between and within nations, nor has it brought about world peace. Similarly, the creation of an international commercial society and the explosive growth of education have not led to an engaged public sphere but rather to a privatized consumer culture. (3) At present—and this is due in part to the lack of predicted moral transformation summarized in the first point—insufficient numbers of people are strongly committed to Enlightenment ideals such as peace, elimination of poverty, reduction of inequality, and an engaged civic culture to make clear progress in realizing these ideals. The predicted extension and deepening of commitment to these ideals among the human population at large has not happened.

Again, though, my aims are also positive. At bottom, I seek to show what remains viable in Enlightenment ideals, and why we still have reason to hope that humanity may some day achieve those that survive scrutiny. My underlying goal is thus to present a reassessment, reenvisioning, and qualified defense of the moral and political ideals of the Enlightenment for our own time and place.

# I

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## Religion

*Pure reason does not undermine religion, but rather its aberrations. You will lose prejudices and retain religion. The closer you bring religion to the light of reason, the more securely and durably it will be established for the future. Religion will not have to fear any attack by the understanding because the understanding approves of it, and if the understanding is its support, religion will become necessary and holy to the human race.*

—Andreas Riem, *On Enlightenment: Is It and Could It Be Dangerous to the State, to Religion, or Dangerous in General? A Word to be Heeded by Princes, Statesmen, and Clergy* (1788)

**T**he myth of the antireligious Enlightenment is still alive and well in many circles. According to sociologist of religion Mark Juergensmeyer, “Enlightenment modernity proclaimed the death of religion,” and the alleged “reappearance” of religion in contemporary society has demonstrated the falsity of this proclamation.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, political theorist John Gray, in *Enlightenment’s Wake*, points to the present “renaissance of particularisms, ethnic and religious” as the primary supporting data for his thesis that “we live today amid the dim ruins of the Enlightenment project”<sup>2</sup>—one implication being that the Enlightenment was fundamentally antireligious. According to Peter Gay, Enlightenment intellectuals were supposedly united by “a single passion . . . the passion to cure the spiritual malady that is religion, the germ of ignorance, barbarity, filth, and the basest self-hatred.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, historian Jonathan Israel has summarized the essence of the Enlightenment tradition as consisting in “the philosophical rejection of revealed religion, miracles, and divine Providence, replacing the idea of salvation in the hereafter with a highest

good in the here and now.”<sup>4</sup> And Gertrude Himmelfarb, while acknowledging that religion “was not the paramount enemy” in the Enlightenment as it appeared in Britain and America, continues to defend the traditional view that we find an “animus to religion” in the French Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I wish to challenge the myth of the antireligious Enlightenment<sup>6</sup> by presenting an account of Enlightenment religiosity, an account anchored by three core ideas shared by a wide number of Enlightenment intellectuals from different countries.

## The Unity Thesis

Most Enlightenment intellectuals were convinced that religion, if properly reformed, could and should serve as a progressive force for the transformation of moral and social life—specifically, as a primary contributing factor in the formation of a more cosmopolitan moral community. A key strategy in their attempt to reform religion involves what I call the *unity thesis*, which holds that all historical faiths are manifestations of one universal religion. Leading representatives from many different aspects of the Enlightenment share a commitment to the unity thesis. Lessing, for instance, expresses his adherence to it repeatedly in his writings, the most famous example being his parable of the rings (which he borrows from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*) in the play *Nathan the Wise* (1779). In Act III, scene vii, Nathan (who is modeled on Lessing’s friend Moses Mendelssohn)<sup>7</sup> addresses Saladin’s query concerning which of the three great religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) is true by means of the following allegory. In the ancient East there once lived a man who possessed a ring that had “the secret power to make its possessor pleasing to God and man.”<sup>8</sup> The ring was kept in the family for generations, each bearer bequeathing it to his favorite son, until it was passed on to the father of three sons, “all three of whom were equally obedient to him, all three of whom he therefore loved equally.” Not wishing to favor one son over the others, the father hired an artist to make two exact replicas of the original ring, so that upon his death he could present each son with a ring. A quarrel soon broke out over who possessed the original ring, but “the true ring was not provable . . . almost as unprovable as the true faith is to us now.” Saladin interrupts Nathan’s narrative at this point, protesting, “The rings!—Don’t play with me!—I thought the religions that I named to you were certainly distinguishable.” But, Nathan replies, external differences notwithstanding, all of them are grounded on history, written or oral, and “history must also be accepted only on trust and faith.”

Returning to his allegory of the rings, Nathan relates that the three sons eventually appealed to a judge to settle their quarrel. But the judge too was unable to determine which of the three rings was the original, and so—since each son did in fact receive his ring from his father—he advised that each should try to prove the genuineness of his faith through the exercise of beneficence toward all people. And thus the task of religious believers everywhere is to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith through their conduct toward and relationships with other human beings. In this manner, Lessing’s parable of the rings defends “a genuine religious pluralism, united by the common bond of universal humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

French author Pierre Bayle, in his earlier *Philosophical Commentary on the Words of Jesus Christ* (1686–87), also advocates a version of Lessing’s conclusion, albeit without quite endorsing the unity thesis: “If each religion adopted the spirit of tolerance that I recommend . . . the most that could happen would be honest rivalry in outdoing each other in piety, good conduct and knowledge; each religion would take pride in proving its favored share of God’s love by exhibiting a firmer attachment to moral conduct.”<sup>10</sup> And in the British deist tradition we find numerous expressions of the unity thesis. For instance, Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), the “father of deism,” articulated a system of “Common Notions” within religion, a system that, “at least as it concerns theology, has been clearly accepted by every normal person, and does not require any further justification.”<sup>11</sup> What he believed he had uncovered was the common thread that unites different historical faiths, a thread graspable by unaided reason. Amid the religious conflicts that had devastated modern Europe (and the desire to overcome these conflicts was itself a primary motive in developing the unity thesis), Herbert locates the following five Common Notions: “1) There is a Supreme God, 2) This deity ought to be worshipped, 3) The connection of moral virtue to piety is the most important part of religious practice, 4) Wickedness must be expiated by repentance, 5) There is reward or punishment after this life” (32–38). “Such then,” he concludes, “are the Common Notions of which the true Catholic or universal church is built. . . . The only Catholic and uniform church is the doctrine of Common Notions which comprehends all places and all men” (40).

The American deist Thomas Paine provides one of the clearest and most radical expressions of the unity thesis. In *The Age of Reason* (1794), he rejects entirely the different historical faiths, on the ground that they are “no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”<sup>12</sup> But beneath these various human distortions of religious faith—distortions caused not only by political and

economic greed but also by variations in human languages and historical traditions—there is raw nature in all of its beauty and sublimity, God’s creation, equally accessible to all:

THE WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD and it is in *this word*, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man. . . . The Creation speaks a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they may be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds. . . . Search not the book called the Scripture, which any human hand might make, but the Scripture called the creation. (419, 420, 421)

France is often held to be the important exception to Enlightenment religiosity, with Voltaire’s battle cry against the church, *Écrasez l’infâme* (Crush the infamous one), frequently being asked to carry the main burden of evidence. But at bottom Voltaire too embraces a clear deist faith that is very similar to Paine’s universal religion of nature. In a letter to Frederick the Great (1770) he proclaims, “All nature cries aloud that He does exist: that there *is* a supreme intelligence, an immense power, an admirable order, and everything teaches us our own dependence on it.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in an entry in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, he writes,

Tonight I was in a meditative mood. I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature; I admired the immensity, the movements, the harmony of those infinite globes. . . . I admired still more the intelligence which directs these vast forces. I said to myself: “One must be blind not to be dazzled by this spectacle; one must be stupid not to recognize the author of it, one must be mad not to worship Him. What tribute of worship should I render Him? Should not this tribute be the same in the whole of space, since it is the same supreme power which reigns equally in all space?”<sup>14</sup>

Rousseau, too, in his vision of a nonsectarian civil religion that makes each citizen “love his duty,” offers yet another Enlightenment endorsement of a universal natural religion of humanity. The various particular religions, he writes in *Emile* (1762), are to be regarded



as so many salutary institutions which prescribe in each country a uniform manner of honoring God by public worship. These religions can all have their justifications in the climate, the government, the genius of the people, or some other local cause which makes one preferable to another, according to the time and place. I believe them all to be right as long as one serves God suitably. The essential worship is that of the heart. God does not reject its homage, if it is sincere, in whatever form it is offered to Him.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in Kant we find an even bolder expression of the unity thesis: “There is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be various kinds of *faith*” (*Religion* 6: 107). The various historical faiths, on this view, are to be understood as humanly necessary vehicles for the transmission of pure religion. These vehicles can and will “differ according to differences of time and place,” but if they are doing their jobs correctly they will all point to “one single *religion* holding for all human beings and in all times” (*Peace* 8: 367 n.). And the all-important moral content of this single religion is that of a universal “divine (ethical) state on earth” that will “one day enlighten the world and rule over it”—even though at present “the actual setting up of this state is still infinitely removed from us” (*Religion* 6: 122).

There are, of course, counterexamples to the claim that the Enlightenment was fundamentally religious, and the most significant ones are to be found in France. For instance, Baron d’Holbach proclaims in *Common Sense, or Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural* (1772), “Whoever will deign to consult common sense upon religious opinions . . . will easily perceive, that these opinions have no foundation; that all religion is an edifice in the air; that theology is only the ignorance of natural causes reduced to system; that it is a long tissue of chimeras and contradictions.” But even Voltaire recoils at d’Holbach’s audacity for asserting “that there is no God, without even having tried to prove its impossibility,” and dismisses his writings as pernicious rant.<sup>16</sup> His rejection of d’Holbach’s animosity toward religion was a representative reaction within Enlightenment culture. As others have noted, “Few *philosophes* held opinions as radical as d’Holbach’s . . . [his] works were regarded as so materialist and anti-religious that they even shocked other radicals.”<sup>17</sup>

Hume is the most significant eighteenth-century philosopher who poses a clear challenge to my thesis that the Enlightenment wanted to reform religion rather than to abolish it. But even he is closer to it than d’Holbach, in large part because his own skepticism prevents him from dogmatically asserting that there is no God. At the end of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Philo, despite the devastating criticisms

that he himself has leveled against many of the central tenets of natural theology, urges “a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition . . . *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.*” Admittedly, this is an extremely “attenuated deism”; Philo cautions readers that the proposition may “afford no inference that affects human life” or “be the source of any action or forbearance.” But there remains room for genuine religious feeling even within it, a sense of wonder and awe at “so extraordinary and magnificent a question,” provided that one does not slide into dogmatism and believe falsely that we have solid answers to all of our questions.<sup>18</sup>

So, while not all Enlightenment thinkers embraced the unity thesis, the majority of them did. And within the unity thesis we find a genuine religious commitment: the belief in a universal religion embracing all human beings. This is the distinctive core of Enlightenment religiosity, and it is a core that needs to be appreciated on its own terms as a sincerely held religious belief rather than rejected out of hand as yet another manifestation of the “shallow” Enlightenment.

### The Morality Thesis

A second pervasive theme in Enlightenment religiosity is its conviction that the content and orientation of religion should be directed primarily toward *moral* concerns. Let us call this the *morality thesis*. The claim here is not that religion alone properly grounds or justifies morality; as is well known, many Enlightenment intellectuals explicitly reject this position. Rather, the morality thesis holds simply that religion’s proper purpose is moral as opposed to theological. Different articulations of the morality thesis are readily available in a wide variety of Enlightenment texts. For instance, Benjamin Franklin, in summarizing “the fundamental principles of all sound religion” in a letter to Ezra Stiles in 1790, writes, “The most acceptable service we render to him [viz., God] is doing good to his other children.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly (but, as usual, more radically), in laying out his “profession of faith” at the beginning of *The Age of Reason*, Tom Paine asserts that our religious duties consist simply “in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.”<sup>20</sup> More traditional candidates for religious duty (surprisingly, even that of the duty to worship God) are conspicuously missing from Paine’s list.

Kant is surprisingly close to Paine when he remarks in a 1775 letter to the Swiss theologian Johann Caspar Lavater that “to be righteous

[*rechtschaffen zu sein*] is the sum of all religion” and that “all wooing of favors by the performing of rituals” would be strictly forbidden in a sound religion (10: 180). However, in his *Lectures on Pedagogy* (first presented in 1776–77), he allows that “the performing of rituals” has a legitimate, albeit subordinate place in religion, but if and only if it can be shown to contribute to the cause of morally good conduct:

If religion is not combined with morality, then it becomes nothing more than currying favor. Singing praises, prayers, and going to church should only give the human being new strength, new courage for improvement, or they should be the expression of a heart inspired by the idea of duty. They are only preparations for good works, but not good works themselves, and one cannot please the highest being otherwise than by becoming a better human being. (9: 494)<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, in one of his moral philosophy lectures, Kant states, “Subjectively prayer is needed, not so that God, who is the recipient of it, should learn anything, and thereby be moved to grant it, but rather for our own sakes. . . . Prayers are indeed necessary for moral purposes, if they are to set up a moral disposition in us. . . . They serve to kindle morality in the innermost heart” (*Collins* 27: 323).<sup>22</sup> Throughout his writing career Kant maintained the view that all legitimate religious service must serve moral ends. As he states in his major work in religion, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), “Apart from good-life conduct, anything which the human being supposes he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious delusion and counterfeit service of God” (6: 170). “Good life conduct” (*guter Lebenswandel*) is held to be the “true goal” of religion, and the more progress human beings make toward this goal the more they will “be able to dispense with statutory articles altogether” (6: 175).

The development of Unitarianism provides yet another example of the strongly moralistic tendency of Enlightenment religiosity. Jesus is revered as *the* moral exemplar, but not as the second person of the Trinity. For Joseph Priestley, one of the founders of the new denomination, a key shift in outlook occurred when he became “fully persuaded that Christ was a man like ourselves.”<sup>23</sup> Thomas Jefferson, spurred to write down his own views on the matter after receiving a pamphlet from Priestley, professes his own Unitarianism by stating that he ascribes to Jesus “every *human* excellence; and believing he never claimed any other. . . . The question of his being a member of the Godhead . . . is foreign to the present

view.” Nevertheless, Jefferson continued, the “system of morals presented to us” by Jesus is “the most perfect and sublime that has ever been written.”<sup>24</sup>

Articulations of the morality thesis among French Enlightenment writers are also plentiful. Perhaps the most famous example would again be Rousseau’s nonsectarian civil religion, which holds “that in every country and in every sect the sum of the law is to love God above everything and one’s neighbor as oneself; that no religion is exempt from the duties of morality; that nothing is truly essential other than these duties; that inner worship is the first of these duties; and that without faith no true virtue exists.”<sup>25</sup>

As many of these citations indicate, Enlightenment intellectuals often linked the morality thesis to the unity thesis. When the two are joined together, the result is what may be called the *common morality thesis*. In other words, beneath the different historical faiths there lies a shared morality, a universal moral message. Key elements of this message include the following claims: All human beings are children of the same father; all human beings are moral equals; all human beings are morally obligated to treat each other justly and beneficently.

Here too, in the widespread Enlightenment concurrence with Lessing’s conviction that the core message of religion is wholly contained within the command to “*love one another . . . this alone, if it is done, is enough, is sufficient and adequate*,”<sup>26</sup> a flattening tendency is present, one that many traditional religious believers strongly oppose. But the positive nature of the phenomenon again needs to be underscored and appreciated on its own terms. As Hume’s Philo notes, “vulgar superstition” has had only “pernicious consequences on public affairs”: “factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery.” We would be far better off, Cleanthes concurs, with a less inflammatory conception of religion: “The proper office of religion is to regulate the hearts of men, humanize their conduct.”<sup>27</sup> Enlightenment religiosity was profoundly moralistic. In linking religion (a religion, again, that they believed was universal) directly to moral conduct and dispositions, Enlightenment intellectuals believed that they had found a powerful means for improving human conduct everywhere.

## Toleration

Finally, toleration: “the characteristic and new religious idea” of the Enlightenment, an idea “which was possibly its most important legacy to

succeeding centuries.”<sup>28</sup> John Locke remains one of the most influential Enlightenment voices on the topic of religious toleration, despite the fact that his own theory of toleration does not seem especially tolerant by contemporary standards. “Those are not to be tolerated at all who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.”<sup>29</sup> Atheists are untrustworthy and hence subversive of the social order; to tolerate them would be political suicide. Even odder-sounding to contemporary ears is Locke’s animus against Catholics: “That church can have no right to be tolerated by the magistrate which is constituted upon such a bottom that all those who enter into it do thereby *ipso facto* deliver themselves up to the protection and service of another prince” (51). Catholics ultimately owe allegiance to a foreign power (the pope), and thus civil magistrates cannot trust them either.

So Locke clearly does not defend anything close to a principle of *absolute* religious liberty, even though his English translator William Popple advocates precisely such a principle in the “To the Reader” note that precedes Locke’s text.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, despite his significant restrictions on toleration (restrictions articulated toward the end of the text), Locke begins his *Letter* by proclaiming, “I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristic mark of the true church” (13). It is this opening core conviction that toleration is the true sign of genuine religiosity that represents a milestone in religious thought. The conviction rests on two basic points. First, genuine faith comes only through free choice. The authorities can force people (for instance, as was often done, through torture) to *say* that they believe X and to externally behave *as if* they believe X, but such tactics can never guarantee that they have freely decided to believe X. Second, the church itself is understood to be “a free and voluntary society” (20), intended for the public worship of God and the salvation of souls. As a result, if church membership is to be truly free and voluntary, churches can coherently carry out their mission only through noncoercive means. “No force is here to be made use of upon any occasion whatsoever” (23).

A more radical theory of religious toleration was advocated by Pierre Bayle. On Bayle’s view, religious believers (including magistrates) should tolerate each others’ conflicting beliefs simply because in religious (as opposed to, say, mathematical) matters “it is impossible in our present condition to know with certainty... absolute truth.”<sup>31</sup> Because absolute truth is humanly impossible in the religious sphere, “God is content to demand” from each person “that he seek the truth as diligently as possible

and when he thinks he has found it that he cherish it and make it the rule of his life” (80). Bayle’s argument thus extends the hand of toleration to a wider group of people than does Locke’s—indeed, to *all* human beings who are *sincerely seeking the truth* and who then act consistently with their sincerely held beliefs.

Voltaire’s position on toleration is also more radical than Locke’s: “What is toleration? It is the prerogative of humanity. We are all steeped in weaknesses and errors: let us forgive one another’s follies, it is the first law of nature. . . . We should tolerate each other because we are all weak, inconsistent, subject to mutability and to error.”<sup>32</sup> In Voltaire’s view, it is not even necessary to pass a Baylean sincerity test in order to be tolerated, in part because he doubts whether people can ever attain truth from within religious sects: “We know that every sect is a guarantee of error. There are no sects of geometricians, algebraists, arithmeticians, because all the propositions of geometry, algebra, arithmetic are true.”<sup>33</sup> Here the blunt message is that because all members of all sects are companions in error, it behooves them to tolerate each other. However, elsewhere Voltaire presents a more positive argument for religious toleration, one that links up with his own commitment to the unity and morality theses discussed earlier: “It requires no great skill in argument or gift of eloquence to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I will go further: I tell you, we ought to regard every man as our brother. What? The Turk, my brother? The Chinaman, my brother? The Jew and the Siamese as well? Yes, assuredly, for are we not all children of one Father and creatures of the same God?”<sup>34</sup> Underneath the guaranteed errors of religious sects there is a discernible common lineage shared by all human beings. But in most cases the appeal to toleration was itself made from within a religious position, albeit one that stressed shared beliefs rather than doctrinal differences. It is thus false to assert that “Enlightenment notions of tolerance are predicated on an indifference to existential or religious experience.”<sup>35</sup> As Hume reminds readers in his essay “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” it is the deists who are “friends to toleration” (and who, as we have seen, are by no means indifferent to religious experience), for they are “indifferent to any particular sect of *christians*.”<sup>36</sup>

Finally, in Kant we find a theory of religious toleration that follows from his famous definition of enlightenment itself: “*Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is . . . the motto of enlightenment” (*Enlightenment* 8: 35). Our vocation as human beings is to cultivate our own rational capacities, and along with this vocation goes a moral responsibility to inquire into the reasons for our beliefs. But people cannot

make use of their own understanding in religious matters unless freedom of belief is extended to the religious sphere. Indeed, as Kant remarks in a famous footnote in the first *Critique*, religion arouses a just suspicion against itself, and cannot lay claim to our unfeigned respect, unless and until its doctrines successfully withstand open and public scrutiny (A xi n.). Reflective human beings cannot take religious claims seriously until they are free to critically assess them. Toleration is therefore the true beginning of enlightenment, “the necessary social condition for people to use their own intellects to decide what they will believe. The Enlightenment’s demand for toleration is thus the demand that people be given the opportunity to fulfill their deepest spiritual vocation: that of using their intellects to determine the faith they will live by.”<sup>37</sup>

In sum, contrary to much contemporary wisdom, most Enlightenment intellectuals did not proclaim “the death of religion.” On the contrary, religion occupied a much bigger space in Enlightenment thought than is generally recognized. In reaction against the religious violence of their own day, as well as in response to a growing awareness of “difference,” Enlightenment intellectuals sought to develop a more pluralistic and less divisive concept of religion that would enable people to live in peace with one another. They advocated not “a rejection of religion, but merely a rejection of those features of religion that had led to so much suffering and warfare in the generations before.”<sup>38</sup> And in rethinking religion, they sought also to forge a new concept of faith that would energize believers to work toward a more just and beneficent international order as well as to tolerate religious and cultural differences.