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A CENTURY FOR FREEDOM

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A CENTURY FOR FREEDOM

A SURVEY OF THE FRENCH "PHILOSOPHERS"

By

KENNETH URWIN, M.A., D.Litt.

Laureate of the French Academy.

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	INTRODUCTION	1
I.	REASON THE "HANDMAID OF FAITH"	5
II.	THE AWAKENING OF REASON	19
III.	TRADITION AND AUTHORITY	32
IV.	FACT AND THEORY	45
V.	MORALITY—DIVINE OR HUMAN?	58
VI.	RELIGION OR RELIGIONS?	70
VII.	DEISM	82
VIII.	MATERIALISM	90
IX.	RELIGION AND POLITICS	98
	CONCLUSION	104
	KEY TO BOOKS QUOTED	113
	BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES	114

INTRODUCTION

MODERN man is so accustomed to thinking and judging for himself that he is sometimes apt to forget that his right to do so dates from comparatively recent times. The present sketch of eighteenth-century thinkers is intended to show how much our freedom of thought derives from their determined onslaught on the restrictions imposed upon human reason by the religious system inaugurated and controlled by orthodox Christianity. If the possession of an intellect is one of the outstanding characteristics of man, the fearless use of that intellect is a most important factor in European scientific and philosophical thinking since the eighteenth century.

In all ages there have been individuals who, using their rational gifts, have opposed currently accepted ideas as to the nature of man and of the world. It is in eighteenth-century France, however, that we find the first real union of many gifted writers working together towards the destruction of the prejudices and "venerable" traditions which constituted the obstacle to freethinking. These writers were sufficiently scientific to realize the value of empiricism, the importance of evidence, the necessity of undermining theory by such an accumulation of facts that the theory becomes at once suspect.

Our main interest will thus be not so much the writers in themselves as the attitudes they adopted to ensure to the human mind freedom from theological chains. Their permanent contribution to human thought lies less in their ideas, although some are important, than in the use they made of them. In a general way we may say that these thinkers are essentially anti-Christian, opposed to what Christianity stood for in the practical sphere. Here it is important to understand what is meant by "Christianity."

To the eighteenth-century philosopher Christianity and Catholicism were much the same thing, but we must not therefore assume that he was merely anti-Catholic. One attacks the nearest and the most pressing enemy. If the Catholic Church was the object of the attack, it was chiefly because Christianity in France at that time was almost entirely Catholic. There is no reason to suppose that concerted Protestantism, had that been the dominant form of Christianity, would have fared any better. Wherever the *philosophers* fought religion their criticisms could apply to any branch of formal Christianity. They were not attacking Christianity because it was Catholic, but Catholicism because it was dogmatic Christianity.

Thus, for our purpose, we may take as their enemy any form of sectarian Christianity. We would not include within it those philosophies which still claim the title " Christian " even though they have rejected or weakened everything that was characteristically Christian. The modernist, who has cast out the Fall, the Virgin Birth, a personal God, the authority of the Church, the divinity of the moral code, the inspiration of the Bible, personal immortality, etc., may have instituted an excellent philosophy of life—that is a matter of opinion—but he would not be accounted a Christian within the limits of this book.

Eighteenth-century France is essentially the scene of the first open conflict between science and religion, between scientific mentality and faith, and it is as such that we here view it. The conflict was inevitable. Science is above all things human and rational. It collects its evidence and proceeds, using human reason, to draw its conclusions, which are then verifiable by any inquirer possessed of a reasonable capacity for thought: pure authority is suspect, and religion, based upon authority, must therefore necessarily be viewed with suspicion. Science seldom begins the open conflict, however: it is prepared to go its own way, quite independent of religion. We shall show (Chapter I) by what process of reasoning religion

would justify its opposition to rationalistic science. Religious opposition to science is inexplicable except on certain bases with which we shall deal and which require a rather special form of logic to appreciate. Whether or not religion is justified in opposing science, it is undeniably true that there was hostility and persecution. For the first time, a century of thinkers within France accepted the challenge and began the final struggle for the supremacy of reason.

The eighteenth century is, then, an important period in the development of critical thought. The centre of intellectual activity was France; not that France was the originator of all that she thought and taught. Much of the subject-matter of the works then published can be traced to other sources, mainly English. But France set out for wider consumption what England had conceived and expounded in both learned and popular works. Originality is not lacking, but it is the originality of the man who has pursued a suggested line of research a little farther than his mentor; guided by the principles of Bacon, Locke, and Newton, the French *philosophers* edited, re-worded, and expounded a new materialism, a utilitarianism,[1] a doctrine of revolt, and this revolt was chiefly directed against the current conception of royalty and the Church. It is with the latter that we are here concerned.

Among the outstanding names of the century, Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, Rousseau, Montesquieu, d'Holbach, etc., there are Atheists, Deists, Theists, but no Christians in the usual sense of the term. Whatever their differences as regards belief, however, they are unanimous in criticizing formal Christianity, and the little they would leave of that religion is not worth the specific appellation of Christianity. We must always bear in mind their special characteristics, for the word *philosophe* is not, for them, the equivalent of our "philosopher." Just as Mme. de Lambert declared that the task of

[1] I.e., the idea that actions should be accounted right in proportion to their usefulness to public welfare and happiness.

philosophy was "to restore reason to its full dignity and cause it to resume its rights, to shake off the yoke of opinion and authority," so they see the *philosopher* rather as a propagandist with a social aim. Diderot, in the *Encyclopedia*, defines him as "a man who is governed by reason, open to all the best influences of life, jealous of his honour, fulfilling his social and family duties." Voltaire calls him "an enthusiast for wisdom,[1] that is, for truth," and it is with this special meaning in mind that we use *philosopher* throughout this book, the italics denoting the French sense of rationalist, social-minded propagandist. The important words in their definitions are "reason" and "truth." These thinkers are primarily rational; their desire to change society is not governed by any Christian ideal, but by a reasonable and rational attempt to make society mentally and materially, not spiritually, better. For this, their first aim had of necessity to be the establishment of the reign of reason. Why that was so will be explained in the first chapter; so long as reason remained subservient to faith, man would make little progress, intellectual or material.

The efforts of human reason to restrict the extravagant claims of theology and to assert the right of independent and scientific inquiry fill the eighteenth century, culminating in the temporary folly of the deification of a personified Reason at the time of the French Revolution. Their more substantial contributions to human thought lie in the freedom which made possible the work of Comte, Renan, and Taine, to mention but three thinkers. They lie, too, in the influence which freethinkers have had upon each other in all the countries in Europe. These contributions are chiefly modes of thought, methods of approach, the claims of empirical science,[2] and it is as such that we propose here to study them, illustrating wherever

[1] The French *sagesse* implies not only wisdom but also right-mindedness, tolerance, and a mind free from prejudice.

[2] I.e., founded on experience or observation, not on theory.

possible at first hand by quotations drawn from their works.[1]

CHAPTER ONE

REASON THE "HANDMAID OF FAITH"

To discuss the Rationalism of the eighteenth-century thinkers without reference to the earlier state of human thought would be like considering the French Revolution without taking the old regime into account. Merely to describe or analyze any particular movement is not enough. The real importance of any human activity—whether political or philosophical—lies not only in what it accomplishes, but in what it replaces. The work of the French *philosophers* is in itself a mixture of borrowed notions, wrong conclusions, reiterated propaganda, and sound ideas. Taken in themselves their works might not appear very startling or very new. They acquire significance only by the measure of their independence from traditional thought and by their inspiration to their successors.

The century of reason is important, not merely because it is rational in its approach to all problems, but also because it is the first fully to vindicate the *power* of reason to achieve a solution. Previously the powers of reason had been acknowledged only within certain limits. Now limitations were ignored, and men concentrated not on *whether* reason could provide solutions, but on *what* solutions it did provide.

The foundations of French thought had been laid centuries before by the work of scholasticism. It is a mistake, undoubtedly, to assume that Catholicism has always been Aristotelian and scholastic, but so great has the influence of Thomism been, and still is, in the Catholic Church that, for the purposes of a general sketch, we may give it as one representation

[1] Figures in thick type placed after quotations refer to the list of works given at the end of the book. Only works from which we have quoted appear in this list.

of the spirit of mediæval Catholicism,[1] particularly in France.

Thomism came into being partly as an answer to Averrhoism. Averrhoes' commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* was based on the Arab–Latin versions, not on the original Greek, and his commentary had given birth to a philosophy, the doctrines of which aroused debate in the schools. Chief among these doctrines was that of the Double Truth, by virtue of which a thing could be true according to philosophy even if declared untrue by faith. Hence a thing could be at once true and untrue. The Church saw the danger of such a theory, and further realized the danger inherent in the Averrhoistic method. Averrhoism was thoroughly systematic and apparently consistent. To overcome the threat latent in this system, Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) and his master Albertus Magnus (1206–1280) sought to frame another system to counter Averrhoes, one at least as logical and in many ways more coherent, one which would equally utilize Aristotelian logic.[2]

Aquinas began by recognizing theology and philosophy as separate sciences, by allowing reason an existence of its own, independent of faith. None the less, he would claim, faith, deriving from revelation which is of God, is of greater authority than reason, and can never deceive. Of course, he adds, reason cannot deceive us either, being a gift from God, but an essential reservation is necessary: reason cannot

[1] It was not unchallenged even in the Middle Ages. The Franciscans—Aquinas being a Dominican—upheld something of the Platonic philosophy in opposition to his Aristotelianism: Roger Bacon and Duns Scotus (both thirteenth-century) are among the better-known names of that school of thought.

[2] It must be emphasized that this sketch of Thomism does not give any idea of the complexity of mediæval Catholicism nor of the attempts towards more rational dogma which were made by various schools of thought. The divergent lines of thought and their subsequent development can be easily seen from G. G. Coulton's *Studies in Medieval Thought* (Nelson, 1940), an account intended for the general reader.

deceive if it be *rightly* followed. Where reason leads to a conclusion hostile to revealed truth, then we have been led astray somewhere in our reasoning.

His own *Summa* is a masterpiece of one type of reasoning. He began by reviewing objections to some fundamental dogma; he then compared them with the more orthodox opinions, deciding, naturally, in favour of the latter. He then proceeded to deal with the objections one by one until they had been shown to lack foundation. All this was done with a logic and a thoroughness which should rebut criticism—as indeed it did fairly successfully for nearly three centuries. But it rested upon certain bases which the modern mind cannot blindly accept, bases which the eighteenth-century thinkers are the first seriously to attack in France.

The keystone of the orthodox position lay in the acceptance of the old Jewish conception of the purposive creation of the world by God. God created the world, and revealed the essential truths of His work to representatives of a chosen race. The Christian conception of the world had inevitably taken over the earlier one, adding certain other "essential truths" communicated through the person of Jesus. Now, if that proposition be accepted, it must follow that revelation is a part of divine truth, and faith a superior reason. Revelation could not be wrong. Hence, for many people, if human reason failed to agree, the error quite obviously lay with reason, and Biblical commentary, exposition, interpretation, and argument were in the hands of theologians—who were unlikely to question the dictates of faith. The Church thus argued itself into the position of being not only the sole exponent of "real" truth, but also its guardian. It became possessed of a "right" to protect truth from any errors of human reason such as might appear when that reason was exercised outside the bounds of strict orthodoxy. Hence, for practical purposes, human reason working on its own was always in danger of persecution or suppression,

particularly when it proceeded by induction rather than deduction.[1]

In the theological framework there are certain fundamental "facts," such as God's existence and His nature; everything else was deduced from them. Hence, when the Roman Church blandly claims that its system is primarily logical it is asserting a fact. But much depends, as the *philosophers* saw, on what one expects of logic. Deduction, however logical, however unassailable, is acceptable only in so far as the first principles from which the rest is deduced be themselves correct. It is far from certain that orthodox deductions are the only deductions possible: it is even less certain that their first principles are beyond doubt. There, at once, is a field of inquiry which human reason was to investigate in the eighteenth century. The traditional position was still firmly held, a fact which explains why so many of the *philosophers* with whom we are concerned were hostile to, and persecuted by, the Church and its instrument in France, the Sorbonne.

We may say that the legacy of mediæval Catholicism was (1) the confusion of reason with deduction; (2) emphasis upon authority; (3) opposition to free inquiry; (4) mystical interpretation of the Bible; (5) a merciless extermination of "heresy," a campaign which justified the Inquisition and later the Index and the punishment of even cautious "freethinkers"; (6) the eschatology[2] which demanded the eternal damnation and torment of many souls, and (7) the relative absence of progress in experimental science. Each and every element in this legacy was undeniably justified if one assumed that the theologians could not err and that God was what the Church represented Him to be. But the *if* is important; as the strength

[1] *Induction*: reasoning from particular cases to general principles. *Deduction*: reasoning from "principles" to consequences.

[2] *Eschatology*: the doctrine of the final issue of things (death, last judgment, future state, etc.).

of a house depends on the solidity of its foundations, so the whole Thomist philosophy and its consequences must collapse unless its bases were sure. As the spirit of rationalistic inquiry spread in later times, the attention of man was concentrated more and more upon those bases, the unsupported assumptions of an early and credulous people. But even to this day, as Joseph McCabe testifies,[1] anything that might savour of experimental verification is suspect:—

> In many seminaries a certain amount of physical science is taught in conjunction with the course of philosophy, but much jealousy is shown with regard to it. I was much attracted to the empirical sciences from the beginning, and, though not actually impeded, I was much discouraged in that pursuit; I was informed that the empirical sciences made the mind "mechanical," and predisposed to materialism.

To this testimony we may add another and older testimony, that of a humanist still so imbued with the orthodox attitude to reason as to state categorically that the inquiring mind free of the control of faith is to be suppressed at all costs:—

> We may love the schools of the philosophers and agree with them *when they are in accordance with the truth*, and when they do not lead us astray from our chief end. Should anyone attempt to do this . . . we must firmly and continuously despise and reject him. . . . Let us admire their intellectual gifts, but in such a way as to reverence the Creator of those gifts. . . . *We must first be Christians; after that we may be what we will.* We must read philosophical works, poetical and historical, in such a way that the gospel of Christ finds an echo within our hearts. Through it alone we become wise and happy: without it, the greater our learning, the greater our ignorance, and we shall be unhappy. On the gospel alone can human industry construct all true learning, as on the one unmovable foundation.[2]

[1] *Twelve Years in a Monastery* (Thinker's Library), p. 67.
[2] Petrarch, *Epistolae Familiares*, VI, vol. 2, pp. 112–119, 2nd edition, Florence, 1864. (My italics.)

That represents the usual theological reaction to freethought, but it does not, of course, imply that experimental science is necessarily closed to Catholics.

It would be wrong to suggest that the secular power, monarch or emperor, always supported the Church. Indeed, the history of the early Middle Ages is that of the struggle between the Empire and the Papacy. The two were frequently in conflict, but little by little, notably under Nicholas I in the ninth century and Innocent III in the thirteenth, the Papacy had asserted itself. It had several advantages. It possessed a continuity which monarchy did not always possess; it became a neutral court of appeal between rival factions; and it could always intervene in politics on moral grounds, morality being the special province of the Church. True, after Innocent III, the French kings began to foster their independent rights and the power of the Pope began to decrease. But even though papal power was reduced, the power of the Church at large remained. Excommunication was a more powerful political weapon than we can appreciate in these days. The Church had taught its flock well; an excommunicate monarch would, except in special circumstances, find himself virtually cut off from the exercise of his royal powers.

Allusion has been made to the special role of guardian of morality which the Church fulfilled. It is a point which is of importance in relation to the attacks to be made upon it by the eighteenth-century *philosophers.*

To the theological mind morality was clear-cut. One began by postulating a perfect God who created man; to man He had revealed moral principles; He gave him, too, a conscience as guide. From that assumption much followed. God revealed the basic moral requirements, but the interpretation and implications of these must be worked out by that Church which He was held to have instituted to supervise His work. This morality was made up of a host of teachings emanating from the Scriptures, the councils

and Fathers of the Church; the further teaching and explanation of these is to be done by the priests. Could anything be more simple or more straightforward? Man had only to receive and obey the instructions of the Church as to what constituted the divine will in the moral field. That all this system of morals was contrary to evidence was a small matter. Salvation came solely through the practice of revealed morality. It is clear that man could have nothing to say on the subject of morality; he had no right to interfere, still less to discuss the desirability of any of the theological virtues. Similarly, he was not encouraged to examine the political consequences of theocracy, by which kings were created to rule and to lead. The sacred trust of kingship was normally regarded as inviolate (unless the king offended against divine morality); to attack or depose a king was a form of sacrilege, unless he were condemned by the Church.

It might perhaps be thought that the Reformation would seriously attempt to examine the traditional bases of Christian thought. In fact, the reformers failed to examine the presuppositions on which Christianity depended; indeed, it is true to say that the Reformation was mainly an attempt to change the authority to which men might appeal, not a movement to remove authority as such. In the sixteenth century men became more generally aware of written tradition. Educated men now acquired the habit of reading and verifying. The insight into classical philosophy and life was reinforced by the new knowledge which the discovery of America brought into being. Organized Christianity, as it had existed, was now exposed to a double threat. On the one hand the text of the Bible was accessible to laymen and the claims of the Church liable to be challenged; on the other hand, the men of the sixteenth century were able to see that a system which they had taken as universal was in fact not universal. The Church was faced with the danger that men would insist on passing

beyond the limits of inquiry which had long been fixed.

All this gave birth to allied movements, the Renascence in literature and the Reformation in religion. Both were symptomatic of the new spirit, and it is significant that many of the humanists and writers of the Renascence were suspected of heresy, whilst others were definitely known to be sympathetic towards the reformers. But even more significant is the fact that most of them forsook the movement. This was not through personal fear, but because they realized the intellectual defect of the Reformation. Protestantism in the sixteenth century was a harsh and intolerant religion which desired liberty to reject Catholic doctrine and to read the Greek text of the Scriptures, but allowed no free criticism of its own theology. Further, the reformers stressed the verbal inspiration of the Bible, thereby making experimental science almost blasphemous, unless favourable to their own position.

Many people of the sixteenth century, while not deserting the Church, were affected by Protestantism. They had been made aware of the shortcomings of Catholicism, the lack of knowledge, the corrupt text, the unjustified conclusions drawn from dubious tradition. So it is that one historian of the Reformation can say of the Italians: "There was no open rebellion against the Church; . . . the humanists as a whole were faithful to the common practice of Italy: *they conformed and they disbelieved.*" [1] Had they gone farther and examined the prime suppositions upon which all doctrine, Catholic or Protestant, rested, their position would perhaps have been more definite. As it was, few *openly* questioned the divine inspiration of the Church or Bible, and certainly not the existence of the divinity which was held to have provided the inspiration. Thus these men of the sixteenth century were left with a curious state of mind, one which was "irreligious without being anti-religious, which was

[1] Beard, *The Reformation*, p. 40. (My italics.)

curious, observant, and critical without being constructive." [1]

Philosophically, this fundamentally irreligious mentality found its home in an old heresy known as Fideism. Stated briefly, this was the exclusion of reason from the religious field, holding that in all matters concerning religion reason had no powers. Such a position was essentially opposed to Thomism, although accepted in part by other scholastics after Ockham. The Thomists had believed their system eminently reasonable. They had founded it by reason, even though by deduction only; suddenly to reject the capacity of reason for dealing with such questions was a complete reversal of things. That it was allowed to continue as a widely-accepted philosophy within the Church is partly explainable by the very unexpected blows administered by Protestantism. The reformers had demonstrated quite clearly that, if the human mind were allowed to examine the available evidence and to treat the authorities in a textual and critical manner, many modifications in doctrine must inevitably follow. The Church, probably in all sincerity, felt there the influence of the devil, and took as its main task the extirpation of those individualists who seemed to claim a wisdom and science greater than the accumulated knowledge of centuries of orthodox thought. Protestantism was the chief enemy, and what safer weapon could the Church add to its armoury than a philosophy which *a priori* denied the validity of every objection rationally reached? The Church was content to allow Fideism its temporary existence. The Fideists were equally content with the lack of open persecution. Fideism represented a means by which they could retain their allegiance to Christian and Catholic doctrine whilst enjoying the right to *exercise* their reason. Their premise made any unorthodox conclusion purely theoretical, but theoretical conclusions reached too frequently can have a decisive and disturbing effect

[1] Creighton, *History of the Papacy*, VI, 5.

upon practical allegiance. For the present, however, the Church conceived that this danger was the lesser of the two. Catholicism appears to have decided upon its campaign: first the Protestants, then the Fideists. Modern Catholicism, purified of Fideism, has officially reverted to its claims to be logical and reasonable.

Thus, by the end of the sixteenth century the Catholic Church had had to face a certain number of criticisms upon dogmatic and doctrinal issues, but had not yet met any really scientific attack such as might threaten its foundations. The beginnings of scientific method, however imperfect, showed themselves more clearly in the seventeenth century with Descartes and, unknown to him, prepared the way for the major assault which the eighteenth-century thinkers launched against the whole theocratic system.

Descartes is an important but curious figure. He formulated four rules of thought which are necessary to clear thinking. They are: (1) to accept as truth only those things which are evidently true, (2) to subdivide all problems into the maximum number of separate questions to be studied, (3) to build up from the simplest to the most complex subjects, and (4) to make one's researches as exhaustive as is practicable, so that conclusions drawn shall be as true as possible. These rules, in Descartes' hands, became confused and misapplied. Descartes, reverting to a form of Platonism, emphasized the mind's direct knowledge of itself. His *cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am," is perhaps an initial error. To conclude that the act of thinking postulates the existence of the *thinker* is fundamentally a rash procedure. The act of thinking does no more than imply the existence of *thought*. However, arguing that the certainty of his existence derived from the clarity with which he was aware of thinking, it followed for Descartes that that which was clearly conceived was true. Further, in practice, Descartes took the view that reason is limited to intuition and deduction. By intuition the mind

receives a clear, and hence for him true, notion of the essence of things; by deduction it argues the consequences of the first principles intuitively received. Thus, however useful Descartes' rules could become to the rational mind, they were deprived of utility in his own system because he accepted as true certain propositions generally accepted and intuitively reached. This meant that he accepted the idea of a God-creator, which remained as unchallenged as in former times. Such an attitude may explain the strange position of his fourth rule. It would be more sensible to begin by collecting all available evidence *before* deciding to retain some knowledge as true (Descartes himself calls it *evidently* true, without justifying his adverb). It did not occur to him that reason should work upon objective evidence and from it draw general principles. On the contrary, such a method of reasoning appeared to him merely an instrument to determine which of various *deduced* conclusions was the correct one. Reason was still, in the last resort, confirming rather than discovering.

Thus a method which could—and later did—have far-reaching results was put to the service of reproving various religious "truths" which had been accepted without examination. In the past people had worked from faith towards understanding; now they were to work from understanding towards faith, a change in the pattern of thought without any real change in the materials of thought.

What were the results of his method? Rejecting both sense-evidence and reason as sure means of knowledge, he accepted intuition as sure. He argued thus: I exist, I have an idea of perfection, but I am not perfect; therefore the idea of perfection must have been given me by someone perfect; therefore God exists. Similarly, having an idea of perfection, I am unlikely to have created myself imperfect; therefore my creator is the someone perfect, God. This creator gave us our reason, and if it is faulty,

the error cannot come from God, but from ourselves. If we use our reason properly—i.e., deduce from the certainty of intuitive knowledge—we cannot go wrong.

It is unnecessary to follow Descartes through the windings of his reasoning. It is sufficient to say that his service to humanity in the field of metaphysics lies precisely in the fact that he expounded a semi-rational method and applied it, in his own way, to the bases of religion. His successors learnt to apply a more rational method to those bases, with better results. One of the gravest disservices he did humanity was his support of the doctrine of innate ideas,[1] against which the eighteenth century arrayed the teachings of Locke.

In the physical world Descartes based his work upon his metaphysical opinions. Accepting the existence of a perfect creator-God and that of substance, the essential property of which is extension, he deduced his conception of the universe: infinite matter; no atoms; no void; no reality of attributes such as colour, smell, etc.; the constant and immediate filling of any void created by the movement of a body. Matter being in itself motionless, movement must have come into being by the intervention of God. God's perfection requiring constancy, whatever laws He created are unchangeable. We thus find ourselves faced with the Cartesian mechanism. The sum total of movement created by God must remain the same; it may be transmitted, but the quantity cannot change. This implies, of course, that movement can take place only by direct transmission and contact. Of Descartes' other conclusions only one requires mention here, as being an object of attack in the eighteenth century—the theory of vortices. According to this, God, having created the substance which occupies space, subdivided this "space-substance" into small pieces. Each piece

[1] I.e., general notions, said to be inborn in all men; the opposite of acquired ideas.

pivots on itself; equally, each piece is part of a group of particles which turn round certain fixed points—planets and the like. The vortices thus formed are the source of movement and of the formation of the universe, being started by the prime source of all movement, the Creator Himself.

The greater part of the Cartesian doctrines are admittedly erroneous. Further, Descartes' logic is rightly suspect. Does he not regard as evident things for which there is no evidence? Does he not rely upon his reason in deduction, when he previously denied the value of reason? Does he not make his perfect God a being acting in perfection without yet having created perfection? Does he not postulate free will in a mechanistic universe? Does he not presuppose a set of innate ideas with nothing to explain when we acquired them or for what we require them?

Fortunately, outside the Church the thinkers seized upon the more practical side of the Cartesian legacy. Criticize his method as we may, the method is good; what we really oppose is Descartes' use of his method. The full implications of the method itself are of immense and permanent value to the human mind. Consider for a moment the normal rational approach to any problem. It is little more than the application of Descartes' four rules—but a fearless application of them in their correct order. Restating the process of thought in something like Cartesian terms, we would say that it runs as follows: (1) make one's research as exhaustive as possible; (2) accept as "fact" only those things which are verifiable as such; (3) treat all problems according to the separate simple questions they involve and, of any conclusions drawn, accept as true only those things which satisfy all available evidence; (4) build up from the simple conclusions to the complex conclusions, again accepting as true only those things which the evidence justifies.

The eighteenth century applied these rules, more or less in their correct order, to the whole field of human activity, thereby calling in question and submitting

to the test of evidence many of those things which Descartes had regarded as "evidently true."

This brief account of human thought in France prior to the eighteenth century brings out certain vital assumptions, most of which the *philosophers* set out to combat. We may list ten of them as most important for our purposes: (1) the universe was created by a God; (2) God is eternal, omniscient, almighty, and non-material; (3) man's free will caused the Fall, and man has been suffering the results of his sin ever since: man is naturally sinful; (4) the earth is the centre of interest of the universe; (5) objects possess not only the matter of which they are composed, but also a form which determines their character; (6) God has revealed His will to man through the Church or, for Protestantism, through the Bible; (7) man is born with all essential ideas implanted in him, including notions of good and evil; (8) the Church is the divinely appointed representative of God and has the duty of teaching the faith and suppressing all "heresy"; (9) reason is a capacity for combining sense-evidence, but cannot possibly be accounted valid where it conflicts with the dictates of faith; (10) tradition and authority are the valuable factors in human life and behaviour, since they represent the inspired wisdom of past centuries.

These, then, are the fundamentals with which eighteenth-century thought had to contend. To destroy or diminish their force was the way to human freedom, to decent society, to intellectual honesty. It is to the different levels of attack that we must now turn to see human reason freeing itself from the chains which religion had imposed.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AWAKENING OF REASON

WITH the eighteenth century certain significant changes had taken place. The Church, by its scandals and by its obvious alliance with the Court, had lost much of its authority over men's minds. The social structure, too, had changed. The old division into king, nobility, clergy, and people no longer sufficed; the middle classes were financially too well assured to be ignored. The King's will, which in practice constituted law, no longer received submissive acceptance. Men were ready to consider criticism of the existing order. The battle between the Jesuits and the Jansenists had at least made it clear that good Christians could challenge the orthodox and powerful Jesuits. When the Jansenists claimed freedom of conscience even at the price of losing the Church's approval, they set a precedent which others, non-Christians, were to follow. The eighteenth-century thinkers could to some extent echo Quesnel: " The fear of unjust excommunication must not prevent us from doing our duty."

These changes, political and ecclesiastical, were reinforced by a new contact with the outside world in the form of travellers' accounts of other peoples, both civilized and primitive. In primitive communities they naturally found no complicated despotic monarchy, no highly-organized privileges of one section at the expense of another. The " naturalness " of the French system was thus challenged by thinking men. Civilized countries offered a more immediate lesson; the French became aware of England, a neighbour who survived without the large-scale restraint practised in their own country. It was to her that the *philosophers* turned to illustrate the type of social organization which they contemplated for France. By a natural process of development and elimination, England had achieved a form of life in

which the abstractions of liberty of thought, speech, and action had become realities. Above all, it seemed to have established the dignity of man's reason and his power to reach towards more liberal political and religious ideals. It was certainly this idealized version of England which was presented to the French. The most specific English influences in French thought were Bacon, Newton, Locke, and, to a lesser extent, Hobbes, and it is important to understand why these writers appealed to the French in their anti-Christian mood.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) was misunderstood by the eighteenth century as he has been misunderstood by many writers since. He offers the strange figure of a philosopher who has had more influence, even upon Rationalists, than he deserved. He was far from original, frequently incorrect in his ideas, wrong in his estimate of previous thinkers, not particularly interested in accuracy, and often uncritical of superstition. None the less, consciously or unconsciously, the French noted only those aspects which characterized their own critical minds. They ignored his declared reverence for the mysteries of Faith and retained only his efforts to make man master of the secrets of the universe, his formal hostility to scholastic methods of reasoning, his objections to a preoccupation with Final Causes.[1] They took account of his attempts to frame a method by which any man might probe the essence of things, of his insistence on facts, on experience and evidence as opposed to tradition (4). His philosophy, with its absence of supernatural sanctions, its occupation with this world, its empiricism, its assumption that man will ultimately be able to understand Nature and her works, was hailed as an early form of Materialism.

Newton (1642–1727) was, for the French, the scientist who proved man's powers by his many and fundamental discoveries. He was a token of man's success in explaining the functioning of the universe

[1] I.e., the aim contemplated in the creation of the universe.

when left to scientific and practical methods. An examination of his *Principia* shows his skill and patience as an experimenter, thorough and anxious to counteract any possible source of error. At the age of twenty-three he had recognized the laws of centrifugal force, six years before Huyghens formulated and published them. It was Newton who established that for the whole planetary system there was a relation between distances and the periodic times of the planets, the cube of the distance being proportional to the square of the time. It was Newton who discovered that motion is almost a quality of matter, that at least no force is required to maintain motion, that a body will continue in motion unless some force counteracts it. To the eighteenth century this seemed to suggest that matter did not need divine care or control, that matter and its properties were inseparably co-existent.

The scrupulous and practical honesty of Newton's mind was a feature which permeated his whole work, and it was this which attracted people like Voltaire, who set about popularizing Newton's discoveries in the field of optics (his theory of light and colour), of physics (motion, the movement and predictability of comets, the system of attraction and its effect on tides), etc. What the French liked in Newton was not only the manifestation of man's rational capacities, but also the fact that he was concerned chiefly with the measurable, not the abstract, with the " how " of things, not with speculations as to their " essence," a new approach to phenomena.[1] They welcomed him, too, as an antidote to Descartes' explanation of the universe, with its vortices, its reduction of everything to a mechanical formula, its prime doctrine that in the material world nothing happens except through direct contact—a doctrine which leaves a host of problems unsettled and which prevents classification of phenomena. Now the universe seemed

[1] *Phenomena:* things actually experienced or observed through the senses.

clearer and Nature acquired a new importance as a principle, as a source of the nature they saw around them, as something eternal and uncreated. Men thought that Bacon's promise had come true, that man would shortly hold the key to the whole universe, that already he had explored most of its secrets. This faith in the power of science needed only as complement something which would explain man's ideas, his desires, his nature; something which would reasonably account for his mental world as the Newtonian physics explained his physical world. The century found this in the work of Locke (1632–1704).

Nearly every writer of importance among the Encyclopedists and their contemporaries admitted his debt to Locke. One could, of course, say that they overrated Locke's value as a philosopher—the criticism would not be original—but they seem to have found precisely what they wanted, not a complete philosophy to repeat in chorus, but a certain number of ideas which suited their outlook. That Locke had his strict Anglican moments was immaterial; he gave them something else which was useful—an explanation of the source of human ideas which depended ultimately on something comprehensible and human—the five senses.

Locke's theory of the origin of ideas is well known, and a few extracts will suffice to recall it. He set out to refute those who believe that there are " certain Innate Principles, some Primary Notions . . . characters, as it were, stamped upon the mind of man, which the Soul receives in its very first being and brings into the world with it " (38, I). Locke preferred to envisage the mind at birth as " white paper void of all characters, without any ideas," and when asked whence the mind received its knowledge and ideas, replied: from experience, through our sense-experience and our reflexion (38, II).

This was not entirely a sensationalist theory,[1] but

[1] *Sensationalism*: the philosophy which holds that all knowledge is derived through the senses.

it became one among his French followers. Even without that development, however, Locke would still be immensely important. His emphasis on experience, his refutation of innate ideas, his critical methods: these things corresponded to French needs —the desire to apply human and scientific thought to problems, the means of avoiding the initial assumption of a personal God as the source of our ideas, etc., the explanation of mental things in terms of physical, and hence observable, phenomena. Locke made it possible for them to begin their inquiries on a plane accessible to everyone. Elsewhere, Locke seemed to be teaching yet another thing which they themselves felt—that, provided human conduct is conducive to the happiness of society, the motive behind it need not concern us.

Again, he foreshadowed a popular eighteenth-century topic: the attitude towards matter. Still under the influence of the dualistic view of matter and mind,[1] he none the less began to appreciate the possibility that thought might be but a mode of being, a faculty of the object, not a faculty of a second being, the " soul," added to the original being. In other words, he claimed that it was *possible* that matter might think, not merely hold a thinking being. It was along these lines that the *philosophers*, notably Diderot and d'Holbach, developed their ideas. Locke would have rejected their position, since he believed it more *probable* that there should be a " thinking substance " which was non-material. He also held that matter was not prior to, or synonymous with, God. Whatever Locke's position and his theological bases, it was to the other side of his work that the eighteenth-century thinkers were attracted, and they were all " Lockists," an epithet which marked out the Deists and " sensationalists " of the times.

The effect of all this English influence was to crystallize and formulate what was " in the air " in

[1] *Dualism*: the doctrine which regards mind and matter as two quite distinct entities.

France; it further reinforced something which had begun with Descartes. Unlike the Jesuits, whose system reconciled faith and reason, Descartes separated the two in practice.

The Church, in the person of Bossuet, had foreseen the effects of the Cartesian philosophy: " Under the guise of Cartesianism, I see terrible persecution being prepared against the Church." His forecast was accurate. Bacon's insistence upon observation and experience is now allied to Descartes' desire for certainty. In Fontenelle we find the idea of the certainty which science can bring (23). Bayle, too, asserts his confidence in the powers of reason and permits no tampering with it: " the understanding which keeps watch at the gate should allow nothing to enter unless it bears the stamp of truth " (7, ix).

Unlike contemporary theology, eighteenth-century thought was always ready to examine and, if necessary, reject its conclusions. Evidence of a positive nature was required before beliefs could be entertained. Following the lines of Locke's thought, the *philosophers* became impatient of pure authority and realized that propositions often regarded as " self-evident " are not universally so regarded, that the axiomatic [1] is frequently neither universal nor innate, as is supposed, but limited to certain communities, and is the product of education, experience, environment, etc.

It is not surprising that the eighteenth century should have acquired this faith in human reason, as opposed to authority, when one recalls that with Newton and others the human mind had demonstrated its capacity for producing, without the aid of theology or metaphysics, a satisfactory explanation of much of the working of the universe. Small wonder, then, that the century felt such opposition to the times when, in d'Holbach's words, " doubt was regarded as a crime; when the submission or rather the abnegation of reason, and blind faith were regarded

[1] I.e., that which is regarded as self-evident, needing no proof.

as the greatest of all virtues " (**30**, *Introduction*). The time of Christian resignation to authority was passing. Symptomatic of this change of feeling is the way in which d'Alembert manages, by apparent concession, to exile religion and metaphysics from the field of reason; since, according to Pascal, man's nature is an impenetrable mystery to man using reason alone, " nothing is more necessary than a revealed religion to instruct us on so many points " (**1**).

Man's sinfulness, his need for moral guidance, the consequent position of the Church—all these things and many others now stand as relying upon the authority of the very body which profits by them, the Church. Authority becomes suspect. In that, the century was heeding the warning sent out by Bacon, who pointed out the danger of reverence for authority, of popular opinion, of special bias, of interest, the four " phantoms of the mind " which will hinder scientific progress unless they be discarded or avoided.

Not all authoritative teaching is necessarily bad. As Voltaire pointed out, while authority *as* authority is suspect, " there are some very good prejudices: those which judgment ratifies when we use our reason " [1] (**47**, *Prejudices*). By reason, Diderot reminds us, we must not understand something sterile (**17**). The imaginative element is essential; any step from observation to hypothesis is really a work of the imagination. Rationalism does not banish imagination; it merely controls it by experimental testing of conclusions. The field of human reason and the work which it sought to do, unhampered by authority, are summed up thus by Diderot: " I regard the vast field of science as a large terrain dotted with obscure places and well-lighted places. Our work must have as its aim either to extend the boundaries of the lighted places or to multiply the number of centres of light within the terrain " (**17**). Such was the aim of a century unwilling to draw up whole systems explaining

[1] Among the good prejudices are the social virtues: parental respect, hatred of untruths, proscription of theft, etc.

everything until evidence was available in sufficient quantity; in Fontenelle's words: "So far as new discoveries are concerned, we must not be in too great a hurry to reason, although we always desire to, and true philosophers do as the elephants do, never . . . putting a second foot to the ground until the first is firmly planted" (23).

The eighteenth century is thus characterized by its espousal of the cause of patient accumulation of facts and by its insistence upon the inductive form of reasoning. No longer is reason to be limited to deduced consequences and banned from inquiry into fundamentals. In all subjects freedom is claimed to examine evidence, phenomena, verifiable fact. Further, there is a definite demand for positive evidence. The thinkers are not content to accept Christianity because one cannot prove it to be untrue; they recognize how unsatisfactory such an argument would be in any other sphere. Newton, in the scientific world, had explained how he reached his theory of light and colour: "the Theory which I propounded, was evinced by me, not by inferring 'tis thus because not otherwise, that is, not by deducing it only from a confutation of contrary suppositions, but by deriving it from Experiments concluded positively and directly." With the *philosophers* as with Newton, facts, not hypothetical "axioms," are the starting-point. The ideal is best summarized by Newton: "For the best and safest method of philosophizing seems to be, first to inquire diligently into the properties of things, and of establishing those properties by experiments, and then to proceed more slowly to hypotheses for the explanation of them. For hypotheses should be subservient only in explaining the properties of things, but not assumed in determining them; unless so far as they may furnish experiments." [1] This genuine inductive method had already found its way into philosophy with Bacon's emphasis on "negative instances," upon examining

[1] In *Philosophical Transactions* for 1672.

both sides of each question, and with Locke's examples of varied moral sentiments among men and his comparative method. The enthusiasm with which the inductive method was received and the importance which was attached to investigation and observation are seen in Diderot, who, adding the role of reason, stresses the order necessary to accurate thought: observation, hypothesis, experiment. " Observation gathers the facts; reflexion combines them; experiment verifies the result of the combining " (17).

The main difficulty in the way of the man seeking truth is to assess the value of evidence. Locke, for instance, found evidence of Christ's mission in the miracles, never doubting their occurrence or questioning their divine origin. The *philosophers* were less convinced of the " obvious " value of the evidence, and hence tested it to the best of their ability. Their attitude had been foreshadowed by Fontenelle, who preferred natural and rational explanations to supernatural explanations: " that Hercules parted two mountains with his two hands is not too credible; but that in the time of some Hercules, for there are fifty of them, the Ocean should have broken in between two mountains weaker than the rest, perhaps with the help of an earthquake, and rushed in between Europe and Algeria, I would believe that without much difficulty " (23). Rational probability is henceforth preferred to mystic and unsupported " certainty " (cf. Voltaire in 48, *Foreword*).

So far we have considered how France, under the change of political and ecclesiastical circumstances, was moved by a desire for amelioration; how contact with English thought helped to formulate this desire; how scientific progress had led to a form of scepticism impatient of purely authoritarian codes of thought; how the century tended towards the examination of evidence as a preliminary to thought. To complete this sketch of the awakening of Rationalism we may now glance at the main effects of this feeling upon mental attitudes and ideals.

We have, first, a strong belief in the legitimacy of reason. Reason is no longer the poor relative of faith, as Helvétius points out: " In vain do (vile and cowardly) men repeat that truths are often dangerous. Supposing that sometimes they were, to what even greater danger would not the nation be exposed if it agreed to stagnate in ignorance? " (24, *Preface*). Progress has not ceased, and what man has so far achieved is a token of his ever-growing powers. Much of the *philosophers*' work is directed towards helping the public to realize that many things, at present hidden, are not impossible of human solution. This realization of man's capacities leads, as in d'Holbach, to a further feeling that those who can see clearly owe it to their fellow-men to warn them of their sorry plight (30). The warning may not be heeded, but the *philosophers* know that the truth they announce must sooner or later come into its own. " Do not believe," d'Holbach says, " that truth is useless; the seed once sown continues to exist and in time bears fruit; and, like those seeds which remain buried in the earth for a long time before growing, it awaits the circumstances which favour its development " (30).

The second general effect of the spirit of inquiry is the rational approach to religious dogma and to the " mysteries of faith." The whole tendency is to emphasize the contrast between scientific certainty and religious fables, between probability and the impossible-miraculous, for, as Helvétius points out, " interest would make people deny the most evident propositions of geometry and believe the most absurd religious stories " (26). The eighteenth-century thinkers extend Locke's method, when he fought against the doctrine of Original Sin by commenting that " In Adam all die " implies no more than death as the result of the Fall, and not that the sin of Adam doomed mankind to perpetual sinning (40). The plain, and so often contradictory, text of the Bible is explained without reference to the body of traditional exegesis. Their Deism is much the same as Locke's

alleged Christianity—a religion which retains little more than a God, creator of the laws of nature, and a code of social behaviour.

To support such a belief, if one may so term it, they first needed to show that the mysteries of Christianity were not at all mysterious, but merely manifestations of a common human failing. In France Fontenelle (22) had begun the task by showing how primitive men, in their ignorance, naturally created the Gods: "They imagined beings more powerful than themselves capable of producing these great effects (storms, etc.). These beings had to be like men: what other picture could they have? And as soon as they are like men, the imagination naturally attributes to them everything human; they are now men in every way, except that they are always a little more powerful than men."

Voltaire often attacked this idea of a God with power to interfere in human life, the God of Providence which had replaced the earlier storm-raiser. He himself strongly supported any position which got away from divine interference and favoured an idea of inevitability in human life. We are what we are and we act as we do because we could be and do no other: in those words we may summarize the form which scientific determinism took in his philosophy.

The third effect upon the human mind was a change in values and a new set of ideals quite unlike the combination of fanaticism and trusting faith of former times. Fontenelle had already indicated (20) that it was dangerous to trifle with existing irrational beliefs, picking and choosing among them. Accept all or reject all is his advice. New ideals of justice, truth, liberty, and tolerance are presented by Montesquieu (41). Bacon again helps to summarize the new intellectual ideals: "desire to seek, patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to reconsider, carefulness to arrange and set in order" (3).

To accomplish all these ends the *philosophers* set before them a programme of public education, a form

of propaganda designed to accustom the people to critical examination of the ideas they had so long taken for granted and the truth of which they had never questioned. Accepting Locke's refutation of innate ideas, they not unnaturally stressed the power of education and intellectual environment as the decisive factor in mental attitudes. Their first task, then, was to provide the necessary tools for the re-education of the public. Much of this work involved the deliberate destruction of cherished illusions. For instance, where ecclesiastical teaching had assumed uniformity of belief and practice and built a whole system around it, the Encyclopedists and their contemporaries did their utmost to demonstrate the diversity of human customs, habits, and religions. But they were not attempting to frame a philosophy to be universally enforced by missionary work. Few of them believed in the nearness of the time when all men would be governed by reason; they were content to try to create a centre where reason would prevail. " Even if one has no right to believe that reason will one day enlighten the whole of humanity, why should we not expect to see it govern at least part of the earth? " (30); " Reason is only the recognition, in the light of experience, of that which is useful or harmful to human happiness and interests " (34), writes d'Holbach.

This question of human happiness is yet another effect of the new mentality. As each point of habit, idea, custom, morality, politics, or organization is examined, the social benefit or harm derived from it is the test applied, before it is accepted or rejected. Thus in practice they adopted Locke's idea that " no opinions contrary to human society or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society are to be tolerated " (39), as also his refusal of tolerance to those who would destroy the sovereign's power on grounds of heresy, etc., and to those " that will not own and teach the duty of tolerating all men in matters of mere religion " (39). The test is purely

social. Christianity will chiefly be attacked because it does not serve public interest, but, rather, harms (and encourages the head of the State to harm) the men who make up the State.

In spite of their opposition to Christianity the *philosophers* as individuals showed themselves tolerant and just in most cases, but there was some intolerance, quite apart from the gradual development of political intolerance in Rousseau's work. It concerns on the one hand those Christians who place politics under Church control, and on the other atheists, whose teachings were regarded as dangerous and pernicious to society.[1] There was, too, the refusal to temporize in intellectual matters. If a thing were held to be untrue, then it must be attacked as such. This did not, however, mean dogmatism: "it would be unphilosophical not to have the courage to hear one's opinions contradicted. We are not theologians" (**28**). Yet, the century was conscious of its improvement in philosophical matters. Voltaire said of contemporary criticism: "Supported by a healthy philosophy, it has destroyed all the prejudices with which society was infected; . . . false marvels, false wonders, superstitious customs; it has relegated to the schools a thousand puerile disputes which were once dangerous and which they have rendered contemptible: in that, they have indeed served the State" (**19**, *Men of letters*).

Such, then, was the programme which the *philosophers* adopted. But how were they to fulfil it? When they began their work the Church was all-powerful, men were unaccustomed to freethought, the majority were unaware that any criticism of the existing state of affairs could be formulated. This was the first duty: to change that mentality, to arouse thought and criticism, to attack gently, to insinuate doubt, to shake the idol of authority, to weaken the hold of tradition. It was to that end that the thinkers first applied their efforts.

[1] See our comments on this subject in ch. vii.

CHAPTER THREE

TRADITION AND AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY is usualiy vested in a person or institution by virtue of some document. Where no written sanction exists, the authority is most likely to reside in tradition: this is the case with Christianity. The Bible, although in practice used as a sort of guarantee of the Church's authority, is really an expression of that authority. It is a compilation of documents authorized by the Church. In the last resort the authority of the Bible rests, contrary to the popular Protestant belief, upon that of the Church. The thinkers of the late seventeenth and of the eighteenth centuries saw that their first duty was to show of how little value tradition really was. In this respect two writers are important, Bayle and Fontenelle, precursors of the Encyclopedists, to whom they bequeathed a method and an ideal.

Bayle (1647–1706) began as a Protestant, was converted to Catholicism, and then renounced his religion. His published work is a thinly-disguised attack upon superstition and traditional ways of thought; his aim was tolerance for unorthodox religions and for rational thought. His *Commentary on the "Compelle intrare"* was a magnificent defence of human reason, its powers, legitimacy, and rights. He went so far as to demonstrate that all "acts of faith," even submission to the authority of the Church, were really acts of reason. If they are valid when they lead to orthodoxy, he claimed, they must be equally valid when they lead away from it. Reason did not come begging for recognition; it asserted its position as the keystone to all philosophies, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Atheistic. If you reject it, you must destroy them all; if you accept it, you must accept tolerance for all positions. Such was the message of the *Commentary*, a message reinforcing his earlier *Thoughts on the Comet*, which were an attack upon

superstition of all types.[1] His general reflexions were destructive of authority and oral tradition. At first sight the numerical support behind Christianity would seem extremely impressive, but Bayle faced the essential question: what is the *value* of numerical support? He replied: " Remember certain fabulous ideas which have been driven out recently, by however great a number of witnesses they were supported, because it was shown that the witnesses, having copied each other without any examination of what they were repeating, ought not to count as more than one witness " (8). Numerical support is not in itself any guarantee of truth. Whole generations of people have subscribed to beliefs which have since been shown to be untrue; generations have uncritically repeated what has been handed down. Wherein, then, is the value of such support? " Eventually man has found himself obliged to believe what everybody believed for fear of being taken for a rebel who claims to know better than everyone else and to contradict venerable antiquity " (8). Bayle's own work was primarily directed to the contradiction of " venerable antiquity," by accumulating testimony on all sides of every question (6), by insinuating doubt. His aim was tolerance, his method freedom of thought which embraces the *pro* and the *con*. His own position was quite clear: he believed in the possibilities of human reason and in tolerance for whatever conclusions it reached.

Fontenelle (1657–1757) worked upon much the same lines as Bayle, except perhaps that he deals more specifically with Christian arguments. Starting, for instance, from the obvious fact that even Christianity claims considerably fewer miracles now than in the past, and finding similar beliefs in marvels among primitive races, he gave this solution: " The more ignorant man is and the less experience he has,

[1] Cf. also his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, in which he assembled information by which questions might be more fully and objectively studied.

the more wonders he sees. The first men saw many; and, since parents tell their children what they have seen and done, the accounts of those times were full of wonders" (22). He was particularly interested in the nature of divine pronouncements made through men. "As for oracles, their first establishment is not . . . difficult to explain. Give me half a dozen people whom I can persuade that the sun does *not* cause the day and I shall not despair of whole nations embracing that opinion. However ridiculous an idea is, all you have to do is to find the means of maintaining it for some time; it is then already ancient and sufficiently proved" (21).

A few years earlier Fontenelle had attacked both the Christian method of inventing dogmas by analogy with earlier ones and the argument that we should not try to be wiser than our ancestors. His comment was brief: "These two principles when taken together work wonders. The first . . . extends a piece of folly to infinity; the second preserves it for ever, however weakly founded; the first, because we are already in error, urges us to be more and more so, and the second forbids us to get out of it because we have been in it for some time" (22). Now, in the *History of Oracles*, he pretended to make a gesture to the Church, a gesture which underlines, however, the fact that even great Churchmen can be wrong in their opinions: "We do not seek to weaken authority, nor attack the merit of these great men. After noting all the errors they have fallen into with regard to a certain number of facts, an infinite number of solid arguments and fine discoveries will remain to them, for which we cannot admire them enough. . . . It is for us to receive from them only that which is legitimate and to forgive them the zeal which has furnished us with more claims than we need."

If oral tradition is suspect, being the handing on and embellishing of human stories, what of written tradition? "We reason on what the historians have said, but were these historians unmoved by passion,

were they not credulous, or ill-informed, or careless? " (21). In other words, the written sources are not sufficiently reliable in themselves to demand acceptance without critical examination. But whether the tradition be oral or written, Fontenelle mainly feared the use made of it. As he tells us (21), human ignorance is really shown, not by what it does not know, but by the reasons it knows for things which are untrue or non-existent. It was this fear which led him to formulate the rule which influenced all the *philosophers*: " Let us make sure of the fact before worrying ourselves about its cause " (21). He gave them, too, a method: the testing of the unknown by the known, suggesting that if a thing can be explained by some known phenomena it is wiser not to invent other explanations which cannot be tested—a form of scientific economy, in fact. Fontenelle had the mind of a scientist, observing and collating his facts. Although many of his very tentative hypotheses have since been overthrown by further discoveries, his importance on the scientific side lies in his popularizing of recent advances in our knowledge of the universe. In so doing he helped to create a state of mind which was aware of the littleness of man, the relative unimportance of our planet in the whole solar system, and the improbability of any anthropocentric [1] explanation of creation.

The work begun by Bayle and Fontenelle continued through the century. The thinkers agreed with the position adopted by d'Holbach, that most men are attached to their religion by habit only, never having given serious examination to their reasons or motives, never having dared to investigate a question which is none the less so important to them (28). Again, with him, but in less violent language, they felt that education, in the hands of the clergy, has no other aim than to " infect the human mind at an early stage with unreasonable opinions, shocking absurdities, distressing horrors; from the threshold of life man is filled

[1] I.e., regarding man as the measure and aim of the universe.

with foolishness; he acquires the habit of taking for proven truth a mass of errors which are of use only to impostors" (30). They recognized that the power of education is great and lasting, and that their work would be difficult, since "people do not cease to believe an absurdity because fine minds show it to be such; they believe it because a small number of fools and rogues say it is true" (26). Hence the main lines of the *philosophers'* attack are clear: state the truth, attack error, and try to convince the people that their trust in their ecclesiastical mentors is misplaced.

Another scientist, Buffon, tentatively suggested that the Genesis story was incorrect. In the first volume of his *Natural History* (1749) he pointed out the probability of a solar origin for the earth. The following year the Church denounced the book because it offended against the Biblical text: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"! Such was the type of opposition which manifestations of human reason were to meet. How, then, were they to find their expression so that the public might be re-educated? One way was to examine the past, to list practically without comment parallels to Christian beliefs, parallels which the average Christian would admit he could not believe. That is the method adopted by Voltaire (47, *Miracles*). Such parallels were not likely to disturb professional Christians, but they were not without their effect upon the ordinary reader.

If mere length of tradition were support enough for a theory, then Voltaire was able to draw the public's attention to non-Christian traditions at least as venerable as those of Christianity. "The idea of metempsychosis [1] is perhaps the oldest dogma of the known world, and it still reigns in a great part of India and China" (47, *Metamorphosis*), he writes, thereby pointing out that Christianity is not the only well-established religion, in addition to insinuating that certain

[1] *Metempsychosis*: the passage of the soul after death from one animal body to another.

Christian doctrines are merely refined echoes of primitive theories.

Although Catholic doctrines inevitably receive most attention, d'Holbach cannot resist a criticism of the illogical attitude of Protestantism towards the Real Presence in the Sacrament: "The Protestants have had enough courage to reject this mystery, although it is perhaps the one most clearly established by Jesus Christ, who says definitely: *Take, eat, for this is my body*" (28). As for another dogma, he puts its origin not in divine teaching, but in classical philosophy from whence it was borrowed: "It is clear that Roman Catholics owe their *purgatory* to Plato. This . . . philosopher divides the souls of men into *pure*, *curable*, and *incurable*. The first, which had belonged to the just, returned to the universal soul . . .; the second went to hell, where each year they appeared before the judges of that gloomy kingdom . . .; lastly, the incurable souls remained in Tartarus, where they suffered eternal torment" (28). Elsewhere he attacked a familiar argument: that concerning the disagreement between the four Gospel versions. He quotes the view that "nothing proves more surely the good faith of the Evangelists than the fact that they did not agree on all points: for, but for that, one 'might have suspected them of having written in collaboration'" (28). He did not bother to point out that the Christians would have used absolute agreement as a proof of divine inspiration had that been the case. But his citing of that defence did present to the public the simple fact that the Gospel versions were not in agreement. It was that type of work which helped to shake the uncritical "certainty" which the Church has instilled into men. Voltaire indicated (47, *Certain*) that unanimity may be a legitimate basis of belief when the story or rumour is "morally and physically possible," but not otherwise. How the Church had succeeded in fostering uncritical acceptance of "tradition" and "authority" is suggested by d'Holbach: "The rarity of books,

the excessive cost of the few good works which existed, necessarily concentrated knowledge within a narrow circle of men who nearly always had an interest in misusing their superiority whilst the rest of the nation languished in political or religious prejudices. Only the few truths which could not harm the ambitions of their leaders were allowed to get through to the people" (**30**). Elsewhere in the same work (bk. 5) he points out how many stupid ideas and customs persisted because of an exaggerated respect for one's ancestors. That this was intended as a reminder that such unthinking respect is harmful was further indicated by his comment that, if blind veneration of past ideas had been universal, man would still be wandering naked in the woods, feeding on roots and raw meat. By thus coupling uncritical acceptance of tradition with out-of-date modes of living he hoped to stimulate curiosity through natural pride. His aim was in many ways that of Buffon, who had so anxiously sought to make men examine what concrete evidence could be found; he taught that we misuse philosophy when our first aim is to find the "why" of things. Our immediate object should be, Buffon suggested, "to find out the *how* of things, the way in which nature acts. . . . That is why we must collect with care the examples which oppose our pretensions; why we must insist upon those facts capable of destroying a general prejudice which we receive from taste, an error which we adopt from choice. . . ." (**11**).

Nor did the *philosophers* like the adoption of even correct opinions if the reasons be mainly prestige considerations (**15**; **16**). Diderot regretted Pascal's preoccupation with theological disputes; he regretted that "he did not devote himself to the search for truth without reserve and without fear of offending God, by using all the intellect God had given him. How regrettable that he accepted as his masters men who were unworthy to be his disciples" (**16**, 14).

By 1748 this half-revealed campaign against religious authority had disturbed the Church to the extent of

turning its chief hostility away from the Jansenists and towards the *philosophers*. It applied a simple form of blackmail to the king by coupling with a financial gift a request that impiety should be driven from the country, that he should extirpate "this spirit of incredulity which shamelessly and insolently raises itself against the noble simplicity of our mysteries . . . God has reserved for you [the king] the honour of becoming the terror of these restless and wicked men who would dare to disturb the peace of the Church." [1] The Church was right in recognizing the danger in which it stood, but wrong in assuming that the thinkers were mere rebels. As d'Holbach explains, "the *philosopher* is almost always forced to depart from the opinions of the crowd: but every man who does not share the crowd's ideas is not thereby a *philosopher*; the love of truth alone gives the right to the title of *philosopher*" (30). It was this love of truth which led the eighteenth century to devote so much of its time to the acquisition of knowledge as a basis for theories and conclusions. That is why Montesquieu, seeking what lay behind the wealth of variety in human laws and customs, gathered all the facts he could about other countries, either by personal observation or by analysis of travellers' accounts, as a constant check upon his theories. His observations led him to formulate the theory of the importance of climate in fashioning man's tastes and character, thereby helping to determine his laws, ideals, and institutions. Further to verify his ideas, Montesquieu went to the trouble of experimenting with the effects of heat and cold upon animal tissue. From this he deduced a varying degree of sensitivity, and hence of interests, according to the climate. The theory of the effect of climate upon temperament and laws is perhaps carried too far by Montesquieu (41), and is not entirely accepted by his contemporaries, but the main idea of the relativity of law, custom, and

[1] Cited Lanfrey, *L'Eglise et les philosophes au XVIIIe siècle*, p. 176.

morality was absorbed by Frenchmen and forms part of the various deterministic theories [1] which have been espoused by that and succeeding centuries.

Voltaire, less interested in theory, also used experience to counter self-satisfaction; he described Chinese civilization as an example of a non-Christian civilization in so many respects superior to that of Christian France (47, *China*). This preoccupation with experience was not merely a method of attack. It was intimately connected with the programme of human rehabilitation. "It is obvious that all the errors of mankind come from having renounced experience, the testimony of the senses and right reason, in order to let itself be guided by imagination, often deceptive, and by authority, always suspect" (35, I), writes d'Holbach.

The main attack on tradition and authority, whether religious or political, came with the *Encyclopedia* (1745–1772), a composite work under the editorship first of Diderot and d'Alembert, and later of Diderot alone. It was a series of volumes composed of articles on all sorts of topics, written by many different authors, most of them devoted to the task of promoting human welfare by destroying the ill-effects of ecclesiastical and despotic rule. It was intended as the repository of freethought, of criticism of authority, of arguments for and against any position, of documentation to help the public examine the beliefs so far accepted without examination—in short, the arsenal of truth-loving freethinkers. Completeness, exactness, clarity, method, popularizing of scientific discoveries—these are the features of the Encyclopedists' work. Above all, they demonstrated the immense achievements of the human mind to a society which had long been trained to decry unaided reason's ability to achieve anything sure or valuable. If this *philosophy* was militant, it must be recalled that the declaration of war upon Christianity was a chal-

[1] *Determinism*: the doctrine that the will is not free, but determined by fixed causes, motives, or stimuli.

lenge by a small community of thinkers proffered to a mighty and well-organized enemy which had not hesitated to suppress freethinkers for the mere implications of their work. Moreover, the *Encyclopedia* did little more than recognize a state of war already existing and marshal the weapons it proposed to use. True the various articles often contained a moderate version of the writers' opinions, in an attempt to avoid complete suppression by the authorities, but, as d'Alembert wrote: "Time will enable people to distinguish what we thought from what we said." The Church needed no such time. In 1752 the first two volumes were suppressed as "tending to establish a spirit of revolt and incredulity." In 1758, after the privilege of the *Encyclopedia* had been withdrawn, the triumphant Church made its highest free gift—16,000,000 pounds—to the king. Fortunately the work was continued in secret until publication became possible once more. Diderot knew the importance of a work such as this, one which could so fashion public opinion as to make the restriction of priestly and royal power a necessity. He held, with d'Holbach, that the power of opinion is greater than that of the most absolute of monarchs. To direct that opinion against oppression and authority and turn it towards the establishment of a just and tolerant society was his aim, as it was of Voltaire, whose main work lay outside the *Encyclopedia* but followed roughly the same lines, with, however, less appeasement of the authorities. If prejudice is "an opinion devoid of judgment" (47, *Prejudice*), then all religious and political ideals in France were his target in the war on prejudice, for him largely synonymous with Christianity. His arguments, scattered throughout his work—theatre, history, letters, stories, poems, pamphlets, philosophy—amount briefly to this: there is little or no connection between Christianity and the teachings of the Church; Christianity itself is wrong, founded on an unlikely idea that the world was created for the Jews; the Old Testament is merely a col-

lection of unauthentic stories; the four Gospels are neither better nor worse than others which the Church has rejected; if God had any connection with the inspiration of the Bible, He shows Himself ignorant of physics, geography, history, and chronology; He also shows Himself possessed of very inferior moral ideas; the Fathers of the Church and the various Councils have heaped further confusion and contradiction upon what was improbable and complicated to begin with; historically all we can say of Christ is that " there was an obscure Jew, of the common people, called Jesus, crucified for blasphemy in the times of Tiberius, in some unknown year." Voltaire believed in a God, founder of our present universe, creator of moral principles; he rejected all formal religion as human imposture foisted upon ignorant people and kept in being through an unscrupulous abuse of power and superstition. His chief weapons were common-sense, a keen sense of humour, and a persuasive sense of human progress. His *English Letters* are, in brief, a summary of his ideals and methods. His article " History," in the *Encyclopedia*, is a repetition of his main preoccupation—the underlining of the weakness of historical arguments, which at their best are extreme probabilities, not certainties, and at their worst tissues of unreliable fables, and whose imperfections must be recognized and allowed for. Real certainty cannot be based on unsupported documents. Without real certainty (as opposed to " inner certainty ") it is difficult to see how any philosophy has the right to deny to others complete freedom of opinion, for freedom must be as complete as is compatible with social security. His ideal of tolerance derived largely from his own social conscience and from Locke's writings. If tolerance were to become a reality, he must first smash the traditional doctrines of the nature of God and of the soul, which are essentially unprovable and therefore insufficient to justify a campaign against " heretics."

It is important to stress that, whilst Voltaire was deliberately undermining dogma and ecclesiastical

power, he respected, and indeed taught, morality, which he saw as a stable element in the universe, irrespective of any guardianship claimed by religious bodies. This same moral element is the motivating power behind Rousseau's famous *vicaire savoyard* who, before expounding his theism, explained how he first came to feel the need for a re-examination of his opinions. " Seeing from sad observation that my ideas of justice, honesty, and all the duties of man were being overturned, each day I lost one of the opinions which I had formerly received. . . . Little by little I felt the evidence of the principles become obscured in my mind and, finally reduced to not knowing what to think, I came to the same point as you [incredulity] " (45, IV). Although Rousseau's final position was quite different from that of the *philosophers*, he began at the same point—experience belying accepted belief.

Thus we have Rousseau working towards a sentimental Deism, d'Holbach an Atheist accumulating evidence of the errors of Christianity, Voltaire demonstrating that " our priests are not what a foolish people think; our credulity makes all their wisdom," and Diderot stimulating a rational morality divorced from religious authority and tradition. The only authorities the *philosophers* could recognize would be Nature and common-sense. There is here no room for alleged revelation, with the attendant danger of official interpreters, explained as follows by Helvétius: " The priests . . . founded religion on revelation and declared themselves its interpreters. . . . From the moment priests take upon themselves to announce the will of heaven, they are no longer men, they are gods. People believe in them, not in God. In His name they can order the violation of every law opposed to their interests, and the destruction of all authority which goes against their decisions.[1] The religious

[1] It is a curious reflexion that this idea is still unconsciously accepted even by English Protestants: for what else was the hope that the Pope might condemn Nazism and Fascism and thereby turn the people away from obedience?

mind, for this reason, was always incompatible with the legislative mind, and the priest always the enemy of the magistrate. The first instituted canon law, the second political law. . . . The spirit of justice and truth presided more or less over the elaboration of the latter; they were thereby more or less advantageous to the nations" (25, VII). As for the attempts to support the authoritarian and traditional nature of Christianity by lauding the "reasonableness" of faith, d'Holbach sums up the position in his contention that the "arguments in favour of faith come down to this: in order to believe in religion one must have faith, and in order to have faith one must believe in religion; or, one must have faith already in order to believe in the necessity of faith" (28): a position which successfully shows faith as a "prejudice" dependent on another "prejudice," itself dependent on the first—a delightful circle. If it be objected that divine revelation is proof of the reasonableness of faith, then d'Holbach replies that before being able to pass judgment on the validity of divine revelation we must have an accurate idea of the divinity. "But where are we to obtain that idea, except in revelation itself, since our reason is too weak to raise itself to the knowledge of the supreme being? In other words, revelation proves the authority of revelation" (28). In his attempts to demonstrate to men that religion had no guarantee outside its own claims, d'Holbach inundated the public with pamphlets and books all designed to show that religious authority had no objective justification.

The foundations of religion—authority and tradition—were systematically attacked, and on the ruins of the edifice the *philosophers* hoped to build a new temple: that of peace, justice, tolerance, humanity, and reason. With Bayle, they rejected Christian intolerance as practised, but, rightly or wrongly, were prepared to allow intolerance in speech or mere opinion. Equally they were unwilling to extend tolerance to any code of thought which was essentially

destructive of freedom or harmful to society: on those grounds they would banish a Christian monopoly in religion, and above all a Catholic monopoly within Christianity.[1] On the same grounds they would, for reasons we shall examine later, banish Atheism. With these few exceptions, however, the eighteenth century demanded tolerance as a prerequisite of any ordered society, and the real exceptions come to no more than this: tolerate everything except intolerance and anti-social feeling.

CHAPTER FOUR

FACT AND THEORY

It is relatively easy to make fun of any institution or philosophy. Fortunately the *philosophers* had more to offer than ridicule. They offered the century a scholarship which, if not always exact by modern standards, was wider and deeper than anything the Church had had to contend with. Nothing did more to shake the faith of Christians than the detailed and factual criticism with which that faith was assailed. It was the first of those shocks which ever since have been inflicted upon faith by scientific thought and methods.

One sensible act was the delimitation of accessible knowledge. To discuss such subjects as God's nature, revelation, the supernatural, with a view to reaching sure conclusions is to talk about things one cannot define; to argue in abstractions is mere waste of time, to make everything depend on them is to hamstring all human thought. The thinkers were interested primarily in facts, and then in probabilities, not in systems and not in theories devoid of objective

[1] Hence Voltaire's remark in his *English Letters* (Letter 6): "If there were but one religion in England, despotism could be feared; if there were two, they would cut each other's throat: but there are thirty, and they live happily and peacefully together."

evidence. They were concerned with two things only: the drawing up of temporary theories on the facts available and the testing of any theories (their own or Christian generalizations) by the facts. Much as they were attracted to the idea of cause and effect, they also realized, as Voltaire put it, that " every being has a father, but every being does not have children " (**47**, *Chain of Events*). Thus, whilst it is legitimate to inquire into the origin or cause of a thing, it is not always legitimate to regard everything as the cause of something else. With this principle in mind the century avoided the error of drawing up complicated lists of necessary " consequences " as binding as the facts from which they were deduced.

What has just been said is enough to suggest the main lines of eighteenth-century method. Although seriously marred by much *a priorism*,[1] it made some effort at observation, experience, and experiment—the equivalent of the scientist in his laboratory. The writers had, too, something of the scientist's faith in progress, the belief that patient examination and accumulation of facts would lead to the discovery of yet another of Nature's secrets, and the attitude which mistrusts unsupported suggestions. Thus, Diderot says: " That which has never been called in question has not been demonstrated. What people have not examined without prejudice has never been properly examined. Scepticism is thus the first step towards truth " (**16**, 31). That was the theory behind Voltaire's comment on the doctrine of the spirituality and immortality of the soul: " I would like to adopt this system but I should want it proved to me. I am not free to believe when I have no evidence " (**47**, *Chinese Catechism*). It lay behind the distinction which Diderot made between mathematical truth and that which is called religious truth. The former can be demonstrated to anyone at any time. The latter cannot be demonstrated at all to the unbeliever—and

[1] I.e., dealing with abstractions and drawing consequences from abstract ideas, such as Liberty, Equality, Man.

if evidence is convincing only to the already convinced (i.e., those who do not require evidence), then it is not evidence (**16**, 59: cf. also Voltaire, **47**, *Certain*). The way in which religion has kept apart from common-sense in its systems was stated briefly thus by d'Holbach: " Instead of following the rules of right logic and going back from what is known to what is less known, the thinkers (i.e., theologians) for the most part began by projecting themselves into the imaginary spaces of the invisible, unknown intellectual world in order to deduce laws to govern a real, visible world which is easy to know " (**30**). It was, for the *philosophers*, a reasonable certainty that they could work backwards. Believing that " every child has a father," each fact can help to work back to the preceding one. Chance was ruled out as a factor; everything was determined, and all acts, opinions, or events were studied in the hope of tracing their causes. This was done with reasonable objectivity. Montesquieu himself favoured the English system of government, but that did not prevent him from describing other systems fairly. Similarly, when dealing with religions and laws, he neither condemned nor approved—he merely reported (**41**). The same desire for impartial treatment of his subject led Diderot to visit workshops, dismantle machines, use them, before writing his articles for the *Encyclopedia*. Neither the scorn of the great nor the enthusiasm of the reformer: strict accuracy based on investigation.

The *philosophers* stood out, then, for free examination of everything. That is why we find such a thirst for facts. The weakness of belief dependent on authority or prestige has already been mentioned. It was for that reason that the eighteenth century sought something more sure, more objective, as its basis. Above all, it required something positive, a change from the " thou-shalt-not " morality and the non-material, non-finite, non-comprehensible God of Christianity. If it was to have any theories, any opinions, it needed a well-documented background to

them, documented with *facts*, not opinions or authorities. In a letter to d'Alembert (13 November, 1756) Voltaire indicated how deep this desire for concrete evidence went: "Personally I tremble every time I submit an article (to the *Encyclopedia*). There is none which does not require the summary of a great erudition." This same spirit led to a change in the philosophy of history. Voltaire abandoned the old idea of history and converted it into a study based on all the available material which reflected human activity. Acts of God and divine favour were eliminated and reasonable human considerations sought as the explanation of events. Boulanger resurrected antiquity, with its beliefs, ceremonies, mysteries, many of which show such an affinity with their Christian counterparts as to suggest non-Christian sources for the latter (**9**).

It is interesting to note the type of fact which emerged from this search. Voltaire mentions, for instance, that Jesus never claimed to be divine. St. Peter alone said that Jesus was the Christ (**47**, *Messiah*). The Bible, as the experts know, but the ordinary Christian seldom knows, has not always been the same. "Why is it less ample now than it was some centuries ago?" asks Diderot. "By what right has this or that work, which another sect reveres, been excluded? . . . On what grounds have you preferred this manuscript? . . . You must restore the text to its original condition before you prove its divinity; for your proofs and my faith cannot depend upon a collection of mutilated documents. To whom will you entrust this revision? The Church. But I cannot accept the infallibility of the Church until the divinity of the Scriptures is proved. I am therefore reduced to scepticism" (**16**, 60). Elsewhere (**49**, III) Voltaire, using the same source as Bossuet, and like him dealing with the Battle of Rocroi, gave a straightforward and rational account of something which Bossuet had turned into a marvellous manifestation of divine favour.

This leads us to yet another aspect of the scientific temper of the age, the desire for practical explanations, for an attitude which avoids the necessarily theoretical nature of pure speculation. The clouds of idealism which covered reality were ruthlessly pierced. Bossuet in history, Leibnitz in philosophy, were but subjects of mockery. If Voltaire was unable to solve the problem of the existence of pain and evil, at least he admitted it without building a theoretical, untestable explanation to make it seem irrelevant to man's real life (**46**). Montesquieu adopted the same line of reasoning; let us admit, not cloak our ignorance. We cannot, as the theologians have tried to do, define God; we cannot get near enough to glimpse Him (**43**). Neither have we any reason for imagining that our little globe is the centre of interest of the universe; let us then, says Voltaire, reject any theory which assumes that the world is so very important in the scheme of things, or that man is so precious that a God would send His son to save him from the effects of sin (**47**, *passim*). As for the soul which man is supposed to possess, and which no one has ever seen, Voltaire preferred the more obvious course of denying the dualism of body and soul. "Soul" is a word invented to express one aspect of our being: "we have passions, memory, reason; but these passions, this memory, this reason, are not separate things; they are not beings existing in us . . .; they are generic words, invented to fix our ideas" (**47**, *Chinese Catechism*).

But the *philosophers*, in spite of their opposition to purely theoretical ways of thinking, did allow theory where observed facts suggested tentative conclusions. Thus Voltaire suggested that the feelings of animals are the same as our own and that animals, possessing similar faculties to ours, must also have ideas (**47**, *Animals*). Diderot was in agreement with the theory of the non-mechanism of animals, in opposition to the theologians of his time (**19**, *Instinct*). He considered, too, the possibility of life on other planets

(18). Certainly, were that possible, the whole Christian theology based on the central importance of man in general, and the Jews in particular, would be badly shaken. However, he went no farther than the possibility, and based no more upon it than the need for caution in accepting an anthropocentric view of creation. The entire Biblical version of creation and of the first generations of men, as also of later reigns, etc., is subjected to the laws of psychological probability. The Old Testament is treated as any other early history-book, and Voltaire comments that the origins of history are tales handed down from father to son, no more than probable when they started, and grossly distorted into mere absurdities by the time they reach the written stage. There is no very obvious reason why the history of the Jews should be an exception to the rule (19, *History*). This, a logical theory to the *philosophers*, and other theories of theirs, attracted opposition from the Christian Church, but, as d'Holbach dryly pointed out, *their* theories, " not being *divine oracles*, can be examined, discussed and, if false or contrary to the welfare of men, rejected. . . . In a word, the authority of the philosopher does not constitute law " (30). Unlike the theologians, they do not mind discussion, nor do they think that truth has necessarily been reached, but, in Diderot's words, " that the more man's knowledge progresses, the more it will be shown to be true " (18). The *philosopher* did not hope to crush the whole system of prejudices which theology had driven into man; some he might destroy, some he might shake, but " if he cannot hope that his lessons will be listened to by his contemporaries, he will extend his gaze to posterity," declares d'Holbach (30).

Against Descartes' scientific theories the thinkers set those of Newton; Fontenelle had helped to extend a firm faith in the possibilities of science and to inculcate the idea of dissatisfaction with established ideas (23). The work of science is primarily to dispel ignorance and, with it, the supernatural explanations which that

ignorance has produced. Similarly, in studying ancient histories, science should aim at finding out *why* they were what they were; that is, to put the Bible in the same category as other histories, since " all men are so much alike that there is no people whose follies should not make us tremble for ourselves " (22). Fontenelle seems, further, to be the first to appreciate why the testimony of the believer is insufficient: " The believers may not be aware of the reasons for disbelief; but it is hardly possible for those who do not believe not to be aware of the reasons for believing." Thus, whilst the evidence of a believer is of little value in support of his belief, the opposition of unbelievers has power to destroy (21).

Buffon, himself a scientist, gave the century its basic method. He drew attention to the fundamental weakness of deductive reasoning, showing how any " truth " reached was relative to the truth or falsity of the first principles adopted. In its place he recommended inductive reasoning, where consideration of observed and testable facts resulted, not perhaps in truth, but in probability. A probability which can be tested is, scientifically, more valuable than a theoretical truth which cannot be tested. Many of these probabilities are what we already mistakenly call truth. Thus, even though each day has brought us a sunrise, it is not true beyond doubt that the sun will continue to rise each day. Theoretically it may not. The probability, of course, is that it will. Similarly all known laws of nature, although true for past experience, are not *laws* in the sense that they *guarantee* future events. We should, then, forget the illusionary absolute truth and content ourselves with extreme probability. Where we cannot employ inductive methods to arrive at probability, Buffon wisely advises us to recognize our ignorance and leave the question alone until those methods can be employed.

Much of his own work was directed towards studying the relationships among the various animals, in-

cluding man. He believed Nature to be the product of a God, but Nature was not a being or a thing; it was the animating power, the whole system of laws which govern existence and development. At first he was opposed to transformist theories, which end in Materialism, but later seems to have been on the way to discovering transformism for himself (**11**, v), only to return to the theory of the fixity of the species in a later work (**10**).

Others, too, were interested in the origin of man,[1] or rather of life as we know it. It was, in fact, the question of biogenesis as against spontaneous generation. Generally speaking, the eighteenth century still accepted biogenesis, according to which matter was dead until some external force gave it life. This position, held by Christians and Deists alike, involves two assumptions: (1) that matter is in itself inert, and (2) that the passage from inert to living matter could not take place naturally, but required some outside "life-giver." Of this more will be said in a later chapter.

A few thinkers, however, tentatively sought to support the theory that the passage from inert to living matter could occur naturally—"spontaneous generation." Diderot was groping towards this position (**18**); d'Holbach sought by experiment to demonstrate that "living" matter could be produced by "dead" matter (**35**). The controversy over spontaneous generation is still raging, but modern research [2] is pointing the way to the probable solution. It seems more likely that matter, being composed of energy-bearing cells, is potentially alive. It has the ingredients which can express themselves in life

[1] The attempt to explain the entire universe in terms of matter and motion, completely mechanical in conception and postulating man as a pure machine, was widespread, under the influence of such writers as La Mettrie.

[2] Cf. the experiments of Professor Bryukhonenko of the Soviet Institute of Physiology, the recent work on viruses, Sir Charles Sherrington's *Life's Unfolding*, and Dr. J. S. D. Bacon's *The Chemistry of Life*.

as soon as conditions are favourable. What these conditions are has not yet been discovered, but recent experiments seem to suggest that it is a question of reproducing the physical and chemical conditions which may have existed at one point in the history of the universe.

In the sphere of scientific examination of all problems, d'Holbach is perhaps the greatest of the *philosophers*. Beginning in the *Encyclopedia* with purely scientific articles and the description of metals, he soon became the most destructive writer of his time; but it was destruction as a preliminary to rebuilding a new and sensible system of society and thought. He flooded the market with anti-Christian works, designed to loosen the chains which Christianity had bound around Western civilization. He tried to force the public to a realization of all the trouble and harm Christianity had brought to mankind and to lead them to a reasoned faith in man's powers. "Man has measured the heavens, he has discovered the laws of movement, he has crossed the seas, he has penetrated to the bowels of the earth, he has brought the elements to submit to his needs and pleasures, he has perfected his lot every time he has thought freely; he has remained in the shadows of childhood about every object which he has been unwilling to examine or has seen only with fear "(30). It was d'Holbach, too, who most strongly put the case against divine revelation: "God, we are told, has spoken to men; but when did He speak? He spoke, thousands of years ago, to selected men whom He appointed His agents; but how can we find out whether it is true that God spoke, except by going to the testimony of the very people who claim to have received His orders?" (28). Or again, the same argument in another domain: "None but Christians ever attest the miracles of Christ." Many Christian ceremonies seem to be remnants of Eastern theurgy (28). Our ideas have been distorted by long years of Christian education; but since, according to Locke and other

philosophers, our ideas are the product of our senses, we can mend that by banishing Christianity from our background, our homes, and our schools, he suggests.

D'Holbach could find no reason why a God should be necessary to explain anything, and he was content with a purely materialistic explanation of life and the universe, even if his efforts to demonstrate that life can come into being naturally lacked the precautions which modern experimenters recognize to be essential. Nature alone is the self-sufficient principle of all things, according to d'Holbach. It is matter, not God, which is eternal and uncreated; matter is essentially living and moving, and requires no mystic touch to set it in motion; there is no point in distinguishing between inert and animate matter, because matter is never inert (35).

Significant are his pamphlets on Christianity. They lack that scholarship and equipment which are opposed to Christianity at the present day, but they served to indicate the critical methods to be pursued in the cause of Rationalism. Although his scholarship has undoubted failings, his ideas and main contentions are still unshaken. Where his illustrations are no longer valid, others could be found to replace them. Science may often have to correct its provisional judgments upon individual points, but its main theories undergo modification rather than correction. D'Holbach firmly believed—and every Rationalist makes the same act of reasoned faith—that scientific methods and thought will ultimately bring men to truth. In seeking truth he did his utmost to break down the barriers of religious taboos, that his successors might the more easily follow the search.

With Helvétius and Condillac we have a different type of mind. Psychologists rather than scientists, they both attempted to explain human ideas and motives without unnecessary dependence on mystical unknown qualities. Helvétius explained all mental faculties as a purely mechanical association of our sense impressions. In his book on the mind he

claimed to have treated morality as any other science and " worked from the facts to the causes " (**24**, *Preface*). Thus he accepted no innate ideas, explained that the senses alone (i.e., sensation and memory, which is sensation continued) produce all our ideas from birth onwards. Laws are the product of these ideas, which makes ecclesiastical law no more important than any other law—in fact less important, because the interests of the whole community must come before those of a smaller association (**26**). But the priest " hates and will always hate the philosopher, he will always fear lest enlightened men should overthrow an empire founded on error and blindness " (**25**, IV). Although Diderot objected to the moderation (the " mixture of incredulity and superstition ") of Helvétius's *Of Man*, Voltaire approved his *Of the Mind*, and in fact adopted much the same psychological basis in his article on the imagination, which is the " instrument with which we compose ideas, even the most metaphysical ideas " (**19**), a position more or less repeated in Diderot's *Dream of d'Alembert* (**18**).

Condillac is perhaps the best exponent in France of the sensationalist psychology, the " philosopher of the philosophers." In his *Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746) he had followed Locke's philosophy, but in his *Treatise on the Sensations* (1754) he takes it a step farther and derives ideas from sensation alone, where Locke had used sensation plus reflexion. To establish his theory he took a statue with the organic structure of man. The statue was credited with one sense after another, and at each stage he examined what knowledge would be possessed by the statue. Among his various conclusions we may mention his view that instinct is habit, with reflexion lost, not an innate quality.[1] Another is his view that " with one of the senses alone the soul has the germ of all its faculties; sensation includes all the faculties of the soul; pleasure and pain are the only motive power "

[1] Bergsonian philosophy has a modern development of this idea of instinct and reflexion.

(12, I, 7). Another, his final word: "The statue is therefore nothing but the sum of all it has acquired. May not this be the same with man?" (12, IV, 9).

This integral sensationalism has been attacked because modern biology teaches us that each member of the species is born with its special organs already in existence: the suggestion is that each member may thus be born with its own innate ideas. The formation of the special organs within each species is probably no more than the result of a long evolutionary adaptation, as the opponents of Condillac admit. If that is so, then the organs are presumably so disposed, arranged, and operated as to ensure that they react in a particular way to stimuli. Ideas would thus form through the senses, and these ideas would vary a little from animal to animal. They would not be *innate*; they would be the result of conditioned physical reactions, the conditioning factors being innumerable sense experiences of countless generations of ancestors. To take the expression most used in connection with sensationalism, the "blank page" which is our mind at birth is in no way destroyed or sullied by the discoveries of biology. All these have done is to indicate that the "blank page" may possess a particular texture which lends itself to certain shaped characters more easily than to others. Those characters are our ideas, still produced by our sense reactions to stimuli.

Whatever the form which the theory must now take, it is certain that, for the eighteenth century, ideas were connected with sense-experience and not with a divine implanting before birth. The century could, then, proceed to examine critically and scientifically all the various ideas and legends which had previously been regarded as of divine origin.

The Church, of course, reacted strongly and informed men that Helvétius "was a lion openly attacking virtue, a serpent spreading its snares; that he put man on a level with the animals, without any respect for Origen, who expressly stated that man

moves by reason and the animal by instinct; that the author is wrong to speak of legislation since we find in the Gospel everything we need to know about it; that there is nothing in the sacred books, nor in the holy Fathers, about anything treated in the book *Of the Mind*; that the love of glory and the love of the motherland should be condemned as passions because all passions are the fruit of sin" (*Journal Chrétien*).

But it was not mere verbiage with which the new spirit was assailed. In 1768, as a result of denunciation, a pedlar, his wife, and a grocer's boy were tried for reading and passing on copies of d'Holbach's *Christianity Unveiled.* They all spent three days in the pillory, after which the woman was imprisoned, the pedlar branded and sent to the galleys for five years, and the boy branded and condemned to nine years in the galleys. And that despite the fact that the Government had already been affected by the new spirit to the point of closing its eyes to as much of the *philosophers*' activities as possible.

Little by little, of course, as the spirit of enlightenment spread, Christianity itself was obliged to preserve its powers by insisting less on what was manifestly no longer believed. Many modern Christian sects have conformed to scientific discoveries to the point of keeping little but a creator-God; orthodoxy could not go so far, but it could fall back upon Aquinas's distinction between Biblical fact and human "forms of expression" in the Bible, allowing more to come in the latter category. But, as d'Holbach warned us, the priests have been obliged to "make at least an apparent and pretended peace with the liberty of thought which their hearts will always detest" (30).

If their grip was ever to be effectively loosened, as he and his fellow thinkers realized, they must first challenge Christian supremacy in the field of morality, a territory which no monarch or legislator had yet ventured upon with complete freedom of action. The immediate cry was, then: Whence morality? What their answer was we shall now see.

CHAPTER FIVE

MORALITY—DIVINE OR HUMAN?

FOR generations Frenchmen were taught that morality was of divine origin, that man had but to conform—so far as was possible—to a code of ethics divinely revealed. The guardians of this morality were, inevitably, the ministers or the councils of the Catholic Church.

Some thinkers, however, had reached the notion of a *reasonable* morality and, nearer the eighteenth century, Bayle had repeated that, although morality and religion were apparently linked, the relationship between them was not an essential one; that morality could be divorced from religion. Montesquieu, in his *Persian Letters*, was bold enough to suggest that morality developed before religion. The theme of the eighteenth century will be the lay character of morality: moral codes are human, not divine, and are hence variable.

The separation between morality and religion which had insensibly come into existence by 1740 was more than a mere drifting into indifference. It was influenced by the widely accepted philosophy and ethics of Locke. If all our ideas come to us through our senses, it follows that moral ideas also have their source in human experience. Once that basis was accepted, as it was, the conclusion was obvious. It was simply that morality could be treated as a science, demonstrated and built up by the use of reason. Locke had added a further point—an important one, since it involved the age-old argument on the freedom of man's will. Like Hobbes, he believed that man was free to act according to his will, but since the will itself was held to be determined by motives, man himself was ultimately controlled by those same motives. Thus any existing system of morality must be judged in relation to its purpose; any new system must take its starting-point in an

investigation of human incentives, happiness, needs, and environment. That is why a disciple like Condillac took as his first task the understanding of the human mind and of the effect of the senses upon it and upon the mass of human knowledge. So, by examining what would happen as his " statue " was provided with different senses, he argued that the most " natural " of our judgments would no longer seem so if our sensations were changed. Further, he deduced that a man limited to one sense would have those ideas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction which are at the root of all our judgments, including moral judgments. The will directs itself towards the general idea of pleasure or pain. A man's judgments, says Condillac, as to what is good are " relative to the character of the individual who judges them, and to the way in which he is organized " (12, IV, 3). These judgments as to goodness are at least partly determined by our opinion of the usefulness of the behaviour involved. Hence, Condillac saw that the solitary man will not only desire objects to be propitious, but will also attribute to the objects the *intention* of being propitious. Thus his opinions as to the rightness or wrongness of any happening will be dependent on its favouring or harming him. His moral test is, then, personal and subjective.

In the same way the moral code of a group or a nation will be regarded by most *philosophers* as the expression of what is considered as beneficial or harmful to itself. So it is that Helvétius explains the origin of morality; men " are born neither good nor bad, but ready to be either according to whether common interest unites or divides them; . . . pleasure and sorrow have placed and ripened within all hearts the seed of self-love, the development of which has given rise to the passions whence all our vices and all our virtues have come " (24, II). Man is incapable of loving good for its own sake or evil for its own sake. All his emotions, all his moral ideas, are dependent on utility and interest. If his actions are such as to

arouse the disapproval of the moralists, the fault lies not with man, but with the law-makers who have not tried to bring the general interest into line with individual interests (24).

Voltaire, too, accepts the Lockian basis that "a man born without his five senses would be devoid of all ideas" (47, *Sensation*), that man is "not born wicked; he becomes so, just as he becomes ill" (47, *Wicked*); that the faculty of thinking (soul) varies according to the state of the senses (47, *Madness*). D'Holbach shares the general opinion that "Nature makes men neither good nor bad. She makes them mechanisms endowed with activity, mobility, and energy. She gives them bodies, organs, and temperaments, of which their passions and desires are the necessary consequences. The object of these passions is always happiness, and they are therefore legitimate and natural and can be termed good or evil only according to their influence on other members of the human race" (35). This fixes the tone of the entire discussion of morality in the century. No longer are morals discussed on the *a priori* basis that man is conceived in sin and born wicked.

If the moral code is a natural and human development, then its divine nature disappears and, along with it, the ecclesiastical system which claimed to be its divinely appointed guardian. Again, if morality is human, its chief purpose must inevitably be the securing of happiness of men on this earth. Thus, moral views will be framed and governed by two considerations: first, the needs of man as an individual, and secondly, the needs of men in society. That is why eighteenth-century criticisms of orthodox morality strike the Christian as strange; they are directed towards eliminating the non-essentials—that is, those things which are neither particularly good nor remarkably bad for society. They are directed, too, towards establishing certain ideas which, necessary for the health of society, have none the less been held in horror by the Christian Church as

" wicked." There is no especial triumph for Christianity when the *philosophers* approve some of the Christian morality; their approval is governed strictly by social considerations. But to approve certain elements within Christian morality does not mean to recognize the ecclesiastical system which enforces it. D'Holbach tells us clearly that it is as a citizen that he attacks Christianity, which is " harmful to the happiness of the State, the enemy of human progress, opposed to sound morality from which the interests of politics can never be separated " (28, *Preface*). Christianity has degenerated into a system in which genuine morality has been overshadowed by the observance of petty regulations unconnected with the welfare of society (28, XI). Morality must be recognized as something in itself outside the province of the Church. That is not, of course, to exclude the Church from any share in watching over morality: the Church is, after all, a form of human association. The Church must simply be deprived of the right to dictate morality, which henceforward should be entrusted to the common-sense of people interested in man's happiness *in this life*. In short, the aim is to relate morality to our present existence, an all-important end in itself. Thus all the *philosophers* make it their duty to bring home to the public the fact that vice and virtue are human terms, defining human ideals; that their happiness depends on a new idea of virtue—a practical ideal to which they can approximate.

Voltaire makes a distinction between two types of virtue. There is first that, the motive-power of which is properly self-preservation, such as temperance. These are not really virtues. The real virtues are those of the second type, e.g. fidelity, magnanimity, tolerance, all of which benefit society directly (47, *Chinese Catechism*). Virtue lies primarily in the act, not in the intention. If an act is good and useful to others it is a virtuous act, whatever the motive (47, *Virtue*).

Diderot maintains the same separation of religion and morality. For him, too, virtue is " well-doing " and vice " harm-doing " (18), as also for d'Holbach: " Society needs virtues which maintain it, give it energy, activity; . . . every being in the human race needs the desire to secure legitimate pleasures and to increase the sum of its happiness " (28).

Since morality is to depend on social qualities, and since man's social happiness depends on the happiness accorded him by the organization of society, no question is of greater importance than that of marriage. Almost without exception the *philosophers* desire the recognition of divorce as part of a healthy society. Helvétius tells of primitive races where divorce and purity go hand in hand, and points out that Christianity, by insisting on tying a couple together permanently, is itself responsible for the " immorality " of extra-marital relations, which a system of easy divorce would render unnecessary (24, II). In the meantime he would not regard as an immoral woman one who, outside marriage, gave herself to a man she loved. Unlike the prostitute, she does no harm to society (26). Society itself has been at fault in following the lead of the Christian Church and making moral laws which are " unjust, aimless, and lacking any consideration for the nature of things and public utility " (14).

The new morality is obviously a lay morality, a morality which takes its origin in Nature. What Nature has given us cannot be evil; Christian " virtue," being the negation of everything natural, has no place in a reasonable and rational code of living, for it " orders the heart to detach itself from those objects which reason (and Nature) order it to love " (28). Morality is simply the application to social life of human experience. The aim of the individual is undoubtedly to satisfy his needs. Whilst Christianity may have corrupted that into an attempt to satisfy the alleged needs of some future life, the eighteenth century is prepared to defend all legitimate

pleasure, i.e., all pleasure which does not harm society. To destroy man's desires is to destroy his motive power (**25**, II). The unfortunate results of some desires are not sufficient justification for trying to suppress desires themselves which have so many good results and on which all human progress ultimately depends. The sole need is to realize that, in view of the existence of society (with, for them, its contractual nature), man must learn that he cannot have the full advantages of social life *and* complete liberty to indulge his desires. On the other hand, his membership of society does not cancel his existence as an individual; thus society can *limit*, but not *suppress*, his right to satisfy his desires.

All this theory is, of course, good and reasonable, but it was none the less essential to record objections to the established notion that morality was divine in origin. An individual writer like Rousseau accepts that indeterminate object, the conscience, as sole guide to conduct, but a guide which needs no ecclesiastical control, even though he believes the innate principle of justice and virtue to be a gift from God. Other writers of the century—as for example Helvétius—would reject his view. Their aim is to remove the necessity for any God behind morality, to make human morality precede religious morality, which is "only the perfection of human morality" (**24**, *Preface*). Helvétius declares roundly that he has no idea of a "moral sense" (**25**, V), and thus denies the rights of Christianity to dictate a moral code to him. The real basis of morality must not be an *a priori* assumption, but, as in d'Holbach, experience and fact (**36**). For too long, he would say, the people have had nothing more than a theological and priestly morality designed to fit in with the interests of the clergy, who have substituted "a pious blindness for reason, fanaticism for sociability" (**35**); for too long morality has consisted in fighting natural emotions and desires, many of them useful to society (**30**). The time has now come, he declares, to find the inspiration

for our actions in something more real than the "ideal world which exists only in men's imagination"; we can find it in experience, in truth, in nature, in the consideration of the real needs of society (35). He analyzes the conception of God as it appears in the Bible and contends that Christian morality cannot be firmly founded, since it depends on a "changing, partial, and capricious God who, with the same mouth, orders justice and injustice, peace and bloodshed, tolerance and persecution. I say that it is impossible to follow the precepts of reasonable morality under the rule of a religion which makes a merit of zeal, enthusiasm, and the most destructive fanaticism" (28). Thus he rejects a supernatural origin for morality. He goes farther and rejects even an origin in natural religion in so far as he considers that the moral "laws" are no more than the development of modes of action which "result from our nature, our essence, our love of life, our desire to maintain our existence," a code of behaviour which goes back to a natural primitive search for the useful and pleasant and a natural turning away from anything which occasions harm or trouble (34). Allowing self-preservation as the mainstay of human action, d'Holbach is surely right in seeing the best moral code of organized man, of society, as that which, on the one hand, aims at being useful or good for society, and, on the other, seeks to banish those things which are harmful to society. Certainly many of the ten commandments need no divine sanction. They are precisely the rules which any society of men would need to develop if it wished to avoid disintegration.

If human society has placed a curious emphasis upon certain moral rules, the fault, d'Holbach believes, lies with the sovereign who, failing to understand human societies and flattered by the ministers of religion who pretended that he was a divinely elected being, allowed the interests of society to be subordinated to those of his priestly advisers (30). He none the less appreciates the most powerful argument

against his "human morality": that, with the fear of divine wrath removed, men might tend to crime, vice, and debauchery. His reply is simple: we must teach that excess is wrong in itself, because of the harm it does to the individual, the family, and society. If we can make men realize that social disapproval, coupled with nature's own reaction to vice, are deterrents as powerful as threats of eternal punishment, vice and crime will be kept in check with as much—and more—effectiveness as under the rule of religion (28). If it is unfair to judge a religion by its moral failures, it is not quite logical to expect us to close our eyes to them and regard only the extent to which it is supposed to have prevented contemplated wrong action which, since by definition it never occurred, can hardly be used as evidence.

The whole movement towards a lay morality is strengthened by the optimism which Rationalism had aroused. Original sin being regarded as a fable, the world is not a sad preparation for a future life. The world is not particularly well arranged, but that is because it is at present being run by fools and ignorant men. Human reason has made many discoveries which a few centuries ago would have seemed impossible and the effort itself impious. Now that there has arisen a genuine desire for knowledge, and a few men act together in support of reason, the citizens of to-morrow can be made better and wiser men. Thus, in turn, enlightened public opinion can create a better and more adequately planned world. The new society can establish an intelligent and useful moral code which will weigh as lightly upon the individual as is consistent with the welfare of society. It will frame laws according to society's needs, not according to someone's ideas of what an unknown God considers permissible. In so far as it is possible to evolve any basic moral principle of general application, it must be that of the *philosophers*: the maximum satisfaction of the individual with the minimum harm to the community, the maximum satisfaction of the

community with the minimum interference with the individual, welded together with a real tolerance of everything that is doing no positive and radical harm to the social structure. As a check on any State arranging its morality with a view to creating a potential for war-making, it must be added that the individual State stands in relation to other States as the individual stands to the State. There is thus an international morality limiting the desires of each State as each State limits the desires of the citizen.

In this idea of a lay morality the eighteenth century was influenced by the information it had collected regarding the customs and laws of different races. Montesquieu, in the first real attempt at a study of comparative legislation, had conceived the doctrine of the relativity of law. His research seemed to suggest that law was nothing but the concrete expression of human reason, varying from country to country, moulded and fashioned by things such as climate, size, vegetation and occupations, temperament, and population (**41**, I, 3). Voltaire adopted the same attitude. Law is not an echo of divine law but an affair of convention (**47**, *Laws*). This idea was extended to cover moral laws: Helvétius remarks that "virtue depends upon circumstance" (**24**, II).

It is against the background of that belief that we must set the century's preoccupation with utility. If law is human and virtue a *social* duty, then the moralist must turn his attention to the needs of man. In its most exaggerated form we find this in the writings of Helvétius, who makes the operative factor in behaviour the love of self, egoism, interest: these, then, are in theory the factors at the base of all morality. In practice he reduces this to the consideration of public—and hence, in the last resort, individual—welfare. He removes the stress from actions, which in themselves are neither moral nor immoral, and places it upon their use to society which can "fix the moment at which each action ceases to

be virtuous and becomes vicious " (24, II). The love of pleasure is not a vice; it is the natural aim of man. It is a useful relaxation for the industrious citizen. At its worst it is merely folly and idleness when it absorbs the whole of the individual's time (25, VI). Virtue is " that wisdom which brings passion into agreement with reason, and pleasure with duty " (26). Control is naturally a factor in virtue, but it is not control for its own sake, nor for God's sake. It is control for society's sake. In reality the individual is sometimes led to choose between an immediate pleasure and the pleasure of being able to live in society. It is the control of one desire by another, and this requires education. " The moral education of man is now practically completely given over to chance. To perfect it we must draw up a plan of it in relation to public utility, base it on simple and unchanging principles " (25, I).

D'Holbach follows the methods of Helvétius, in that his utilitarian approach to legislation leaves behind the conservative element which Montesquieu had included in his views. Montesquieu, seeing laws as the inevitable development within each country, conditioned by more or less unchanging factors, had not visualized more than a modification of the system in any country. Helvétius and d'Holbach agree in a strictly utilitarian and psychological approach to the problem, even though d'Holbach's norms are more moral than those of Helvétius, who attached more importance to physical pleasure and was less concerned with purely moral considerations. D'Holbach's utilitarianism is more scientific. He sees the possibility of a religious morality as well as a political morality, but the former is intended to produce saints, not citizens: the saint has nothing in common with the citizen, since he is not primarily interested in this world. For human purposes, then, practical, political, useful, common-sense morality is the aim (28). " Real and lasting utility " is thus the norm, the only norm which man can reasonably apply.

The utilitarian conception of man and the community, based on the view that virtue and vice are mere words used to designate the useful and the harmful, has led to the criticism that these writers have destroyed the moral sense and denied man's free will. Such a criticism is couched in terms which have no real meaning. If the "moral sense" is that which distinguishes between good and bad, then the utilitarians have merely aided it by giving an intelligible meaning to "good" and "bad." What of free will? Christians have for generations tried to explain how man can be at once conditioned by original sin and free to choose good or evil. Their explanations, which differ from sect to sect, are seldom clear to anyone but a theologian: indeed, their definitions of free will and predestination are not free from contradictions. If the *philosophers* have rejected free will, they have done little more than dispense with something which complicated, without helping, man's analysis of his actions. When we make a choice between two courses of action, does it help to be told that our choice is a free one? Is it not much more probable that we make a particular choice because it is more in keeping with our interests, our nature, our desires? Being what we were, how often could we have chosen the other course? The eighteenth century found that the probabilities were in favour of our actions being pre-determined—by understandable physical and human factors, of course, not by some mythical sin of Adam. "Since I act in this way, anyone who can act otherwise is no longer myself; and to declare that, at the moment I do or say a thing, I could do or say another is to declare that I am myself and someone else" (18). Such is the view of Diderot, d'Holbach, and Helvétius. For d'Holbach the apparent freedom of the will is an illusion created by the multiplicity of the causes which determine men's movements, which are "the necessary result of their temperament, their accepted ideas, the true or false notions they have of happiness,

their opinions fortified by example, education, daily experience" (35).

There is some disagreement as to what is the prime factor in determining our actions. Diderot and d'Holbach consider that our physical organization plays the dominant role, while Helvétius believes in the all-importance of education. The modern tendency would undoubtedly favour the former view—heredity being more important than environment, perhaps—but to form a complete picture, account must be taken of both. We cannot escape from the moulding created by physical heritage, food or background. In order to frame a new society, as the *philosophers* all realized, it was essential to modify as much as possible of that which made men what they were. That is why the campaign for social reform is reinforced by the publication of so many works attacking the State, the Church, religion in general, and Christian morality in particular.

The *philosophers* promised less than Christianity, but what they did offer was sane and intelligible. They suggested a healthy attachment to this life and its pleasures. They set a clear ideal—personal and social desirability. They gave common-sense as a norm instead of the wishes of an unproven God dictated to man; instead of the learned doctors' interpretations of odd New Testament remarks, they left the individual free to follow his bent, deciding merely whether his contemplated action would bring him more harm than good. Determinism does not excuse harmful actions. Even where the choice of action may be rigidly pre-determined, if the choice is one obviously harmful to society, that merely means that the individual is unsocial and requires treatment to recondition him if possible; in extreme cases he must be excluded from society.

Determinism and utilitarianism do not offer a complete solution to the problem of ethics, but the eighteenth century felt that they offered a solution more complete and more consistent with human

dignity than did Christianity, with its claims to exclusive divine rights in the domain of morals, claims for which the *philosophers* could find no justification.

CHAPTER SIX

RELIGION OR RELIGIONS?

CHRISTIANITY teaches—or implies—that there is only one true religion in the world: itself. It has assumed that other religions are mere human errors. The eighteenth-century freethinkers, on the whole, would accept the view that Christianity is yet a further human error.

Although most of the *philosophers* did not share d'Holbach's extreme conviction that all the ills of the world could be traced to religion, they believed with him that formal religion had proved itself a serious danger to mankind. They would endorse his view that " Nature has made men susceptible of experience and hence more and more perfectible; it is then absurd to wish to stop him in his course, against an eternal law which urges him forward " (30). They believed, too, that formal religions were merely a phase in the development of man, a phase which was now antiquated. Religions as we know them were no more than incidents, men being born, Voltaire suggests, " neither Atheists nor Theists " (47, *Atheist*): belief in gods developed because of limited experience. Such beliefs came into being inevitably as primitive men found much to explain and little by which to explain it. They found their explanation in some outside force which, egoistically, they believed to be acting for or against them. Religions began, then, perfectly naturally as a result of ignorance (47, *Idol*). With the passage of time these religions codified themselves and led to a position in which, says Helvétius, theology ran counter to the ordinary decencies of civilized and moral behaviour (25, I), and in which

points of belief have been established without reference to new experience. What was once a guess has now become an article of faith.

The problem for the thinkers, then, was: Is Christianity different from other religions? Is it unique? Or is it merely another attempt to explain the unknown by reference to some unknown god? Its chief rights to special consideration are presumably its claim to have been founded by God Himself, its revelation, and its assertion of superiority. These are the points which, upon examination, the thinkers decide to be untrustworthy, being either unsupported or else supported only by mere declaration. They thus proceed upon the assumption that Christianity is neither more nor less important than any other religion and must be judged in the same way as the others. The claim to divine revelation can hardly be taken seriously, since no proof is offered except the opinion of those to whom the revelation was supposed to have been made—which is unsupported testimony.

Similarly the Roman Catholic claim to the exclusive right to define and interpret God's will must be ignored, Helvétius declares: "In order to be independent of the prince, the clergy needed to hold its power from God; it claimed that and it was believed. In order to be obeyed in preference to kings, it needed to be regarded as inspired by the divinity; it claimed that and it was believed. Thus, it added, when declaring myself infallible, I am infallible. Thus, in declaring myself the avenger of the divinity, I become so. . . . What is a king before the Eternal? In His eyes all men are equal and are equal too in the eyes of the Church" (25, IX).

Catholicism, having created its own power by mere declaration, disliked the way in which the *philosophers* refused to recognize its rights; it equally disliked their way of lumping Christianity with other religions, notably the Jewish and Mohammedan religions, as in Rousseau (45, IV). Nor did it relish the latter's suggestion that the doctrines, dogmas, and moral

claims of Christianity were held by so few inhabitants of this globe. It was a healthy reminder that Christians were numerically less imposing than Christianity would like to insinuate.

D'Holbach summed up and exposed the pretensions of Christianity: " Do not all religions pretend to the same importance? . . . Do they not all say that their god is the master of other gods? Their pretensions are equal; their qualifications are the same; each one believes that it has exclusive truth and the favour of the Almighty . . .; each one is founded on miracles or on works contrary to the course of nature . . .; in fact the intelligent man sees on each side an equality in fables, in absurdities, in lies. . . ." (30). It was Voltaire who picked out intolerance as the main difference between Christianity and other religions. Whilst the Roman State permitted all religions which did not harm the State, Christianity has always sought to be the dominant religion and force itself upon non-Christians (47, *Tolerance*).[1] Christianity is, in fact, an impertinent religion: " If a man wishes to persuade foreigners or compatriots to accept his own religion, should he not begin with the most charming gentleness and the most attractive moderation? If he begins by saying that what he announces is proven, he will find a crowd of incredulous people; if he dares to tell them that they reject his teaching only because it condemns their passions, that their heart has corrupted their mind, that their reason is nothing but falsity and pride, he will set them against him, provoke them; he himself ruins what he seeks to establish. If the religion he proclaims is true, will passion and insolence make it any more true? " (47, *Religion*).

It was essential that everyone should at last recognize that Christianity is but one religion among many and treat it as such. Fundamentally, the thinkers claim, all these human attempts to explain phenomena

[1] Voltaire would doubtless be amused to see this still exemplified in the twentieth century in the activities of the Lord's Day Observance Society.

have been the same and the religions built around them rather similar, with their prayers, martyrs, angels, shrines, idols, priests, and oracles (**28**). There is a tiring similarity, d'Holbach goes on, between Christianity and its fellow religions: " All religions say they emanate from heaven; all forbid the use of reason in examining their sacred qualifications; all claim to be true to the exclusion of the others; all threaten with the wrath of God those who refuse to submit to their authority. . . . Thus the Christian religion has no advantage over the other superstitions with which the universe is infected " (**28**). " I hear cries of impiety on every side," writes Diderot. " The Christian is impious in Asia, the Mohammedan in Europe, the Papist in London, the Calvinist in Paris. . . . What is an impious person, then? Either everybody or nobody " (**16**, 35). Christianity is even unfavourably compared with Islam by Montesquieu: " I have not noticed amongst the Christians that lively persuasion of their religion which is found amongst Mohammedans. Amongst the Christians it is a far cry from professing Christianity to believing it, from believing it to conviction, from conviction to practice " (**43**, 75). And yet it is this religion which has made a point of trying to force itself on people of different persuasions. The thinkers would prefer to see within a State a multiplicity of religions as a means of ensuring tolerance (**25**, IV, IX). Religious intolerance is dangerous; religion is the pretext, love of power the motive; the whole is marked by a peculiar blindness. Thus, Helvétius comments: " When anathematizing the Calender or the Dervish, is the Monk unaware that in the eyes of the Dervish the real criminal is the Christian, the Pope, the Monk, who do not believe in Mohammed? Must each sect, for ever condemned to stupidity, approve in itself what it detests in others? " (**25**, IV).

An interesting feature of this eighteenth-century attempt to relegate Christianity to its proper position is the importance given to the Jewish case. Chris-

tians, in whose scheme the Old Testament cannot fail to play its part, are none the less too prepared to ignore the Jewish religion as something superseded and the Jewish attitude as an extraordinary piece of blindness permitted by God for reasons of His own. That Jews live among them and still show no marked desire to forsake their forefathers' " errors " does not appear to them, as it should, as an indication that the Christian case cannot be so obvious as it pretends to be. Many writers of the eighteenth century comment upon the fact that the Jews never pretended to exclusive divine favour, i.e. that they recognized and accepted the existence of other Gods for other peoples (**47**, *Religion*; **44**). Rousseau gives us a categorical statement which echoes the general enlightened attitude of the century. " At the Faculty of Theology of Paris it is as clear as day that the prophecies about the Messiah refer to Jesus Christ. Amongst the rabbis of Amsterdam it is quite as clear that they have not the slightest connection with him. I shall never believe that I have heard the Jewish case until they have a free State, schools, universities, in which they can speak and discuss without danger. Only then shall we be able to know what they have to say " (**45**). Voltaire and Montesquieu manage, however, to give something of the Jewish point of view. Voltaire, quoting Polier's article in the *Encyclopedia*, points out that according to the Jews " if the Saviour, and after him the evangelists, the apostles, and the first Christians, called Jesus the son of God, that august term, in Gospel times, meant nothing more than the opposite of son of Belial; in other words a man of good, a servant of God, as opposed to a wicked man, a man who does not fear God " (**47**, *Messiah*). Montesquieu, giving a Jew's address to the Inquisitors, points out something which Christians are apt to forget in practice: " You put us to death, although we believe nothing that you do not believe, because we do not believe all you believe. We follow a religion which you yourselves know to have been

formerly beloved of God; we think that God still loves it and you think He no longer loves it; and, because you think that, you deliver to the sword and the flames those who cling to the very pardonable error of believing that God still loves what He has loved" (41). The speech is addressed to the Inquisitors, but it served, too, to remind eighteenth-century Christianity that the Jewish religion was, after all, God's religion according to Christian teaching itself. Is its claim to be ignored simply because the Jews executed someone whose divine nature had not struck them as very convincing? Is the whole basis of the necessity for a Christ to be rejected as out-moded because the people most concerned were not impressed by a claimant to that position? Such were the questions which the thinkers intended to raise in men's mind. If they succeeded, then Christian "exclusiveness" was already less of a reality. Add to that the other attempts to make Christianity *a* religion instead of *the* religion, and the century was prepared for the suggestion that religion is essentially accidental.

For Montesquieu the form of religion will vary with the form of State. "When a religion is born and forms itself within a State, it usually follows the form of the government where it is established, because the men who accept it and those who cause it to be accepted have hardly any other ideas of government than those of the State in which they were born" (41). To Helvétius the surest way of ridding oneself of one's unconscious prejudices is to examine the range of human customs, morals, etc., so that a realization of man's egoistic glorification of his local practices may lead him to take his own customs less seriously (24, II). D'Holbach begins to realize the complexity of the development of forms of religion. He saw the creation of a personal, arbitrary divinity as an honest but primitive attempt to explain the apparent forces behind what happened around and to early man. He also realized the importance of

the priest in the subsequent moulding of the religion (28). The whole problem is, of course, too complex to deal with here, but we may remark in passing that d'Holbach seems to have grasped the two essentials, the natural origin and the human codification by interested elements. As for the particular form of religion which bore the stamp of "truth," the eighteenth century began to realize that Christianity was merely the religion to which they were accustomed and its superiority a matter of pure assertion by those people who could hardly claim anything else if they were to receive people's allegiance.

Stripping Christianity and other religions of everything that savoured of human additions and explanations, the *philosophers* were left with a sort of natural religion, consisting of little more than an unknown God responsible for nature but uninterested in man. There is no argument from design;[1] Diderot had shown the relativity of the idea of design in his *Letter on the Blind.* There is no discussion on the exact nature of God, which at least avoided the Christian difficulties over the problem of pain and evil: "God, the doctors of the Church tell us, is not the author of evil, He only permits evil. Do they not see that to permit evil is the same thing as to commit it, in an omnipotent power which could prevent it?" (28). They have no priesthood, because the priesthood has been the corruptor of native reason and natural religion, says Voltaire (47, *Fraud*). In short, "nearly everything that goes beyond the adoration of a supreme being and the submission of the heart to his eternal orders is superstition" (47, *Superstition*). God is, in fact, little more for Diderot than the creator of thinking beings and of physical laws, or else He is one with nature, knowing past and present by reason of His identity with nature, but unable to do more than guess at the future (18).

[1] I.e., the argument that nature, animals, etc., show evidence of design, pattern, and harmony, and that there must, therefore, be a designer—God.

Whatever the god of this simple natural religion may be, he is clearly not regarded as a personal God nor even, usually, as a person. His precise role is a matter of personal interpretation to those who give him a separate existence, as we shall see in the following chapter. To others, " god " is merely an empty term, as with d'Holbach.[1]

It remains now, having indicated why the *philosophers* declined to accord Christianity any extraordinary position among religions, to recall briefly the main objections brought against Christianity as a religion. The attacks are indirect up to about 1758, after which they become more open. Commonsense was brought to bear upon the whole structure of Christianity.

What of the Christian God? D'Holbach declares that He is the work of the priests who, to strengthen their own position, have made of Him a tyrant, sharing their passions, jealousies, partiality, and possessing a theological mind with all its intricacies and special pleading (30). He is a mass of contradictions upon whose justice we are told to rely, although we have never seen any sign of it, the justice of a " God who permits Himself (at least in this life—the only one by which we can judge) temporary injustices which they suppose Him prepared to set right some day. . . . If this God has been willing to allow Himself to be unjust even for a moment, why should we flatter ourselves that He will not continue to be so later? " (28). Christianity, says Diderot, has imprisoned its god within its churches and has taught him too soon in our lives (16, 26). With regard to Christ Himself, the Church has made of Him more than He ever claimed. Voltaire sums up the position thus:—

" First, Jesus was born under the Mosaic law, he was circumcised according to that law, he fulfilled all its

[1] See Chapter VIII.

precepts, he observed all its feasts and he preached nothing but morality; he did not reveal the mystery of his incarnation; he never told the Jews he was born of a virgin; he received the blessing of John in the waters of the Jordan, a ceremony to which several Jews submitted, but he never baptized anyone; he did not speak of the seven sacraments; he did not institute any ecclesiastical hierarchy during his life. He hid from his contemporaries that he was the son of God from all eternity, consubstantial with God, and that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. He did not say that his person was composed of two natures and two wills. . . . He desired his holy Church, established by him, to do the rest" (47, *Christianity*).

The lesson is obvious. Practically everything that Christianity has made essential depends entirely on what the Church has since decided. True the Church would claim to have been guided by the Holy Spirit, but, as the claim has no outside support, the Church will still appear to the eighteenth century as primarily a collection of human beings drawing up what regulations best suited them.

If the Christian God is too elusive to seize, such is not the case for His ministers, whose activities cannot be approved, says d'Holbach. "No religion has ever made its devotees more entirely and continually dependent on its priests than Christianity" (28). "Substituting the word *priests* for that of *God* makes theology the simplest of sciences. From which it follows that genuine Atheists are non-existent, since it requires an imbecile to deny the obvious existence of the clergy" (37). The priests are above all dangerous because they constitute a State within a State. They find it a virtue, Helvétius points out, to place their religious allegiance before their allegiance as citizens (24, II). The teachings of the clerics have the most unfortunate effect on men who are told that "life is only a passage. Heaven is the real country of men: why then hand oneself over to earthly affections? If such teachings did not completely detach the layman they at least cooled in him love of

family, of glory, of public weal, and of country" (**25**, I).[1] At the same time these priests, who preach attachment to the future life, put their theories into effect in the most cruel way imaginable (**25**, V). It must be remembered that the Inquisition was more than a mere memory at this time. A priest's translation of Eymericus' *Directorium inquisitorum*, in which the whole art of the Inquisition was set out—naïvely brutal in its candour—shocked the eighteenth century into a realization that the ministers of the Christian God were without humanity and lacked understanding of anything but their rules and regulations. They were interested not in practical religion, but in orthodoxy.

Side by side with the priests we have the monks. Voltaire finds no reason to suppose that mortification of the flesh pleases God, however much it may impress the ignorant (**47**, *Chinese Catechism*). As for the deliberate withdrawal from society, from family life, and their duties as citizens, no one finds any words to excuse them. The whole system of celibacy, whether of monks, nuns, or priests, is condemned as unsocial and harmful to society. Such celibacy is, of course, as Voltaire recognizes, a matter of discipline (although unjustified), and not really a general Christian characteristic (**47**, *Priest's Catechism*).

Christianity, the *philosophers* feel, is full of theological subtleties. Free will is a meaningless doctrine, which the ordinary man cannot hope to understand (**47**, *Liberty*). Christianity seems to enjoy obscurity, d'Holbach alleges (**28**). The Church, with all its councils, canons, decretals, and laws, has never succeeded in determining the objects of Christian belief. Any pagan who contemplated becoming a Christian would not know how to make up his mind [2] when the

[1] It is a strange reflexion that in time of war the only type of "conscientious objection" which the State really recognizes is that which arises from religious scruples—a commentary upon the accuracy of Helvétius's observation.

[2] Cf. Voltaire's *L'Ingénu*.

various Christian sects disagree with each other on what are essentials and seldom agree on definitions of any such essentials.[1]

In the domain of morality, d'Holbach declares, Christianity has substituted dogma and fables for real virtues (30). By opposing divorce it has encouraged immorality; by lauding humility it has deprived man of his real motive power (28). By failing to suppress vice among the great it has encouraged it among the mass of citizens (30). By founding its morality on a God whose record in the Bible is one of changing and contradictory characteristics it has failed to find a secure basis (28). To this it will probably be objected that d'Holbach lacked the modern evolutionary conception of God. If he had, it would probably merely have confirmed his impression that the Jewish and Christian God is man-made and His alleged character, even to-day, no more than a human idea—still insufficient as a basis for a morality to be jealously guarded by a divinely-appointed Church.

But above all it is the intolerance of Christianity and its political effects which are criticized by the *philosophers*. From Fontenelle onwards the plea is for tolerance, a virtue which is inconsistent with the Christian idea of its own rightness and its duty to bring all men within its fold. " Tolerance has been admitted only by weak Christians lacking zeal and possessing a temperament very unlike the God they served " (28). The point of view of the eighteenth century is summarized in this one sentence by Voltaire: " It is obvious that any individual who persecutes his brother man, because he does not share his opinions, is a monster " (47, *Tolerance*). It is the lust for power, the determination to be the dominant religion, which makes Christianity politically undesirable. Book

[1] The Protestant usually forgets that things like the Apostolic Succession, efficacy of sacraments, etc., are *essentials* to Catholics. The disagreement as to essentials is as complete as I suggest.

after book, writer after writer, criticizes that aspect of Christianity.

Some control of ecclesiastical authority is clearly needed, says Montesquieu in reply to an attack upon him in the Jansenist *Ecclesiastical News*: " Theology has its limits, it has its formulae. . . . But it is to make a jest of the world to wish to put these boundaries around those who deal with human sciences " (42). As it is, theology has indirectly led to a host of regulations and laws which interfere with legitimate desires and, " in the name of heaven, people are forbidden to love liberty, to work for their happiness, oppose violence or exercise their natural rights " (35).

Finally, Christianity is hostile to truth, hostile to any attempts to investigate things, claiming that truth is its prerogative, divinely revealed. The many attacks upon the *philosophers* are witness to the accuracy of this criticism. To be outstanding, to be a genius, says Helvétius (24, *Preface*), is to court persecution. The fanatics judge a man's probity by his credulity, and hate anyone who refuses to be their dupe: " Every new truth is suspect; they are like children in the dark, afraid of everything " (24, II). D'Holbach voices a common view, that humility, for the Christian, has become a virtue by which a man must " give up his reason, fear his virtues, refuse to do his good actions justice, to lose the most merited esteem of himself " (28). This religion rejects or crushes the only obvious difference between men and animals, reason (30).

All the foregoing considerations are behind the attack upon Christianity which the *philosophers* launched in the eighteenth century. Christianity's extraordinary claim to be the only true religion; its unsupported " divine powers "; its intolerance; its political effects; its sapping of man's dignity: all these things explain why the thinkers fought for religious tolerance, why Voltaire set himself the task of crushing Catholicism, why d'Holbach saw no good in Christianity that reasonable human laws, education,

and morality could not equally create. England, Holland, Switzerland, had managed to cure part of their ills by throwing Catholicism overboard; France could do likewise, could in fact do better by ridding herself of Christianity and all formal religion. And, to express the faith of these *philosophers*, we cannot do better than end this chapter with d'Holbach's observation: " Why despair of causing to arise within the nations active, enlightened, and virtuous citizens? Is it, then, easier to create a fanatic, a martyr, a penitent, a zealot, an abject courtier, than to fashion an enthusiast for the public weal, a courageous soldier, a man useful to himself and valuable to others? Is it, then, easier to break the soul than to raise it up?" (30).

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEISM

THE eighteenth century had set itself the task of examining religion in general and Christianity in particular. Most writers found their solution of the religious problem in Deism. Formal religion, sectarianism, they rejected, but they retained a God because He seemed to them a logical necessity. Why they reached this conclusion must concern us here.

Scientific research and an empirical investigation of phenomena had led the *philosophers* to a recognition of the existence of " natural laws " which, so far as they could see, were invariable. The supernatural was no longer needed to explain the activity of matter or the motives of mankind. Determinism, as opposed to mechanism, was seen as the predominant factor in all natural activity. But the term " laws of nature " is misleading, and the error of the thinkers was perhaps excusable. Fundamentally, natural laws are not laws; they are statements of how things behave, not laws

to which nature must conform. Eighteenth-century philosophy, on the whole, took natural laws as operators instead of as modes of operation, and this meant that these operators must have been instituted by some source. This source, the origin of laws, was God. This God, having set the laws in operation, might stop them but could not vary them; He did not create matter, He merely gave it a pattern; He made no special revelation to man and does not intervene in human affairs. Such was roughly the god of Deism, to believe in whom was a rational act, based upon probabilities: a belief which required no outward expression or religious ceremonies. "It was reserved for the knowledge of nature to make true Deists" (**16**, 19), such is the keyword of many writers.[1] Voltaire even seemed to hope that one form of Christianity might be sufficiently purified to produce a Deistic Church; but Deism was usually regarded as a philosophy rather than as a religion, following Shaftesbury's view, itself derived from Bayle.

While Voltaire continued to bring forth God as the first cause, Diderot was toying with the argument from design. In the *Philosophical Thoughts* (No. 20) he saw in it a reason for the existence of a God. In the *Sceptic's Walk* he put the case against that argument, and by the time of the *Letter on the Blind* he rejected the argument as inadequate. Diderot is, in fact, an interesting example of a man whose reason led him step by step through scepticism and Deism to a frank Materialism; he belongs, except in his early writings, to our next chapter. Far different was Montesquieu, who, coldly analysing the good and bad effects of belief in God, decided that the good effects outweigh the bad, and so reached Deism for practical reasons. Condillac, like Voltaire, saw a

[1] Cf. Delisle de Salle's definition of natural religion: "the pure worship of a God who punishes and rewards, whose laws manifest themselves without revelation, His dogmas without mysteries, and His power without miracles" (*Philosophy of Nature*, 1770).

need for a first cause, and thus postulated a God as the being who set natural laws in motion. Outside this, however, his sensationalism resulted in an ultra-deterministic position, the logical conclusion of which should have been Materialism. The *Encyclopedia*, reflecting many shades of opinion, was chiefly Deistic, and its answer to the question of the best type of religion would have been that of Voltaire: " Would it not be that which would teach much morality and very little dogma? that which would tend to make men just without making them absurd? that which would not order men to believe things which are impossible, contradictory, harmful to the divinity and pernicious to the human race; a religion which would not dare to threaten with eternal torment anyone who possessed common sense? . . . one which would teach nothing but the adoration of a God, justice, tolerance and humanity? " (47, *Religion*). An apt if unkind description of the Deists is given by d'Holbach as follows: " Those who, having shed a great number of gross errors with which popular superstition has continually filled itself, cling simply to the vague notion of the Divinity, which they restrict themselves to viewing as an unknown agent . . . full of infinite perfections " (35).

The " vague notion of the Divinity " here referred to was necessary, so long as the *philosophers* accepted the need for a first cause. They were, of course, often influenced by the argument from design, a criticism of which is contained in a letter from Diderot to Voltaire (1749): " What am I to think of this marvellous order and these wonderful adaptations? They are metaphysical entities, existing only in your own mind. Cover a vast tract of ground with a mass of ruins falling haphazardly here and there; the worm and the ant find commodious shelter enough there. What would you say of these insects, if they were to take for real and final entities the relationship between the places they inhabit and their own organization, and then fall into ecstasies over the beauty of their

subterranean architecture and the marvellously superior intelligence of the gardener who arranges everything for them so conveniently?"

Particularly struck by the argument from design is Rousseau, whose religion is a sort of sentimental Deism, almost admitting a revelation—not ecclesiastical or Biblical, but personal, an inner feeling that he knows God to exist. His God bears a curious similarity to himself in all his contradictions, and requires an inner and sentimental worship. Rousseau's fundamental weakness was his desire for simplicity. He was not built to endure long and complex mental torment; reason demanded too much, and the *philosophers* had no ready-made, generally accepted, system to offer him (45, IV). Thus he turned to a religion of love and feeling, adoring a prime cause, an intelligent and interested being—a religion which, if not specifically examined, is a simple answer to a deranged sensitive mind turned in upon itself. If we emphasize sentiment in Rousseau's position it is because he himself adds a sentimental appeal to any argument. Even to the argument from design (the watch presupposing a watchmaker) he appends the eloquence which so often replaces argument in his works: "Let us listen to our inner feelings; what sane mind can refuse their testimony? . . . Say to me what you will of combination and chance; what use is it to reduce me to silence if you cannot persuade me to accept? and how will you take away from me the involuntary feeling which always gives you the lie . . .?" (45, IV). Rousseau needed the mystery and imaginative element which a deterministic view of the universe would have ruined. There is little or no attempt to reach his belief in God rationally, as with the Deists. "I believe then that the world is governed by a powerful and wise will; I see it, *or rather I feel it*" (45, IV). He avoids trouble by refusing to discuss the nature of his God, it being presumptuous to attempt such a thing! Of one thing, however, he is sure: evil comes from man,

not from God, and divine rewards and punishments must be a necessary part of life after death.

This is not the place to follow Rousseau's *Profession of Faith*, but we may mention that his glorification of sentiment led him at times to approve fanaticism; his opposition to materialist dogmatism became in turn dogmatic; his attempt to stem the exaggerations of some of the *philosophers* became an exaggeration of his own feeling and led to religious intolerance coupled with the doctrine that religion is a matter of individual conscience—notions which are in practice mutually exclusive.

The *philosophers* were far more tolerant of sectarian religions than was Rousseau, but even they objected to Catholicism, which, by its system and doctrines, was essentially anti-social. Their intolerance in this matter was dictated by political considerations, for it would be foolish to advocate tolerance towards a religion which made a special point of teaching intolerance.

The Deists did not, however, intend to suppress those forms of religion which were not in practice hostile to society. They would tolerate the more liberal philosophies which had developed away from orthodoxy, even though they themselves rejected doctrines such as the necessity of a future life or the probability of immortality. They desired to avoid the error of orthodox Christianity by which, in Voltaire's words, so often " every philosopher who went outside the jargon of the Schools was accused of Atheism by the fanatics and rogues, and condemned by the fools " (**47**, *Atheist*); therefore they were prepared to recognize the utility of religion for other people. " I know that God does not need our sacrifices or our prayers; but we need to offer them to Him; His cult is established not for Him but for us " (**47**, *Chinese Catechism*). Hence certain forms of Christianity could be tolerated because they made people happy. None the less, things like Sunday observance were a mere waste of time (**47**, *Priest's*

Catechism); Christianity of the Gospel is insufficient for the citizen whose needs are fulfilled, Rousseau suggests, by the establishment of a " civil " religion (**44**). The real test of religion was, for them, its social and moral effects. Whereas a d'Holbach held that all religion could be attacked without harming society or morality (**30**), the Deists felt that the entire destruction of religion would harm them. Their position is easily explained: they feared the great mass of uneducated people. These, without the prop of religion and its doctrines, would probably lose their moral standards along with their religion; thus, for the sake of safety, they countenanced for the people dogma which they themselves disbelieved, just as they attacked Atheism for its alleged moral dangers.

The main charges brought against Atheism in the eighteenth century are two. First, the Deists contended, with Montesquieu, that even idolatry is better than Atheism. Although Voltaire held that Atheism was better than fanaticism, he still claimed that " it was infinitely better for the Greeks to fear Ceres, Neptune, and Jupiter than to fear nothing at all. It is clear that the sanctity of oaths is necessary and that one could trust those who believe that a false oath will be punished, more than those who think they can swear falsely with impunity. It is undeniable that . . . it is infinitely more useful to have a religion (even a bad one) than not to have one at all " (**47**, *Atheist*). Ironically enough, it was Voltaire's attack on d'Holbach's Atheism which helped to spread the latter's arguments; his article against d'Holbach was sold as a pamphlet, thus offering a *précis* of the essentials of the *System of Nature* in readable form!

If Voltaire and the other Deists regarded Atheism as a danger it was partly because of the idea that Atheism must lead to immorality. The charge, although fantastic, is still believed by many otherwise sensible people. If morality is man-made, then there is no reason to suppose that a recognition of that fact

will lead to immorality. The Deists still believed that basic things such as justice were independent of man, instead of recognizing in them an abstraction of ordinary human dealings. Every man must realize that some of his activities are contrary to the interests of society; even more must he realize that the activities of others are harmful to society, and hence possibly to himself as a member of society; thus he will extend his feelings until they reach an abstract stage of right and wrong (i.e., useful and harmful). To protect the useful and penalize the harmful is the essence of justice. Every thinking man must realize that if his society does not punish theft and adultery, for instance, then he himself is thereby threatened by loss of property or by marital infidelity. In his own interests he must regard theft and adultery as crimes. It is ridiculous to suppose that his personal interests are less of a motive for "virtue" than the pronouncements of an unknown God. Immorality and Atheism do not go hand in hand. Atheism is the result of careful and prolonged thought; the large mass of the people, under present conditions, cannot make that effort, and so will not become Atheist. The real source of moral danger lies in the indifference of the masses, where religious morality is ignored and Atheist morality is in advance of their mental capacities. D'Holbach realized that Atheism, like philosophy and all deep sciences, "is not made for the crowd, nor even for the greater proportion of men" (**35**). None the less the Deists and many Encyclopedists would willingly have punished Atheism as socially undesirable. God was still felt to be a useful social policeman (**19**, *Atheism*). Perhaps some day, when education is more fully and properly organized, we may have a society which needs no external policeman to induce virtuous behaviour.

The second charge brought against Atheism is that it removes mysterious powers from God to give them to matter. That charge is valid only if we assume that sentient, living matter is a special creation. Once

allow that matter is itself living or potentially so, and the mysterious powers conferred upon matter seem less illogical than the supposition of an unknown and unknowable God. Of the strange position in which the Deists placed themselves by their criticisms of atheistic Materialism we shall say more in the following chapter: here we may anticipate, and mention that not one of their arguments but upsets their own position.

The Deists justified their position not merely because it represented a middle way between the extremes of Christianity and Atheism, but because the existence of a God was required by their reasoning. They were influenced by the old habit of "purpose-hunting." Seeing certain modes of behaviour behind physical phenomena and confusing the *how* with the *why*, they concluded, as we have said, that matter behaved in a particular way because it conformed to natural laws. It was, then, almost inevitable that they should have asked themselves for the reason behind those laws, so arriving at the first cause of all laws, God. Had they not taken the step of postulating natural laws as something apart from their manifestation, they would have had no need of "causes," and so probably would have reached, if not an Atheistic position, at least Agnosticism. In formulating their Deism they did, however, serve one useful purpose: they moved away from the traditional way of making God but a large-scale reflection of man. By putting Him as little more than a far-removed designer whose work was finished when He set natural law in operation they left the way clear for a more scientific and less interested approach to the problem of the world. Equally, they left conduct a matter for human regulation and cut away the danger of fanatical devotion to divine dictates as interpreted by those who were believed to be His commissioned ministers. The Deist could, then, by changing the first noun, say with d'Holbach: "The Atheist's imagination will never be intoxicated to the point of

making him believe that violence, injustice, persecution, and assassination are virtuous or legitimate actions " (35).

CHAPTER EIGHT

MATERIALISM

THE Materialist position arose out of a conception of the world very different from that adopted by the Deists. For the latter, nature was something created, life something given, God the mysterious origin of ordered nature and of life. The Materialists agreed that there must be something uncreated and eternal, but felt that there was no necessity to make this " something " a personal God or any external source of life. So far as they could see, life was not a force infused into dead matter, but something existing potentially within all matter; movement was not a power added to matter, but something inherent in matter, a quality inseparable from it, a mode of its being. " If," writes d'Holbach, " you ask how we imagine that matter can, by its own energy, have produced all the effects we see, I reply that if, by matter, you insist on understanding an inert and dead mass, possessing no properties, devoid of action, incapable of moving on its own, you have no idea of matter " (35). Thus the eternal, uncreated thing behind the universe as we know it was not a " being," a God, but Nature, a force which science had partly analyzed and which in time it might analyze in its entirety. The Materialist position was thus economical in that it presupposed one rather than two sources of natural " laws." It was, further, less stultifying than the religious solution because, while admitting that we do not fully understand this Nature, it held out the possibility of eventually understanding it; unlike Christianity, it did not require a mysterious God who, by definition, was for ever beyond our powers of understanding. Newton and Galileo

pointed the way to a fuller understanding of the powers of Nature, but the Materialists never felt that Atheism was to be a universal creed to be forced upon the public. Their aim was to lead people to realize the unimportance of man in the whole cosmic system and so destroy the anthropocentric religions which were, for them, so many superstitions unworthy of intelligent men.

Even Voltaire (**50**; **47**, *Matter*) appears to have acknowledged the eternity of matter and held that matter is not in itself inert; but, as a Deist, he desired an external God who gave order to that matter, just as he desired a moral God who gave us our basic morality. Materialism, rejecting the complication of an external God, also rejected Him as a source of any morality, preferring to believe, with Hobbes, that our morality is utilitarian; not, it is true, an *automatic* attraction to pleasure and avoidance of pain, but a motivated *desire* to seek the one and flee the other, resulting from our experience. The Sensationalist psychology went hand in hand with the Materialist cosmogony. Helvétius, to whose psychology we have already referred, says of matter: "If matter cannot exist without movement, it follows that movement is essential to matter and consequently there is no need of an agent who has given it to it," [1] a position which he puts more firmly in *Of Man* (Bk. I).

It is significant that if a Materialist like d'Holbach had not yet reached any clear conception of evolution, he did at least realize that man's development, past and possible future, was a matter for investigation (**35**). Diderot, who in his youth had declared Atheism better than superstition (**16**, 12), was later to become a critical Materialist. He accepted the position by which knowledge, ethics, and metaphysics all derive from the impact of the external world upon our senses (**15**). He came to recognize the absolute importance of man's work in civilization and to challenge the theocratic conception of man and his society.

[1] MS. Notes.

As editor of the *Encyclopedia* his philosophical articles provided a valuable collection of Materialist writings which Naigeon later re-edited as the *Methodical Encyclopedia*, the bible of eighteenth-century Materialism. Elsewhere Diderot set down a molecular theory of life: "What is being? . . . The sum of a certain number of tendencies. . . . The species are merely tendencies towards a common end proper to them. . . . And life? . . . Life is a series of actions and reactions. . . . Alive, I act and react as a mass . . .; dead, I act and react as molecules. . . . Birth, life, death, are changes of forms. . . . From the elephant to the flea . . ., from the flea to the sensitive and living molecule, the origin of all things, there is not one point in the whole of nature which does not suffer or enjoy" (18). We are what we are because of the way we are made, and that which composes us is in a state of constant change. The species are interrelated; there are no clear-cut divisions into men, plants, minerals (18). Who knows but that fermentation produced all living beings? Who can say that the world has reached its final form? (18). What we are pleased to call the "creation," that which the Deists regarded as the moment at which God made order out of chaos and breathed life into matter, this appearance of "living matter" is referred to by Diderot in terms which seem to foreshadow the idea of natural creation rather than divine creation. He is discussing the creation of a chicken: "With inert matter, arranged in a certain way, impregnated with other inert matter, by heat and movement we obtain sensitivity, life, memory, consciousness, feelings, thought. All you now have to do is to select one of two positions; either to imagine within the inert mass of the egg a hidden element which awaited its development in order to declare its presence, or to imagine that this imperceptible element found its way inside through the shell at some specific moment of its development. But what is this element? Did it occupy space, or did it not? How did it come, or

escape, without moving? Where was it? . . . Listen to yourself and you will be sorry for yourself; you will feel that, by not admitting a simple supposition which explains everything—sensitivity as a general property of matter, or a product of its organization—you are departing from common-sense and casting yourself into an abyss of mystery, contradiction, and absurdity" (13). Creation thus appears to Diderot less as a decisive and deliberate act than as a natural development within matter under favourable circumstances; Mlle. de L'Espinasse is describing D'Alembert's words, spoken in his sleep: "'Voltaire can make fun as long as he likes, but Needham was right [1]; I believe my eyes; I can see them (the worms).' The vase, in which he (Diderot) saw so many fleeting generations, he compared to the universe" (18). To try to work out what combination of circumstances can remove the barrier and allow potential life to pass into actual life is the supreme problem of science. The problem is difficult, but one that can be approached, whereas the God-origin of life can never be proved or disproved by man.

Intelligent Atheism, as found in Diderot, did not claim to prove that there was no God; it found the hypothesis of a God superfluous and expected that in time science would have so investigated nature and life that its findings would demonstrate to any inquirer that it is not necessary to assume a God in order to explain life and the universe. "If we were not taught by our faith that animals came out of the Creator's hands as we see them, and if it were permitted to entertain the least doubt about their beginning and their end, might not the philosopher, left to his own thoughts, suspect that animality had its elements from all eternity mixed up and dispersed in the mass of matter; that these elements happen to encounter one

[1] In his experiments with flour worms, intended to support the theory of spontaneous generation. The error of regarding simple fermentation as the principle of life was not confined to him.

another, because it was possible that it should happen; that the embryo, formed of these elements, went through an infinite series of organisms and developments; that in succession it acquired motion, sensations, ideas, thought, reflexion, consciousness, sentiments, passions, signs, gestures, sounds, articulation, a language, laws, sciences, and arts" (17). It was on the basis that things could be explained without God that eighteenth-century Materialism proceeded. It was against the conventional idea of man as a material frame within which a soul had been placed that Diderot formulated his view of man as a composite being, a mass of separate sensitive atoms, as it were, fused into "one" being: Diderot's famous swarm of bees, acting as a unit but composed of individual bees. "Do you wish to transform the swarm of bees into a single animal? Soften the legs by which they cling together; instead of the contiguous things they were, make them continuous. Between the new state of the swarm and the former there is certainly a marked difference; and what can this difference be, except that now it is a whole, a single animal where before it was nothing but a collection of animals? . . . All our organs . . . are nothing but distinct animals which the law of continuity holds in a general sympathy, unity, and identity" (18). In this way the writer's analogy emphasizes the essentially physical nature of man, of the stimuli which decide his actions and ideas, whilst at the same time he gets rid of the view that makes the body little more than an unimportant container for the soul. Experience, physical experience, is the predominant factor in our make-up: it is also man's only reliable guide.

To explain and interpret everything possible in reasonable, natural, physical terms is the task which the Materialists set themselves. Of these, special place must be given to the Baron d'Holbach, who, though less of a thinker than Diderot, created more of a name for himself by the uncompromising Atheism

of his writings. This German, turned Frenchman, provided the *philosophers* with a meeting-place and was, moreover, wealthy enough to publish at his own expense many volumes of anti-religious writings.[1] He held, with Boulanger, that religion was no more than the expression of primitive man's fear of natural phenomena which he could not understand—an appeasement of imaginary powers. Systematic religion was but a development of this. D'Holbach claimed that, even if one could not deny the existence of a God, one could not accept the Christian God (28). His own position was to reject the assumption of a God and proceed on purely material grounds. He accepted only such arguments as found support in evidence which could be examined and tested objectively (30). Needless to say, he accepted the reality of objects (27) and attacked Berkeley's Idealism (35).[2] All our experience is of matter, and if we wish to envisage a " soul " we must accept that it is part of the body, that " it is nothing but the body itself considered in relation to some of its functions or faculties," which exist by virtue of its nature and organization. Any attempt to distinguish between body and soul *in essence* fails (35). Man is purely material, and his aim is to extend his material existence and well-being. It may be mentioned in passing that, in common with other thinkers of the period, d'Holbach tends to make man a little too much of a machine; but that was due to the existing lack of biological knowledge, the development of which has not, however, diminished the importance of Determinism as a theory of human behaviour and opinion. The suggestion that man is a free agent found no support in d'Holbach. We are what we are and we act as we act because of the way in which our bodies are con-

[1] It was d'Holbach who, by attributing his works to dead authors, solved the problem of how to avoid persecution.

[2] Berkeley believed that there are no abstract ideas and that matter, therefore, does not exist. He held that only the mind and its contents exist.

structed and because of the ideas which our environments provide. We have no control as to the country of our birth, nor can we regulate what happens around us. We are the product of our times, of our constitutions, of our habitat (27).

What of God? He seems to be composed, d'Holbach notes, entirely of negative attributes: He is non-material, non-finite, etc., and this suggests an unreal being. His participation in creation presupposes that matter must be in itself inert, which is unproved; d'Holbach even attempts to demonstrate by experiment that matter can produce life by fermentation. His experiments were invalid, but it is interesting to examine the Deist reaction to his work. Voltaire comments: "The author (of the *System of Nature*) claims that blind nature, without the capacity for selection, produces intelligent animals. Producing, without intelligence, beings which possess intelligence! Is that conceivable?" (47, *God*).

Examine this reaction. It comes to this: intelligence cannot produce itself; hence an intelligent God is needed as a creator. But if that is so, then God, being intelligent, also requires a creator by the same logic. If you admit the possibility that this intelligence (God) came into being on its own, then how deny that possibility to matter? If, on the other hand, you claim that this intelligence had no beginning, then how claim that intelligent matter must have had a beginning? The hypothesis of a God complicates, rather than simplifies, the problem.

D'Holbach's *System of Nature* (of which I count ten English or American translations from 1797 to 1884) was duly condemned by the French *Parlement* and Crown; the condemnation, with a good summary of his book and quotations, was published for a few pence by the authorities, a singular service to the cause of Materialism. Among the thinkers of his century his overt Atheism found few supporters, and d'Alembert's letter to Voltaire (25 July, 1770) is the reaction of an honest critic: "I must confess that,

with regard to the existence of God, the author seems to me too rigid and dogmatic, and on this question I see no reasonable alternative to scepticism." Most *philosophers*, however little they might endorse d'Holbach's Atheism, were Materialistic in so far as they preferred a non-supernatural version of religious ideas. Like him, they explained the growth of Christianity, not by divine origin and protection, but by the well-organized financial and authoritarian genius of the ministry. Few would have accepted the soul as anything but an aspect of matter, inseparable from it. If they accepted God as a prime cause, they sought nothing but a material explanation of everything else and recognized no formal religion as a necessary consequence of their belief in His existence.

The essential characteristic of the eighteenth century in general and of Materialism in particular is the social concern behind all the anti-religious writings. The *philosophers* are interested, not in what is supposed to please God, but in the happiness and welfare of man as an individual and as a member of society. D'Holbach (30) deliberately rejected any support from those whose anti-Christian motives are selfish: " The enemy of morality cannot be the friend of *philosophy*." He insisted that it was useless to destroy religion if we still " allow men to follow their undisciplined inclinations and abandon themselves shamelessly to their blind passions " (30). A real scientific and social virtue must be substituted, he said, for the obscure and shadowy dogmas of theology. This should " lead men to gentleness, indulgence, tolerance, virtues which are without doubt more patently necessary to society " than those speculations which lead to strife and intolerance (35). Man is made for society (30)—an idea which we find at the root of Voltaire's social ethics, his advocacy of tolerance; we find it behind Montesquieu's social ideal as a religion (43, 46) and his criticism of Catholic celibacy (43, 117); it is there at the root of the Deist objections to Atheism, which seems to them to remove security

from the sworn word and from human duties to society. Society is the supreme touchstone by which any system is judged, and Materialism of the Atheist type recognized this. The ideal of d'Holbach was one which can still be accepted by Rationalists and Atheists. He believed that if we analyzed men and their temperament " we should then know what laws and institutions are necessary and useful. In short, ethics and politics stand to gain greater advantages from Materialism than they ever could from the dogma of spirituality, advantages of which such a dogma prevents them even from dreaming " (**35**).

CHAPTER NINE

RELIGION AND POLITICS

It is outside the scope of this book to examine the purely political aims of the *philosophers*, whether it be the small city-state of a Rousseau, the enlightened despotism of a Voltaire, or the constitutional monarchy of a Montesquieu and, at times, a Voltaire. Our task now is briefly to enumerate their opinions on the relations between religion and the State. But we must first summarize the general view of the origin of society, since on this depends their idea of the role of religion.

They differ in their interpretation of the pact by which society came into being, but all believe that men, first in families and later in groups of families, banded together for mutual protection and support (**47**, *Country*; **34**), needing thereby rules, laws, and a structure to preserve their " society." They recognize the need for government, but insist on the ruler's subjection to the laws and to the elementary rights of his " subjects." The king is a being chosen by the nation, whose rights are prior to those of the king (**34**). Ethics is the science of the relationships between man and man and of the duties which result from those

relationships. Thus religion has no real connection with ethics or with government (this latter depends entirely on the consent of the nation) and cannot be allowed to dictate policy or claim special privileges. It is significant that from 1774 onwards constitutional and financial issues replace religious issues in politics. The *philosophers* were largely responsible for the new interest in the efficient running and welfare of French civilization; they had shown that law should not be contrary to common-sense, damaging to human rights, or divorced from the material well-being of the members of society. They had led the revolt against the effects of Christianity upon politics; kings turned into tyrants by theories of divine right, ruling over sheep whose attention had been diverted from earth to heaven (**28**); the State turned over to civil disorder (**44**), divided into warring factions who disagree over Biblical interpretation (**28**), losing its population and wealth through celibate and non-productive priests, monks, and nuns (**28**; **43**, 117); the people disinclined to effort under a religion which despises wealth and comfort, attaches insufficient importance to this world, and encourages fanaticism; a religion which could produce the Inquisition or the scandal of the la Barre case.

If society did indeed develop to protect and serve man, then Christianity, as they held, must be condemned because, other-worldly in theory, it becomes in practice a State within a State. The *philosophers* insist, with Montesquieu (**41**), that human and ecclesiastical laws are different and distinct, both by nature and by purpose. For them, human law is the important thing, and where it clashes with ecclesiastical law, as it frequently does, it must be allowed to triumph. Political edicts are too often nullified, Voltaire declares (**47**, *Chinese Catechism*), by religious authority and the idea of obedience to God.[1] The priest—first the Jew, then the Christian—has usurped

[1] Philosophy is the only cure for superstition and fanaticism, he says.

the law-making within our nations, says Helvétius (25, VII), and the Church has acquired an illegitimate temporal power (25, IX). The Jesuits, in particular, have demonstrated the undesirability of a State within a State by their activities, both within Catholicism itself and within nations (25, VII).[1] Ecclesiastical law must be subservient to civil law (47, *Laws*), otherwise we shall continue to have the position by which the French Church could withhold financial help from the king because he had allowed Protestants to occupy public positions, a privilege which it declared to be "contrary to divine, civil, and canon law." After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes a grateful Church granted the king four times as much money as it usually did. At the same time France saw people imprisoned, beaten, and executed on mere denunciation by a priest. Society was failing in its prime purpose if it allowed its members to be so treated for holding opinions different from those of the ecclesiastical powers.

Religion had taken upon itself far greater powers than were consistent with the purpose of society. Since Christianity implanted itself, the king is "only the chief slave of the priesthood, the executive of its vengeance and its decrees" (28). The Christian Church, having declared itself God's representative, claims to be the sole judge of whether the king's will is in conformity with divine will; in other words, the king's will and the happiness of society are subject to ecclesiastical domination—an intolerable deformation of the original intention of men when banding together in society (28). Princes must be taught, d'Holbach adds, that their real interests lie with the happiness of their subjects and not with the pleasure of the ministers of religion (28).

Rousseau went so far as to set down a basic civil religion suitable to men living in society. "The existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, fore-

[1] Cf. the example of Portugal, which was compelled ultimately to expel them.

seeing, and provident God, the future life, the happiness of the good, the punishment of the bad, the sacred nature of the social contract and of laws: those are the positive dogmas." He adds the virtue of tolerance as another dogma (44). The formulation of these articles he leaves to the ruler, who may banish anyone who cannot accept them or kill anyone who, having accepted them, behaves as if he did not believe them! Such a position is as intolerant as the one against which Rousseau was fighting. Fortunately the other thinkers of his century do not support the idea of a compulsory civil religion. They favour the co-existence, with equal privileges, of many different religions and sects. In the words of Voltaire: "If you have two religions, they will cut each other's throat; if you have thirty, they will live in peace" (47, *Tolerance*). From elsewhere we might add: "If you have one only, society, justice, and freedom are doomed."

The various points we have just mentioned are some indication of the new ideals which the *philosophers* wished to see dominating the relations between State and religion, ideals which we shall now set down in as consistent a system as possible.

Kings must henceforth occupy a new position, d'Holbach suggests. No longer supported by divine right, no longer subject to the wishes of the priesthood, they will be subject to the same laws as their subjects, whose interests will be their own (30). The enlightened monarch will be a rational guide to his people, the centre of all improvements in the social domain (29), upheld by the affection and gratitude of the people. His laws will be suited to a free people, whose interests will keep him in power (30), and whose complete education he must sponsor (30).

The people are very important. Ignorant people ruled by a bad prince are too much at his mercy. They must be educated to think and express themselves freely, thereby diminishing the dangers from a bad or superstitious monarch. Education must therefore be removed from the hands of the enemy of

reason and free thought—i.e., the Church. The citizen must be educated for himself and his country, not for his god, priest, or despot (30).

Law and social morality, Helvétius suggests, must go hand in hand to ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people (24). The laws should be as merciful to crimes as is compatible with the safety of society, says d'Holbach (35), and the law-maker should give attention to the problem of preventing crime (30). An entirely new code of ethics based on eighteenth-century *philosophy* is required (Voltaire in a letter to Helvétius). The old system by which metaphysical notions fashioned laws must disappear; manifest truth is the best commander of loyalty and observance.

Of the various political systems, constitutional monarchy seems the most favoured. Monarchy is founded upon a sentiment of honour,[1] and so appeals to man's self-esteem, the prime motive of human action (33). Absolute monarchy is unjustified outside a doctrine of divine right; the constitutional monarch is justified by the consent of the people whose constitution he protects and fosters.

Property, being the result of labour, is justified by its origin; it should also be the reward of useful labour, and it is in accordance with those principles that property should be redistributed. In particular, applying the tests of "how acquired" and "how necessary," most thinkers agreed that Church property should be redistributed (34; 24; 25).

Labour is a necessary duty, the contribution of all to the good of all; public service must be recognized by distinctions and grades, the resulting inequality being a spur to endeavour.

While man is thus working for himself and for the good of the society of which he is a member, some safeguard is needed to ensure that the people to whom the work of ruling has been entrusted shall not usurp his rights and freedom. Most writers accept

[1] This idea is borrowed from Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*.

the usual constitutional protections; d'Holbach (like Toland) adds a strictly limited right of revolt where the fundamentals of the social structure are endangered by the ruler's actions. Elsewhere, like Montaigne two centuries before, he would weigh the cost of the remedy against the cost of the evil to be endured (**34**).

It is, of course, recognized throughout most schemes that, with the disappearance of religions which have outlived their necessity, reason should be the guiding factor in all political and social reforms. Hence no check must be placed upon freedom of thought or publication (**25**, IX). Where religions still exist within a State, no one is to be adopted as a State religion (**28**).[1] Ecclesiastical powers must, at all times, be subordinate to civil powers, over which they should be allowed no control, even that of "forming public opinion." Laws must reflect public utility, not religious desires.[2] Justice must predominate, and, to ensure this, every means of combating superstition in religion must be sought (**47**, *Fraud*). D'Holbach would, of course, prefer the eradication of an Oriental religion (Christianity) from Europe (**28**); Helvétius would desire a religion which cultivates reason, happiness, and the material needs of man (**25**, I); Diderot a social religion which will devote its possessions to the poor, the sick, the unfortunate, instead of supporting an ecclesiastical hierarchy (**19**, *Holy bread*). The new ethics will be primarily concerned with the preservation of men's rights and the honest application of the rule of "do unto others . . ." (**32**). The details of a legal or moral code must depend on the type of people or society for which it is intended (**24**; **15**). Public utility is the supreme test, and by public utility is understood the actual happiness of the greater number.[3] Of the usual religious notions

[1] This view owes much to Shaftesbury's influence.

[2] Cf. Voltaire, Polier, etc.

[3] There is thus no room for the specious arguments by which any measure is opposed on the grounds of some imagined future harm it may do.

only one finds general favour—the idea of a God to reward or punish—and that as a political safeguard against the as yet uneducated passions of the mob (47, *Atheist*).

Thus the eighteenth century desired a constitutional monarchy, based on justice, religious impartiality, freedom of thought, earthly happiness, social well-being, and non-religious education. If the ideal sounds familiar it is because men like the *philosophers* have fought successfully to secure some mitigation of the hold which Christianity once had upon man and the society in which he lived and developed. The whole programme is not yet complete, but it still serves as a guide to those who value human reason and dignity more than the sanctions of the ministers of an alleged divine religion.

CONCLUSION

It remains now but to summarize the main work done by the *philosophers*. Briefly it may be described as giving to man the means of developing himself in his own way, subject only to the duties required of a good citizen. This involved, first, breaking the authoritarian conception of society by which a king was free to act as he pleased so long as he did not transgress the laws of the Church. Further, it meant the cultivation of the social virtues of honesty, justice, and tolerance, guided by an ideal of truth, truth being regarded as reasonable probability based on concrete evidence. Both these aims required the destruction of the power of Christianity, a religion which, no longer justified, merely placed an unnatural restraint upon the spirit of inquiry and created an anti-social system of law and morality. Society is the new focus of interest, and the happiness of its members the new test of any ideals. The metaphysical, the unknowable, is dismissed as an unsound basis for practical

organization. The saint is replaced by the citizen in the plans for the future of the world. Freedom of opinion, expression, and publication is an essential factor of the new world to be created. On that ground, and also for the non-intellectuals, Christianity may be allowed to continue, provided that it is reduced to a form of association and renounces its claims to superiority and dominance.

With Voltaire's wealth of polemic writings, the many anti-Christian books, journals, and news-letters, and the *Encyclopedia* putting materialistic arguments into popular form, the century absorbed the new practical, utilitarian ideals, and the Church lost much of its hold over French opinion. Even the Terror did not quench the flame which the *philosophers* had lit. Earlier, Voltaire's ideas had found their way into the *cahiers* of the *Third Estate* in 1789.

But it was not only in France that *philosophy* influenced thought: Baron Alberg, Caraccioli, Hume, Franklin, Garrick, Shelburne, Sterne, Wilkes, the Crown Prince of Brunswick, Grimm, the Emperor Frederick, and many others, were in contact with the eighteenth-century thinkers. Future generations of philosophers were to be prepared by their teachings. Comte, Taine, Bentham, are all in their way their disciples. Few European countries missed their influence. The union of science and Rationalism is a direct result of those early attempts to seek the explanation of the universe within the domain of human science, and it is interesting to compare the basic ideas set down in this book with A. Gowans Whyte's *The Religion of the Open Mind.*[1] The comparison reveals how indebted modern Rationalism is to eighteenth-century *philosophy*,[2] modern science having gone far in confirming earlier hypotheses.

What of the lessons to be learnt by us? Primarily

[1] Thinker's Library, No. 49.

[2] One exception is to be noted: the eighteenth century attaches more importance to the influence of education alone than does modern Rationalism.

we must cultivate tolerance of all points of view. Christians should not be persecuted where they occasion no social harm, but Christianity should be opposed wherever it interferes, as of right, with society. Morally, man should learn to guide his actions by reference to his own and his fellows' happiness. Christian morality is not harmful as practised to-day, but its stimulus is less real than that of a rational order. In this field, as in the religious field generally, we have the same responsibilities as the *philosophers*—to publish, popularize, and advocate all ideas which will enable man to examine his position and seek a more reasonable explanation of the past; to educate the public patiently; to use all social means of reform, opposing any attempts at dictation by groups of any one religion.

Some of those attitudes have been adopted—consciously or unconsciously—by the vast majority of English people. Others, not perhaps so generally accepted, still represent the foundations of modern thought and research among scholars. In many cases, even those who, within their church or chapel, accept the opinions of a priest or minister, none the less approach the problems of modern life on their own initiative and react as individuals, not as mere echoes of the occupant of their pulpit. In other words, when the limitations of the *philosophers* have been allowed for, there still remains much that is both valid and, indeed, essential to our modern outlook—things upon which there has been no going back.

Thus, everywhere to-day we find the prime importance attached to experience. Not only the scientist in his laboratory, but also the politician, the journalist, the law-maker, begin from hard facts instead of theories. Wishful thinking has given place to social study and human interests. Democracy has gained immeasurably from its growing independence of ecclesiastical theorists, and an unpractical bishop in the House of Lords is faced with the ridicule of the public in touch with realities.

The factual treatment of Christian history continues and is accepted by large numbers of clerics, as is evident from their publications (and their efforts to persuade us that, whilst Christians may have failed, Christianity itself has never been properly tried). The same objective tendency is visible in scientific circles. Science has freed itself from polemic, and the scientist pursues his investigations, leaving his results to be used and interpreted by Theist and Atheist alike, as best suits them.

This new methodical outlook is coupled with mental attitudes, also derived from eighteenth-century Rationalism. The idols of Authority and Revelation are no longer blindly accepted outside Fundamentalists and the Roman Catholic Church, and even in the latter we can discern intellectual elements which pay little more than lip-service to tradition. Similarly, numerical support as a guarantee of the validity of an argument is regarded with suspicion, and increasing attention is given to the nature and origin of such support, and particularly to the degree of rationalization present in popular attitudes. Again, following the lead given in the eighteenth century, the wide interest in the findings of archæology, astronomy, Egyptology, etc., is indicative of the way in which man no longer seriously regards himself as the centre and aim of the universe. The doctrine of the evolution of the species is widely accepted and the chemistry of life continues to occupy a large place in the scheme of modern Rationalism. The supporters of divine purpose who have adopted the idea of emergent evolution seldom suggest nowadays that the entire universe was planned in relation to man. This is indicative, too, of yet another feature of eighteenth-century Rationalism, one which has been greatly developed —the idea of the unity of life. The sciences are so interwoven that work in one sphere impinges upon another in an intimate and vital way. Life is seen as a unity, whether it be the behaviour of the one-cell organism or the complexity of social behaviour in man.

No educated man now believes that it is possible to shut any one branch of research off from the rest of science. It is no longer revolutionary to suggest that there may be no essential difference between inanimate matter and sentient matter.

The common-sense appeal of Rationalism, the strongest weapon of the *philosophers*, has continued to be its special line of approach, and it is noteworthy that Christian propaganda put out by the B.B.C. in this country has got farther and farther away from mysticism and concentrated upon practical issues. In this respect, as showing how Rationalism has dislodged Christianity from its authoritarian pedestal, it is worth quoting two recent statements. The first is by a Nonconformist minister, the Rev. W. Silver, who is reported as saying that the Church must learn how to use the Press and how to organize its publicity.[1] The second is by a layman, secretary of a Free Church Federal Council, who, in September 1944, declared: "It is the business of the Church to set its stall out to attract young people to the higher things of life [presumably Christianity]." The success of Rationalism in weaning people from blind obedience is evident from the fact that laymen no longer feel that they have to explain why they do not go to church, and that the Church feels it has to do more than say it is their duty to attend church, but must find advertising means of "selling itself" to the public. The change is significant of the permanency of attitudes of mind established in the eighteenth century.

Among scholars, if not among the public, there has been no falling back in matters of Biblical criticism, which continues to treat the sacred books of Christianity as it would any other ancient text. The influence has not been confined to Rationalists; even Christian ministers, who have most to lose from an attack upon the Revelation of the Bible, are among the critics who have helped to establish the dating of

[1] Just before going to press we read that the Church of England plans to spend £1,000,000 on advertising itself!

various Biblical books, thereby casting some doubt upon their absolute value as evidence. This may explain why some High Church Anglicans dismiss the Higher Criticism as irrelevant to their religion; it is too inconvenient.

With the Bible, as elsewhere, there has been a growing tendency, since the eighteenth century, to study the record of man's adaptation to his environment, with a consequent stress upon this world and its institutions. The idea of the evolutionary conception of God in the Bible could hardly have attained any wide popularity if our civilization had continued under a system which was primarily interested in the "other world."

Closely linked with this is the establishment of Determinism as the basis of most thought. In its more extreme form it follows the line of eighteenth-century mechanism, as in the Watsonian school of psychology. In its lesser forms it is found everywhere. It seems now to be a basic assumption, for instance, that people are largely what environment and heredity have made them. In another sphere, the public on the whole places more reliance in a high output of munitions than in National Days of Prayer, and certainly attributes the present war to economic and racialistic factors rather than to divine wrath.

This means that ethics have undergone a radical change; the science of morals is now, to the public almost as to the Rationalist philosopher, a practical science, founded upon human and humanitarian principles. Morality is, in practice, treated in its social rather than in its religious aspects, and moral improvement is sought through social betterment, security, housing, etc. Modern Protestantism, which is generally opposed to alcohol, frequently defends its position by reference to the social consequences of intemperance. Opposition to Sunday cinemas often buttresses its religious arguments by bringing in the social effects of a seven-day week upon the workers.

Ethics have become social and practical: houses rank higher than churches in our lists of needs; freedom of thought and worship are widely accepted as the needs of the new society; divorce is made easier than our Churches approve, but Roman Catholics, among others, still place their religious notions above the interests of society; education is directed towards society and towards individual needs, instead of towards God and the Church. All these changes in the ethical sphere are welcome to the Rationalist who, since the eighteenth century, has never ceased to work for them.

The humanitarian aims of the *philosophers*, the desire to outlaw war, slavery, poverty, and intolerance, have come nearer their fulfilment, urged by Rationalists, Atheists, and non-sacerdotal religions, and with little support—and what there was, tardy—from the Christian Church.

Modern Rationalism, then, still stands firm on the essential bases codified in the eighteenth century. The trend of civilization has led to an increasing trust in the capacities of human reason, and false humanitarianism, based on Christian theories, has been, we hope, finally discredited. We may further hope that a real humanitarianism, founded on actual and practical social aspirations, and guided by human reason, may lead to a stronger and better civilization.

One last duty remains in a book on the *philosophical* opposition to Christianity: to state briefly what the *philosophers* offer in exchange. Instead of a mysterious being who created matter in some undefined way, who gave some of it an unidentified soul, they offer us a universe in which matter had no specific beginning, possessed all the essential properties which matured into life, and behaved in a way which can be examined and described.[1] Where they cannot explain, they admit the gap in their knowledge

[1] Cf. *Man on His Nature*, by Sir Charles Sherrington (Cambridge Univ. Press), or *Life's Unfolding*, by the same author (Thinker's Library).

instead of referring it to the workings of some incomprehensible God. For an out-of-date morality, interpreted by a few human beings, they substitute a code based on human needs within society, a code which can thus be varied as circumstances require. The comforting doctrine of a second life is abandoned and stress placed entirely upon this world; by seeing man as the product of heredity and environment, they supply an incentive to progress. Misfortune does not evoke a pious acceptance, but provokes a desire to find the cause and eradicate or modify it. With the disappearance of prayer, man's self-reliance is developed. With the rejection of the Christian God and all His attributes, we now find an incentive to thought and activity in the reasoned belief that science will ultimately be able to explain everything that has puzzled man; in the belief, too, that man, if left free, can develop a worth-while social life in which restrictions are reduced to a necessary minimum and in which the citizen will be genuinely attached to the society in which he lives.

If in the meantime formal religion must continue, what guide can be better than these remarks of Helvétius in *Of Man*:—

> In order to be good, a religion should be inexpensive and tolerant. Its clergy must have no power over the citizen. . . . To ensure peace between nations, civil tolerance is not enough. The ecclesiastic should contribute to the same end. Every dogma is a germ of discord and crime. . . . Which religion is truly tolerant? That which . . . has no dogma or reduces itself . . . to a healthy and noble morality which will doubtless be the religion of the universe one day.
>
> A religion must, moreover, be gentle and human; let its ceremonies have nothing gloomy or severe about them. . . . Let its cult excite passions, but passions directed to the general good?

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON SOME OF THE *PHILOSOPHERS*

D'ALEMBERT, JEAN LE ROND (1717–1783), illegitimate child, abandoned by his mother, Mme. de Tencin, and brought up by a woman of the lower classes. He became famous as a mathematician, and helped Diderot to edit the *Encyclopedia* at its inception; he wrote the *Preliminary Discourse* to it, in which he attempted to classify human knowledge and account for its origin and development. An Agnostic, he contrived to avoid persecution. He was elected to the French Academy in 1754, and became its Permanent Secretary in 1772, helping the liberals and freethinkers, whose entry into the Academy he facilitated.

BAYLE, PIERRE (1647–1706), one-time Protestant minister, converted to Catholicism for a while, and ultimately an Agnostic. He took refuge abroad, and became Professor of Philosophy at Sedan and then at Rotterdam, where, in 1693, he lost his post because of his disputes with Protestant ministers. His *Historical and Critical Dictionary* sought to destroy ill-founded traditions and to inculcate scepticism by amassing historical evidence of contradictory opinions and human credulity. He was one of the first open defenders of freedom of thought and of tolerance, and rejected the idea of Divine Providence interfering in the ordering of this world.

BUFFON, COUNT GEORGES-LOUIS LECLERC (1707–1788), scientist and naturalist, Keeper of the royal collections from 1740, who wrote a vast *Natural History* in which he suggested the idea of evolution. Elsewhere he formulated ideas on the stages of development of the world. He saw Nature as the eternal force, the source of all things. His views were condemned by the Church. From his earliest works he sketched the principles to be observed in experimental science.

CONDILLAC, ETIENNE BONNOT DE (1715–1780), cleric, economist, and philosopher, tutor to the Prince of Parma. The theoretician of the *philosophers*, he was interested in the origin of human ideas. In many ways a disciple of Locke, his philosophical work tended to become more and more completely Sensationalist than his master's. He was elected to the French Academy in 1768.

CONDORCET, MARQUIS MARIE - JEAN - ANTOINE - NICOLAS DE CARITAT (1743–1794), philosopher, mathematician, and statesman, a disciple of d'Alembert. The bulk of his work was in the field of science and economics, although his most important book is his account of the development of the human mind, 1794, written during his imprisonment. He played an important part in the French Revolutionary Assemblies, but was arrested under the Terror. He was an earnest supporter of Socialism and a propagandist for the cult of Progress.

DIDEROT, DENIS (1713–1784), philosopher, playwright, art critic, social and natural historian. A bold free-thinker who from scepticism passed practically to Atheism. Persecuted and imprisoned for his views. He sought to demonstrate that God, Providence, and morality were human inventions and that man was a purely material being. As editor of the *Encyclopedia* (1751–1772) he fashioned the attack upon the French political and religious system and displayed his extraordinarily wide range of interests and knowledge. He was the first fully to use the discoveries of contemporary science as a basis for new and revolutionary theories.

FONTENELLE, BERNARD LE BOVIER DE (1657–1757), wit, writer, and poet, who later turned to scientific and philosophical studies. He did much to popularize Copernican astronomy and the scientific discoveries of his times. In philosophy he sought to combat dogmatism and discourage belief in Divine Providence. He was the apostle of a Rationalism which virtually excluded all intuition. Secretary of the Academy of Science.

HELVÉTIUS, CLAUDE-ADRIEN (1715–1771), Farmer-general of revenues, and courtier. He inaugurated moral science and incurred the enmity of the Church by reducing morality to a matter of enlightened self-interest. Originally a follower of Locke, his philosophy became completely Sensationalist. He is the forerunner of nineteenth-century Positivism. Great advocate of education.

D'HOLBACH, BARON PAUL-HENRI DIETRICH (1723–1789), German baron who became a naturalized Frenchman. A complete Atheist, who published everything he could find which would serve to discredit religion, he was one of the leaders and inspirers of eighteenth-century Materialism of the mechanistic type.

LA METTRIE, JULIEN OFFROY DE (1709–1751), physician and philosopher, who lost his position as Army Physician because of his Materialistic work, the *Natural History of the Soul*, and took refuge at the Court of Frederick II. Applying Descartes' mechanistic view of animals to men, he propagated the notion that man is a pure machine.

MONTESQUIEU, CHARLES DE SECONDAT DE (1689–1755), French Baron, magistrate, traveller, student of natural history, physics, and literature. He was chiefly interested in the formation of law and in social institutions. Tracing the natural development of laws and institutions, he announced the idea of historical determinism. Elected to the French Academy, 1727.

ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES (1712–1778), a moralist who ascribed man's evils to the influence of society. He based his work on a faith in the natural goodness of man. His political theories were socialistic in the extreme, but ended in the exaltation of the general will and the subordination of the individual will. The success which many of his theories enjoyed was due to their emotional appeal and simplicity rather than to their reasonableness. In religion he was a sentimental Deist who aimed at a simple, civic religion.

VOLTAIRE, name taken by FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET (1694–1778), poet, playwright, historian, moralist, satirist, and philosopher, educated by the Jesuits. He led the attack against Church and Despotism. A great admirer of England, he fought for tolerance, justice, and social improvements. A critic of all abuses and prejudice. He was interested in Newtonian science and Biblical criticism, which he used to discredit Christianity. He spent much time in exile and lived in England and Berlin. His vast correspondence (more than 10,000 letters) served to propagate his views in all quarters.

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