

The Enlightenment and Religion. The Myths of Modernity

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For a generation Peter Gay's book on the Enlightenment (a text which perhaps tells us more about the 1960s than the 1760s) informed scholars that Enlightenment and Christianity were polarities and that the defeat of dogma and metaphysics were the harbingers of secular modernity. In the course of the last two decades the Gay perspective has been modified to the point of being discarded outright: the French experience of Enlightenment (the Gay paradigm) has been proclaimed the European exception rather than the rule and that, far from being its foe, Christianity was the midwife and sustainer of the *siècle des lumières*. S.J. Barnett's vigorous and concise book builds on this current scholarly consensus and pushes it further: with examples drawn from England, France and Italy, Barnett's Enlightenment is one that cannot be understood outside a Christian context in a century that witnessed no significant rise in unbelief. Furthermore, public opinion is deemed central to religious change (1) (as it had been well before the 1750s) and the significance of the *philosophes* and their writings is declared to be exaggerated, not least because there was no deist movement. Those churchmen who insisted that there were deceiving themselves, but created 'a very public antichristian bogey that did not have any substantial reality' (p. 5).

These are contentious claims (particularly as they affect England), though at all times Barnett acknowledges his indebtedness to other historians who have, as it were, paved the way for him. Repeatedly, especially in chapter 2, 'Historians, religion, and the historical record', he advances with Thomas Munck's *The Enlightenment. A Comparative Social History 1721–1794* (2000) deployed as his sword and buckler, usually to convincing effect, as in the observation that the differences between the enlightened and non-enlightened 'in various contexts, times and places' (p. 36) were never particularly sharp. Yet Barnett does not advance from that point to query the uses of retaining Enlightenment as a descriptive term. Rather it remains 'an intellectually rich and complex phenomenon' (p. 36). Yet isn't this also to introduce a degree of elasticity into the concept that has the effect, as Jonathan Clark and Jeremy Black have both noted, of making it teleologically suspect and confining?(2) Barnett considers that historians have for too long regarded the production of controversial theological and philosophical texts as evidence of influence (with Alan Kors particularly singled out for arraignment). The point that proof of influence is insufficiently addressed is well made, though Barnett is obviously keen enough to ensure that the primary texts he cites – many anticlerical in character – carry a decent burden of importance. It is a truism that however dazzled future generations may be, intellectual brilliance is no guarantee of favourable extended notice in one's own time, as some of Hume's later writings on religion remind us, in contradistinction to the acclamation for James Beattie's *An Essay on Truth*

(1770). However, it may be that Barnett exaggerates the degree to which scholars in the field are prisoners of exalted claims for the primacy of print culture, and are actually rather cautious about assuming that an important and innovative argument necessarily constitutes an influential text. Barnett rejects any notion of the inert masses and stresses the importance of non-elite dissent from the Church. Quite so, but the extent to which opinion at this level can be recovered is not to be underestimated. Too many of the scholars who differ from him on this and other claims (approximately 90 per cent on a rough count) tend to be presented as misguided.

At the heart of the book is Barnett's contention that the battle of orthodox divines against deists was a 'fictive war' (p. 68). Who were the members of this movement beyond the usual dozen or so suspects from Blount to Anet, demands Barnett. What hard evidence is there that they persuaded thousands more to follow them and turn deism into a popular cause? He concludes that much of the clamour was invented, the deists various paper tigers that never seriously threatened the main confessional Churches or their grip on national culture. These points are stoutly and efficiently offered and should give us pause even if they cannot entirely persuade. Deists may have been few in number and were not very good at co-operating among themselves let alone begetting a movement or Grub Street imitators, but the very clamour the clergy raised against them (deism was perhaps best known from people writing against it) tended to attract attention to their cause. Deists were proficient in disseminating their views within the innumerable avenues that a commercial and minimally regulated print culture held open for them. It created a critical tendency, a culture coloured (or contaminated, as the clergy might see it) by what contemporaries loosely referred to as 'freethinking' where deism and heresy shaded into each other for perhaps half a century after the Revolution of 1688. Critical rather than constructive deism (this is not a working distinction used in this book) could both upset and rattle the orthodox: the deists' biblical criticism, crude as it was, and their observations on the discrepancies of the Gospels, or the immorality of events like the massacre of the Amalekites all posed a vague anxiety about accepted ideas of biblical inerrancy in terms which were sufficiently clear to percolate down from the intellectual elite to the metropolitan debating clubs, coffee-houses and even the ale-house. And this is not to mention (and Barnett doesn't) the international dimension to deism, with networks so painstakingly reconstructed by Jonathan Israel and Ann Goldgar.

Yet Barnett virtually accuses Anglican apologists such as Bishop Edmund Gibson of creating deism as a McCarthyite scare tactic in the 1730s 'to encourage loyalty and bring waverers back to the fold' (p. 30), and lambasts a whole train of historians from Norman Sykes onwards for swallowing this propaganda hook, line and sinker. Authors of the calibre of Gerald Cragg, J. A. Herrick, and W. R. Ward are taken to task for their gullibility in accepting the scale of the clash between the Church and the deists despite the 'paucity of evidence' (p. 103). Barnett may be justified in forcefully reminding scholars that insufficient allowance has been made for the possibility of clerical fabrication and exaggeration in the matter of deism, but the latter, as Barnett well knows, was hardly an invention of the 1730s. His depiction is hard to accept not because Gibson was worried about an impecunious old age or because the clergy were incapable of such cynical self-defence, but because it required a degree of conspiratorial planning and presentation among them that was unlikely given party divisions within the Church of England: for Gibson to have said nothing in the face of provocative challenges from the likes of Collins, Wollaston and Tindal would have been a dereliction of duty from the leading prelate in the Church. The deist alarm, like most moral panics, had its periodic ups and downs, and the 1730s was undoubtedly one of them when many clerics – and not just the numerous Tories among them – were very gloomy indeed about what might happen if things went on as they were and got even worse. Of course, Barnett is right to say that there was no necessary link between deism and natural religion. The latter could be entirely compatible with Athanasian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the emphasis on natural religion was such that, by the 1740s, many clergy (and by no means just those participating in the evangelical revival) were alarmed that revelation was being downplayed for sinister purposes.

Instead of deism as the main challenge to the Churches, as one might expect from the author of the interesting *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests. The Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (1999), Barnett wants us to consider anticlericalism as the principal goad to organised religion in the eighteenth century. As he notes, 'permanent, institutionalised anticlericalism' (p. 50) had existed in the 150 years before the

Enlightenment, often comparative in theme and popular in style, and it was by no means incompatible with enlightened piety of the sort displayed by Sir Robert Howard in the 1690s or, half a century later, by many of the Commonwealthsmen. It is refreshing and useful to have this counter-emphasis reiterated, though it is also disappointing that Barnett does not fully explain his preference for 'anticlericalism' over the more usual contemporary usage of 'priestcraft'. Yet if deists were few in number in early eighteenth-century England, Barnett could conceivably have done more to show us the range and depth of his anticlericalist challenge. Although this may have repeated some of the ground already mapped out in *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests*, it would have been appropriate. He might also have broached the question of how far one can accurately separate anticlericalism from scepticism, or infidelity from a vague commitment to free-thought.

The chapter on France is somewhat less contestatory. The principal subject is Jansenism as a dissident group, with Barnett drawing on recent work by scholars such as Catherine Maire, Dale Van Kley and William Doyle, and generously acknowledging his debt. Whether that company would then proceed to identify Jansenism as a more vigorous and numerically significant challenger to the Gallican Church than anything the *philosophes* were capable of mounting must be a moot point. As a summary of the ups and downs of French eighteenth-century Jansenism it will do well enough. The refusal of the sacraments crisis in the 1750s is usefully linked with existing Parisian anticlericalism and Barnett attempts a comparison between Jansenism and the struggle of seventeenth-century English Protestant dissenters that might have been more clearly articulated. Barnett has a strong case in saying that the *philosophes* were a small band without the numerical strength possessed by the Jansensists and that their claim to the credit for securing the exiling of the Jesuits from France in 1762–4 was downright cheeky. Barnett's sympathies are occasionally too conspicuous.⁽³⁾ Thus we read of 'Roman tyranny' (p. 139) and Jansenism as the 'revolt of democratic Christianity' (p. 137) with Unigenitus marking the 'final erosion' of Bourbon prestige (p. 137). However, phrases like 'democratic Christianity' do not withstand close scrutiny, and it is surprising that Barnett abandons the more appropriate 'constitutionalism' and 'conciliarism' favoured by Van Kley. Outside the capital and some other urban centres, Jansenists were a relatively small minority of the French laity (heavily concentrated in the upwardly mobile professional classes) throughout the eighteenth century, and were actually in sharp numerical decline from the mid century. Apart from the notorious Saint-Médard congregation of the early 1730s, historians have yet to turn up evidence of popular, let alone democratic, Jansensism. If they had a significance disproportionate to their numbers then couldn't one say much the same for the *philosophes* too (and possibly for the English deists)? The General Assembly of the Clergy of France certainly thought so: from the 1760s onwards their remonstrances to the Crown repeat the constant complaint that *philosophe* literature is corroding the religion and morals of the kingdom and that the Crown must act. Sources are scarce, but the memoirs of Jacques-Louis Ménétra, the Parisian artisan, certainly suggest the existence of a popularised deism at that social level.⁽⁴⁾ The reality of the Grub Street-style challenge and the polemical counter-challenge has been splendidly analysed recently by Darrin McMahon in his account of the Counter-Enlightenment ⁽⁵⁾ but neither text nor author figure here. But then if, even in France, the main threat to the ecclesiastical establishment came from *within* a recognisably Christian context, anything resembling a Counter-Enlightenment is superfluous to Barnett's requirements. The fact is that by the time of the Maupeou coup in 1770–1 Jansenism had achieved its purposes and had become a political irrelevancy for younger clerics and lawyers, except in as much as it had transmitted the spirit of opposition to these 'Patriots' (and that claim can be exaggerated, as Barnett does here).

As Barnett notes, Jansenism and the Catholic Enlightenment were closely linked, and this persuasion is reflected in his chapter on Italy. As with France, the author hunts out polemicists opposed to papal pretensions, men pushing at an open door thanks to the pattern of great power politics and the growth of national churches within Catholicism. Anticurial thought was not necessarily either deist or Jansenist, as the case of the Neapolitan lawyer, Pietro Giannone, author of the influential *Istoria civile del Regno di Napoli* (1723), reveals. Such publicists were concerned less with securing a form of Church government in which the laity and lower clergy might have more importance than with the more conventional aspect of conciliarism that stressed the supremacy of the secular prince. Thus the celebrated Muratori was happily acting as a paid client of the duke of Modena. One finds few signs in Italy under the flag of Jansenism of the

kind of 'democracy' that Barnett apparently identified in France. It was an aspect of elite intellectual culture that made few friends among lowly and less talented Catholics, for whom the predominantly historiographical concerns of the pro- and anti-curatorial parties impinged not at all. Not much sign here, then, of Barnett's (and Munck's) broad Enlightenment affecting the lower orders.

There are a few slips that, taken cumulatively, detract from one's confidence in Barnett's handling of labels: Isaac Newton is referred to as a 'dissenter' (p. 122), David Hartley becomes an oxymoronic 'dissenting Anglican' (p. 123), Louis XVI's accession year is predated by 20 years to 1754 (p. 154), there is an allusion to John Lindsey when Theophilus is intended (p. 97) (it further mutates into Lyndsey in the index) and there is a mysterious reference to Lady Drummond, the wife of the duke of York, having the last rites refused her in 1755 (p. 146). Barnett's occasional resort to the few scholars 'on his side' in the debate on deism strikes a rather unfortunately self-conscious note and, as well as the reflectiveness one finds in *The Enlightenment and Religion*, there are a few too many assertions. Thus he tells us that the Sacheverell affair of 1710–11 was the 'most serious challenge to the English Enlightenment' (p. 111). He never tells us when the Enlightenment occurred in England (or anywhere else for that matter), or refers to its components stages in as much as they can be identified; it assumes a degree of intellectual direction (anti-Sacheverellians as an early counter-enlightenment party) to the case that it never possessed because it had nothing to sustain it beyond a nostalgia for the departed days of tight confessionalism in the 1680s. Barnett's point is that public opinion was to the fore in the affair. The point may be admitted but doesn't that leave the popular Jacobitism of the 1710s as far more worthy of attention as a challenge to the 'English Enlightenment'? More generally, his insistence that public opinion was a significant force in the public life of England, France and Italy throughout this era is unexceptionable, but one could have wished for more discussion of changing perceptions of its composition in the course of the century. In an English context, Barnett (p. 94) is inclined to homogenise Protestant dissenters and underestimate the gap between the orthodox and liberal among them on doctrinal questions. The Calvinists might agree with some of the deists' anticlerical views, but usually remained strictly Athanasian in their theology.

Throughout, Barnett assumes a 'chronicle of Enlightenment' in a rather old fashioned, no-nonsense way, endorsing the notion of ferment on a Hazard-like scale c.1680–1720. There is no recourse to 'Counter-Enlightenment' as a working concept, one that scholars such as Cadoc Leighton have recently found useful. (6) One can readily see why. Since Barnett's Enlightenment is such a 'big tent', capable of containing a variety of contented opinions, he has no need to evaluate the possibility of emerging opposition to its emphases. From this book one gets very little sense of the cultural shift at mid century, in which both the 'long Reformation' and the 'long Counter-Reformation' were played out, and Church establishments in France and Italy, under unprecedented pressure from princes and philosophical opinion (both tinged with anticlericalism), dropped their pastoral guard. Confident that the rural masses were with the Church, religious propagandists (with unimpressive results) poured their efforts into denouncing the insidious effects of 'philosophy' as deleterious to the faith and encouraging no more than nominal belief in the wider culture. Of course defenders of the Church thought primarily in terms of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, but one finds very little reference to such categories in *The Enlightenment and Religion*. This is a surprising omission given Barnett's persuasion that factions inside the Churches were the main vehicle of opposition to the ecclesiastical status quo in all three countries; he might have built on James Bradley's studies which have shown that it was ecclesiology rather than theology that was the main arena of dispute between the orthodox and their adversaries in the eighteenth century. (7) If Barnett is anxious for historians to admit that interesting texts are not necessarily influential in their generation, and demands care and caution in measuring influence (what he calls the 'holy grail' of scholarship (p. 104)), the challenge in turn to him might be to concede that intellectual propagandists can occasionally be prodigiously and disproportionately influential in demarcating the culture of their time. He might also consider revisiting his assumption that the conflicts over deism (and the associated growth of religious liberalism) were primarily socio-political, and investigate the genuine theological issues involved. If much eighteenth-century religious conflict was about politics, the reverse was also true.

Notes

1. J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2002). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, most recently, Jonathan Clark's axiomatic presumption that "the Enlightenment" is a polemical term devised in the nineteenth century to place interpretations on what had happened in the eighteenth; the term did not therefore correspond to any clearly demarcated eighteenth-century phenomena, and could be made to mean whatever its nineteenth- and twentieth-century users wished'. J. Clark, 'Providence, Predestination and Progress: or, did the Enlightenment Fail?', *Albion*, 35 (2003), 559–89. J. Black, *The Eighteenth Century* (2nd ed., Basingstoke, 1999), 226. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, most recently, H. M. Scott, 'Religion and Realpolitik: the Duc de Choiseul, the Bourbon family compact and the attack on the Society of Jesus, 1758–1775', *International History Review*, 15 (2003), 57–72. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See J. -L. Ménétra, *Journal de ma vie: compagnon vitrier au 18e siècle*, ed. D. Roche (Paris, 1982). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. D. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment. The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, 2001). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. C. D. A. Leighton, notably 'The Enlightened Religion of Robert Clayton', *Studia Hibernica*, 29 (1995–7), 157–84; 'Hutchinsonianism: A Counter-Enlightenment Reform Movement', *Journal of Religious Studies*, 23 (1999), 168–84. See also, for instance, G. Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Enlightenment* (SUNY series in Social and Political Thought) (New York, 2003); eds. David Berman and Patricia O'Riordan, *The Irish Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment*, (Bristol, 2002). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. James Bradley's forthcoming book on the English Enlightenment and religion is much awaited. [Back to \(7\)](#)

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