

The myth of Enlightenment deism

The myth of the deist movement

The first hint of deism in the historical record is to be found in sixteenth-century Lyon. In 1563 Pierre Viret, a close colleague of the Protestant reformer Calvin, wrote the *Instruction Chrétienne*, in which he described various freethinkers who needed to be combated. Amongst them Viret mentioned those ‘qui s’appellent déistes, d’un mot tout nouveau’ (‘who call themselves deists, a completely new word’) and his description of them heavily emphasized their lack of religion.¹ It was not, however, until the second half of the seventeenth century that the deism scare really began to take shape.

In 1654 the orthodox Catholic and Bordelais barrister Jean Filleau claimed that the Catholic reformer Jansen, Saint Cyran and five others had met in Bourgfontaine in 1621 in order to plan the destruction of French Catholicism and supplant it with deism.² In England, by the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, many Anglican prelates seemed increasingly convinced – if we are to believe their testimony – of the existence of a deist movement, and similar fears were apparent amongst the orthodox in France, Italy and elsewhere in Europe. The central question is: should we accept the proclaimed fears of eighteenth-century thinkers as a true reflection of reality? If they were real fears, did they necessarily reflect the actual existence of deists or even a movement of them? In short, the answer is negative: on this subject, what we read in the historical record is for the most part the fears and prejudices of writers rather than actual observations. Some of those proclaimed fears were genuine. Some, however, were not entirely so, and were in good part the result of a matrix of personal, economic and politico-religious

The Enlightenment and religion

circumstances and exigencies that prompted some observers to exaggerate threats to Christianity. The results are beyond doubt. The deism scare proved to be one of the great and enduring European propaganda coups, the results of which, in academic terms, are still with us today. Historians, wishing to locate the origins of secular modernity in the Enlightenment, have perpetuated the notion of a secularizing eighteenth-century international 'deist movement', which has been considered 'especially strong in Britain and France'.³ It has consequently been noted that amongst some historians there has been an 'obsessive iteration of "modernity" as a watchword of Enlightenment'.⁴

In his *Christianity under the Ancien Régime 1648–1789* (1999), Ward has suggested that the number of deist writers was 'immense'.⁵ Herrick (*The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, 1997) has claimed that English deists were so numerous that they posed a threat to the social and religious order.⁶ In his *Enlightenment Deism* (1999), Daily has even argued that the large Latitudinarian tendency of the Anglican Church consisted of strong advocates of deism.⁷ In 1993 Walsh and Taylor too asserted the existence of a deist movement that, in the 1730s, 'became dangerously fashionable in the *haut monde*'.⁸ Justin Champion (*The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 1992), although debating its nature, also accepts the existence of a deist movement.⁹ In a recent offering, Margaret Jacob, a consistent advocate of a radical Enlightenment, also contributes to the notion of a deist movement, claiming that deists and freethinkers were 'readily found on the radical fringe' of the Whigs.¹⁰ In her earlier *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981), she argued that the clandestine writings of such thinkers 'fed the flames of ... massive conflagration intended to destroy the Christian Churches and their doctrines'.¹¹ In 1985 J. C. D. Clark informed his readers that '[d]eism was launched as a self-conscious movement in the mid 1690s ... and the deist movement found its chief spokesman in John Toland'.¹² Commentators on France too have asserted the unquestionable existence of a deist movement, as does C. J. Betts in his *Early Deism in France* (1984).¹³ Rivers, in her *Reason, Grace and Sentiment* (2000), also asserts the existence of a deist (or free-thinking) movement.¹⁴ In his *France in the Enlightenment* (1993), Roche argues that 'theism was a public promise that echoed everywhere', and he defines theism as 'a desperate attempt to make sure that religion remained ... unattached to any supernatural myth'.¹⁵

The myth of Enlightenment deism

Two recent works, explicitly focusing on the relationship between the Enlightenment and modernity, make similar claims. In his much-praised *Enlightenment Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000), Roy Porter too has argued that deists were numerous and enjoyed wide support.¹⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly, in his *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), Jonathan Israel alludes to considerable numbers of known and active deists by describing, for example, how ‘major segments of British deism evinced close conceptual affinities with Spinozism’.¹⁷

The forerunners of such claims can be found in much earlier assessments of the numbers of deists and their influence by canonical thinkers such as Ernst Cassirer, Paul Hazard, Frank E. Manuel, G. R. Cragg and Peter Gay. In his *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), Ernst Cassirer writes of the ‘extraordinary effect’ that the English ‘deistic movement’ had on the Enlightenment, and quotes the late-seventeenth-century Huguenot Pierre Bayle describing his age as ‘full of freethinkers and deists’.¹⁸ In his ‘*Christianity not Mysterious and the Enlightenment*’ (1997), McGuinness has asserted that deism was ‘very influential in Germany’, but his authority is Manuel’s *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (1959). Using Paul Hazard’s *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1946) as his authority, the same writer also asserts that French deism saw the birth of a ‘race of men whose sole spiritual nourishment was anti-clericalism’.¹⁹ In his *The Church and the Age of Reason 1648–1789* (1962), G. R. Cragg advanced an analysis that has endured until the present without significant revision, and will thus demand our attention in the following discussions. He argued that, from the last years of the seventeenth century until the mid eighteenth century, deism was a serious threat to organized Christianity.²⁰ Peter Gay, in his much-lauded *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966), asserted that in England ‘the dawning deist Enlightenment’ produced ‘a true school of thought’, the deists ‘redrew the religious map of Europe’ and their teachings became ‘commonplace’.²¹ The same kind of claims are to be found in Ira Wade’s *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment* (1977), where it is asserted that the history of French ‘religious thought from 1715 to 1750 is dominated by the dynamism of a widespread deism’.²²

It can be asserted, however, that in any meaningful definition of the term, beyond the virtual reality of history books, the deist movement never existed. The Enlightenment studies canon also holds

The Enlightenment and religion

that Voltaire and the other deistic philosophes constituted the paramount force in the struggle for enlightenment, and initiated the birth of secular modernity. This notion, too, is based more upon supposition than evidence. It is true that the philosophes were opponents (if inconsistently) of the Church, although not necessarily of religion. But it is also true that, rather than leaders and instigators of real change, the philosophes were observers (and not unbiased commentators) of politico-religious struggles and transformations across late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.

There have been some voices against the notion of a predominantly secular radical Enlightenment (see below) and a relatively weak Church, amongst whom I wish to place myself. Nevertheless, politico-religious conflicts have still been given insufficient weight in the study of Enlightenment thought. That is to say a profound process of religious change has been relatively neglected because it manifested itself in a traditional early modern politico-religious form, rather than in the 'modernizing' language of the philosophes. That the philosophes have been granted the credit for achievements that were not theirs is not really surprising. They themselves were prone to claim credit for victories of others against the establishment, even if – as in the suppression of the Jesuits in France – these were in fact victories for one wing of Catholicism against another. This circumstance cannot, however, form any general indictment of enlightened thinkers or indeed of the philosophical and scientific achievements of the Enlightenment itself. But it does illustrate how a tiny minority of intellectuals naturally grasped any opportunity to further their own views, claiming favourable winds as universal victories for reason against ignorance and superstition.

We know that d'Alembert, for instance, in his 1765 pamphlet *Sur la destruction des Jésuites en France*, claimed the hitherto unthinkable destruction of that pillar of papal and absolute royal power as a victory for enlightened thought. Yet he knew very well that the dominant force in the battle to disband the Jesuits was other dissident Catholics, Jansenists.²³ Some enlightened readers of Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (finally published in 1782) were also presumably surprised to learn how indebted they were to the author's prompt action in preventing a revolution in 1753. With deft footwork, Rousseau had apparently distracted Paris from acute religious strife with his views on the comparative virtues of Italian and French music.²⁴ Rousseau's rather amusing megalomania aside,

The myth of Enlightenment deism

these two anecdotes indicate how the philosophes ought to be seen more often as onlookers in truly tumultuous events which were certainly not ‘enlightened’ as we have come to understand the term. From this perspective, it is possible to view at least some of the thought of the philosophes as the *result* of a profound politicization of religion especially apparent in France, Italy and England, rather than its cause. Indeed, there is little evidence of religious change brought about by philosophes. At the heart of this book is the understanding that it was the politicization of religion that was central to religious change in eighteenth-century Europe. But the philosophes were rarely central to the process of politicization. For religion to be politicized in reality, rather than in elite theory or sensationalist writings, the politicization process needed to encompass far wider social strata and express significant elements of the political, economic and religious outlook of those strata.

Paradoxically, in England and France the greatest phenomena of the time corresponding to the term movement – something organized and active with a definable intellectual platform – were usually religious in outlook. Major examples were the various sects and tendencies that constituted late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century English Dissent, and in France, Jansenists organized around the very influential journal *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* and the Camisards (insurrectionary Huguenots). Thus, in agreement with the emerging trend to view the Enlightenment from the perspective of diversity rather than homogeneity, the following discussion will assume that the religious thought of the philosophes was as much a product of their own broad politico-religious experience as of their claimed universalist and classic-inspired thinking.

That historians have been able to refer to deism as a movement, a social force, is a reminder that in important and often vital respects – especially in intellectual history – historians recreate the past based not only upon its more tangible events and achievements, but also upon the hopes and fears of its participants and the historical outlook of the historians themselves. Thus, d’Alembert’s claim has been seen as proof of the philosophes’ influence. Yet, paradoxically, even though the politico-religious role of Jansenism is in fact difficult to deny, the public face of French Jansenism was always a denial of its own existence: a quite reasonable fear of being condemned and persecuted as schismatics by Rome and Bourbon monarchs. This simple reality has also served to bolster the notion

The Enlightenment and religion

that a ‘modern, progressive act’, such as the dissolution of the Jesuits, had to have come about on account of the influence of the vocal and progressive philosophes, not at the hands of the fanatically religious and self-effacing Jansenists. Yet the term ‘simple reality’ is a bold statement, for historical reality is rarely what it might seem at first glance. More precisely, we have to ask *which* historical reality we wish to recover, for we are usually presented with a choice. We know, for instance, that in the opinion of many Jansenists the Jesuits were, in practice, allied with the philosophes, while the Jesuits claimed that the Jansenists were in league with the philosophes.²⁵ These two claims have rarely been considered as little more than crude propagandizing, yet, as the chapters of this book will argue, there is every reason to consider that at some points and in some respects the claims of the Jesuits, at least, were justified. In sum, if there is any single theme of this book I would wish to stress above others, it is the propensity of the historical record to ‘mislead’ posterity.

For a variety of reasons, then, the aims, hopes and fears of historical actors represented in and selected from the historical record may not coincide with a more general historical view of the period. Historians have also at times been victims of modern historiography itself, where the deism imposed on the population by a tiny elite – the cult of the Supreme Being imposed during the French Revolution – has often been read backwards into French intellectual history. So, regardless of how ineffective (and even rather ridiculous in aspect) the cult might have been in terms of transforming personal piety, along with the Revolution itself it has often been understood as the logical result of the influential deistic philosophes and their programme of enlightenment. This type of approach helps us understand why the traditional division of labour in eighteenth-century studies – books on the Enlightenment and books on the rest of the eighteenth century – has been so enduring, yet so glaring: one historical story seemed out of place with another. As Dale Van Kley has noted in relationship to France, the problem emanates in good part from the assumption of an active Enlightenment party in contradistinction to a wider inert and passively receptive social context.²⁶ To view the majority of experience in eighteenth-century Europe through the prism of the deistic philosophes is simply to accept uncritically the world as the philosophes claimed they saw it.

The myth of Enlightenment deism

Deism, diverse in form and thus difficult to define, has generally been accepted as entailing belief in God and even of *post mortem* rewards and punishments. It was, however, a God usually remote from everyday human concerns. Deists thus dismissed the need for any mediation between humanity and divinity in the form of the Church and dismissed the Church's claimed mediation as self-interested fraud. This sort of view was understood as a potential threat not only to Christianity, but also to the established social order, for Christian teachings and the Church were widely acknowledged as the broad foundation for morality and law. Reducing the reliance of society and intellectual endeavour upon religious thought was of course one of the fundamental propositions of the enlightened. By eliminating superstition and clerical influence, which they understood as a key barrier to human progress, the philosophes hoped to renew society. They wished to bring about a new rational, humane and progressive social order, in which the faculty of reason would be free to work for the benefit of all humanity. The problem is, however, only a small minority of even the enlightened were identifiably deist in outlook. That there were fears of the encroachment of such potentially anti-establishment heterodoxy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should not, however, be any surprise. It was a period in which states were still confessional in nature (that is, with only one permitted state religion). Nevertheless, diverse religious divides were common and were of course understood by many of the elite as potentially inimical to the well-being of the state and the social order. Yet, paradoxically, almost all those radical in religion or politics also recognized the vital role of the Church in preserving the status quo. Thus Voltaire, famed as a deist, could crusade against all organized religion, yet he also argued that religious observance was to be tolerated and even supported amongst the masses. It was to be tolerated, however, not because of its value as legitimate divine worship, but as an aid in the maintenance of social stability, including the maintenance of the social and economic status of the philosophes themselves, who, for the most part, were drawn from the moneyed classes. So, even if we accept the simple but controversial proposition that a deist movement did not exist, those deists who certainly did exist held views which might seem at least paradoxical to us and serve to complicate any attempts at a one-dimensional view of eighteenth-century religion.

The Enlightenment and religion

There can be no doubting that some deists did exist, including – on some counts – Voltaire, Montesquieu, John Toland, Diderot (for a period), Matthew Tindal and Anthony Collins. The problem we face, if we accept the traditional claims for a deist movement, is that the rest of what surely should be a lengthy list of deists is not to be found. There were, it seems, more than those listed above, but not sufficient to validate claims for a European deist movement. The *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century History* (1996), for example, seems to reflect the relative scarcity of deists quite well. The *Dictionary* lists only seven deists (and even less atheists) – Viscount Bolingbroke, Toland, Tindal, Collins (listed as a freethinker), Erasmus Darwin, Diderot, Thomas Paine and Alberto Radicati – across the whole of Europe in the whole of the century.²⁷ It hardly needs pointing out that this figure does not, no matter how much we might qualify the term, constitute grounds for the identification of a movement, even an English one consisting of relatively ‘small numbers’ as Clark has put it in his *English Society 1688–1832* (1985).²⁸ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one commentator has ventured that scepticism had less support from the 1690s to the 1740s ‘than it had at any time since the Renaissance’.²⁹ At this point, then, we need to pose two questions: is the *Dictionary* a credible guide to eighteenth-century religious history and what reasons might there be for not recording the names of the rest of the putative deist movement? First, however, let us examine the numbers of deists some other historians have identified in the course of their researches.

A search of Peter Gay’s comprehensive *Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966), the first in his two-volume interpretation of the Enlightenment, results in extending our list of deists by only another five or six.³⁰ Significantly, Cragg’s *The Church and the Age of Reason* identifies only three deists with no extension to our list.³¹ Byrne, in his *Glory Jest and Riddle* (1996), cites seven, providing one addition to our list.³² In his *God and Government in an Age of Reason* (1995), D. Nichols discusses only five deists, with one possible addition to our list.³³ Neither does discussion of the deist movement in J. C. D. Clark’s *English Society* allow us to augment our list. To our list we can of course add the names of deists less usually discussed, such as the Germans Herman Reimarus, G. Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn. The approximate totals of deist protagonists commonly cited by historians are, therefore, five French, ten English,

The myth of Enlightenment deism

one Italian and three German. Given that deism is usually given by historians as a movement crossing most of Europe for most of the eighteenth century, these sparse aggregate figures scarcely amount to a movement in any meaningful sense of the term. Equally interesting is the *History of British Deism* (1995), edited by J. V. Price.³⁴ The eight volumes of reproduced texts which constitute the *History* appear, ostensibly, impressive and a testament to the term 'English deist movement'. In fact, the eight volumes contain (besides three and a half volumes of replies and arguments for Christianity and against deism) the works of only five deists: Charles Blount, Peter Annet, Tindal, Toland and the self-confessed 'Christian deist' Thomas Morgan. Price seems, therefore, to have had some difficulty in coming up with a British deist movement: five writers spanning the period 1693–1761 is hardly the basis for a convincing argument for a deist movement. Indeed, although the work is entitled the *History of British Deism*, Price provides no overall introduction to the work: an introduction to the history of a phenomenon the reality of which palls before its reputation is perhaps not a task many would want to undertake. As Sullivan has commented, 'if Blount, Woolston, Annet, and perhaps Toland were the only deists, then the importance of deism has been consistently exaggerated'. Sullivan also adds the telling remark that even active (usually Anglican) anti-deists 'frequently seemed perplexed about who these men were. Indeed, the Augustans were unable to agree on any single principle as typical of deism.'³⁵ More recently, whilst he has alluded to great numbers of English deists in his *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), Israel does not allow us to enlarge significantly our list.

As we shall see, compiling a list of deists is not only problematic in numerical terms, for it did not constitute a homogenous set of beliefs and in itself this recognition renders the concept of a deist movement somewhat difficult. No one has yet been able to demonstrate any consensus in deist religious outlook, an identifiable deist programme, or consistent intellectual links based upon it – even if we accept that some, such as Hermann Reimarus for instance, chose to hide their deistic views. Thus, depending on the definition of deism one uses, one or two or more names given above might be struck from the list and one or two added: some might argue Rousseau ought to be added to the list and one name or another omitted (such as the Earl of Shaftesbury or Nicholas Fréret). This does not invalidate the reason for this head-count: to put the

The Enlightenment and religion

received wisdom regarding the existence of a deist movement into tight focus. The figures of deists provided from various sources, then, indicate that, rather than a movement, a tiny group of the European intelligentsia advocated deistic or to some degree similar ideas, at geographically diverse locations and often several generations apart.

The specificities of time and place could, hypothetically, serve to bring our short list closer to the idea of an international movement if the protagonists were at least concentrated within relatively narrow time bands. But this is not the case. In the case of England, it is true that some of the individuals mentioned above may have occasionally used the same coffee houses, but their views differed in various respects and there is no evidence to support any hypothesis of concerted ideological action.³⁶ The only obvious facts about the chronological and geographical spread of the list above have already become (uncritical) commonplaces in Enlightenment studies: that Enlightenment deism seems to have begun in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England and that, by comparison, very large gaps appear elsewhere in Europe for much of the century until 1789. The time has arrived to admit that the hitherto prevailing conception of a deist movement has become more of a hindrance than an aid to the advancement of our knowledge of eighteenth-century intellectual history. It has, in fact, begun to produce very unfortunate distortions. As we shall see, trying to fit the round peg of a deist movement into the square hole of eighteenth-century reality has led to the bolstering of the deist count with individuals for whom the tangible evidence for holding deistic views is extremely thin and unconvincing. It is true, of course, that simple head-counts can be said to prove little, for the question of the influence these individual protagonists exerted is also, in itself, a vital question. Although there is no evidence of religious change brought about by the philosophes, we may say they perhaps contributed to changes in public opinion, but yet even this is not demonstrable. As we shall see, in the hubbub of the great politico-religious events in France, for instance, their voices were most often thin and distant, and the partial exceptions – Voltaire's campaign over the Calas case for example – tend to confirm the point. For now, however, we must resume our consideration of the implications of the rather surprising lack of deists listed in the *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century History*.

The myth of Enlightenment deism

There is certainly no evidence to suggest that the scholarship of the *Dictionary* is in any way suspect and certainly no evidence of religious bias. We should conclude, then, even though its content on the subject of deism seems at odds with much received academic wisdom on the subject, that its 800 pages of offerings in fact constitute a fair balance of the religious outlook of its widely chosen subjects and thus of the Enlightenment itself. We know that deism has become one of the hallowed watchwords of the Enlightenment and that the contributors to the *Dictionary* are specialist and erudite scholars. Thus, we can take for granted that if it were possible for the *Dictionary* to have easily identified a host of other deists, it would have done so. Thus, even allowing for the inevitable minor oversights and naturally extremely tight control on space allocation to subjects, we are still left with a tricky problem: how to equate the findings of the *Dictionary* with the repeated assertions by modern historians of the existence of a deist movement. Yet, it cannot be ignored that the *Dictionary* itself also asserts the existence of a deist movement.³⁷ For the supporters of the notion of a more radical Enlightenment typified by a vibrant deist movement, this lack of evidence is a little disturbing. In the final instance, the contradiction between claim and evidence has to be overcome if Enlightenment studies is to remain on a balanced footing. To abandon the claim, at least until now, has been unthinkable for most historians, because the existence of a deist movement has been an inherent part of the chain of evidence for charting the roots and evolution of secular modernity. We need only remind ourselves that the term modernity figures large in the title of the latest offerings of respected historians such as Jonathan Israel and Roy Porter.

In its entry for deism, the *Dictionary* notes that ‘although it was never a coherent intellectual movement, it reached the peak of its influence in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England in the writings of John Toland and Matthew Tindal and in eighteenth-century France in the writings of Rousseau and Voltaire’.³⁸ What is not apparent from this statement is that (prior to 1789) the *Dictionary* lists only four English deists or freethinkers – Toland, Collins, Darwin and Bolingbroke. Of French thinkers, only Diderot is described as deist – not even Voltaire and Rousseau in the articles devoted to them are termed deists (although there is little doubt that Voltaire and some few others did at least exhibit part of the outlook of what has been termed deism). So, even if deists were a mixed bag,

The Enlightenment and religion

readers are entitled to ask where are they? Unless the *Dictionary's* deist count can, via head-counts in more specialized works, be multiplied by a relatively large factor, it is difficult to see how 'a peak of influence', which strongly indicates numerous and frequently repeated polemics, can be ascribed to so few writers. In a nutshell, we have the assertion of a historical social force, but we have only ever had the writings of a few disparate figures to suggest its existence. It seems, then, historians have constructed an imposing ideological structure to which all 'moderns' have felt compelled to give assent. The abstract ideas of a few eighteenth-century thinkers have been reified, imbued by historians with a social force, which has served to construct a wide schema of historical progress upon which Enlightenment studies has been founded. But because of its artificiality, that schema or imputed historical terrain has very often been inhospitable to wider political and social studies of eighteenth-century life. It is important, therefore, to examine some of the factors contributing to the construction of time-lines of intellectual 'progress'.

The deism myth and modern historians

Perhaps one of the oldest practices within historical research has been to identify the sources and authorities present in any given text. This, many young historians have been told, allows one to map the mind of the writer, to identify the influences and sources behind the pen. It is necessary to be very clear on this issue at the outset: finding references to or tracing the use of other writers' works in any given text cannot prove or disprove the existence of influence upon the writer. We can only know for certain that writer A probably read or knew of writer B. In itself this may seem like one bad-tempered historian being pedantic with his colleagues, but the point at issue here merits attention. Historians have repeatedly traced back the ideas found in eighteenth-century texts to their 'source' – anywhere from the classical period to the Renaissance and Reformation period.³⁹ Yet, in the last two decades, it has become a relative commonplace amongst historians themselves that their own profession and all others have never been nor will ever be without bias or ideology. Why, then, should historians imagine that Enlightenment writers should bequeath a transparent record of their own reality to posterity?

The myth of Enlightenment deism

Tracing back the ideas of deism and the philosophes to the Renaissance, as Peter Gay (and others since) has done so eloquently in his *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966), is very often little more than wishful thinking. The ‘forging’ of such links is a process much related to the desire of modern historians to find the ‘modern’ in the Enlightenment: the ‘modern’ in the Enlightenment had to have its own roots, so historians then sought the proto-modern in earlier periods. Historians know very well that the process of writing is most often about justifying their ideas and interpretations: that is to say they most often add ‘proofs’ in the form of references or allusions to ideas already formulated and not necessarily conceived in direct connection with the authorities they might later cite. This then is the process of ‘proving’ or bolstering the legitimacy of our work, a post-factum justification, and can be termed the appropriation of ideas. The point here is that the *influence* of ideas is a very different intellectual circumstance from that of the *appropriation* of ideas. This is, of course, not to say that writings of the past never influence the present, nor that the boundaries between appropriation and influence are precise or fixed. Crucially, if this latter point holds true, in textual terms it will often prove difficult if not impossible to separate intellectual development resulting from broad biographical experience from the supposed influence of past writers. Texts are representatives of the past, yet very often represent no more than a simplified (or misleading) version of one layer of a multi-layered but interactive historical reality. As Oakeshott argued some time ago, the contents of the historical record are only ‘symbols’ of past ‘performative utterances’ which can never, in themselves, be fully recovered.⁴⁰ This admission, however, does not serve to undermine the historian’s craft, but only to clarify its very rationale: the aim to reconstruct elements of the past, which means to situate the historical subject in as much or as many layers of its context as we can possibly reconstruct or authoritatively infer.

To cite an example from Dale Van Kley’s otherwise informative and rigorous *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (1996): when discussing Diderot’s article entitled ‘Political Authority’ which appeared in the first volume of that key Enlightenment publication the *Encyclopédie* in 1751, he notes that ‘[m]odern scholarship has tracked down the obvious clues concerning this article’s intellectual debts’ (and he goes on to cite them).⁴¹ I do not want to disagree with the technical scholarship brought to bear on

The Enlightenment and religion

the article, since we must assume it is of impeccable quality. We ought, however, to ask ourselves what is meant by ‘intellectual debt’? In this article, it has been discovered, there is evidence that Diderot drew upon several other texts, some from the seventeenth century. But to draw upon or appropriate the work of others does not necessarily or even usually indicate influence. It may well be the case that Diderot had long held those opinions, formed by the experiences of his life, and this is a very different circumstance from influence. So what does ‘intellectual debt’ signify exactly? Most will agree, I feel, that this term connotes influence. Let us assume, then, that Diderot had long held the ideas expressed in the article, but upon writing the article he exemplified, sharpened and reinforced his arguments via the writings of past thinkers. If his long-held arguments also shifted a little in emphasis because of his appropriation of the ideas of others, this can be legitimately termed influence. But what does it tell us about the major context for the birth of those ideas in the intellect of Diderot? ‘Intellectual debt’ here can only tell us that he was aware of the writings of others and agreed with them to some extent. Anything more than this, without a good deal of supporting evidence, would be pure supposition. To build intellectual traditions upon sequences of such links is to build ideological edifices where none existed. It is to create social forces from nothing, to reify our own opinions. When an ideological construct becomes dominant, accrues the collective force of a respected and thus powerful layer of professional historians, it can be difficult to dispel. Their shared assumptions form the very window of ‘truth’ through which they view the past, such that most cannot conceive of another, while a few other sharper spirits may be justifiably nervous about the prospect of abandoning the collective ideological shelter of the community.

So, as in eighteenth-century practice, we present-day historians are anxious to imbue our writings with the appearance of truth. To this end we readily quote and reference in accordance with academic norms and our own discursive needs. We thus supply a trail for later readers to follow. Some historians have felt it possible to follow these trails: the ‘origins’ of text D traced back via texts B and C finally to its ‘source’ A. In an occupation always hungry for order and explanation, the cumulative effect of these fancied intellectual time-lines has been to produce a respected body of research, the Enlightenment canon. Once the task of locating the roots of secular

The myth of Enlightenment deism

modernity in the radicals of the Enlightenment had become a shared imperative, for most it then seemed rather superfluous to study by far and away the greatest bulk of the historical record which is of course less 'radical', thus deemed less relevant. In this manner a created historical reality tends to become self-reinforcing, because there is a tendency for that small, even tiny, part of the historical record to become the preferred object of examination and re-examination for those in that particular field.

The philosophes, then, can become lifted and isolated from the actual context in which they lived – that represented by the rest of the historical record. Thus significant elements of the biographical context of their thought, that is to say their general life experiences, are often relegated to a secondary or even lower status in research. In place of the actual interaction between the subject and context, the subject is made to interact with received intellectual positions on a historical stage created by historians themselves. This, however, is not the full extent of the problem, and to berate only historians on this matter would be unjust. Historical actors themselves have of course rarely wished to portray themselves to their immediate audience and to posterity as products of contexts, rather than as original, 'timeless' or at least gifted thinkers. In this sense, in trying to recover the influences which prompted a writer to this view rather than that, the historian is at the outset often already bedevilled. We can say, at the very least, therefore, that the philosophes themselves did not want to appear mundane, and often simply omitted those facts or generalizations about their intellectual formation which we would today often consider relevant and important. Edward Gibbon, for example, never admits that in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–81) the outline of his treatment of the medieval Church is in fact mundane, a rehash of Protestant anticlerical positions dating back to the sixteenth century.⁴²

This tendency for writers to 'overlook' their own formative intellectual experiences or milieux can be accompanied by a willingness to ignore and even misrepresent the influences at work in the achievement of their own dearly held goals, as did d'Alembert with the suppression of the Jesuits. Similarly, the philosophes in general portrayed the fideist analysis of the renowned writer Pierre Bayle as religiously sceptical, when (as we shall see later) it is unthinkable that many were not aware of his Huguenot piety.⁴³ Academic edifices based on influences detected in eighteenth-century texts thus

The Enlightenment and religion

often turn out to have very thin foundations indeed. In many cases it may be reasonable to infer influence, but in perhaps many more it would be more reasonable not to make such assumptions and to look more closely at the life experiences of historical actors. Would it be reasonable to suggest that Edward Gibbon, living for most of his life in Protestant England, had not assimilated the highly critical view of the medieval Church found in the writings of many Protestants? If he wished to write something critical of Church history, it would have been very surprising indeed if he did not consciously or unconsciously draw upon such common-or-garden Protestant critiques.

Gibbon was certainly biting anticlerical at times, and as Mark Goldie has put it: ‘anticlericalism has long been integral to our idea of the Enlightenment. This used to encourage an heroic mythology of secularisation, in which reason did battle with religion, free-thought with bigotry. Few historians today would endorse so Manichaean a picture.’⁷⁴⁴ There is now a growing consensus that the characterization of the Enlightenment as the Age of Reason, in which reason was diametrically opposed to religion, cannot be sustained. It is accepted by many that the Enlightenment represented a challenge to the Church, especially to the established Churches of the day, rather than to belief in God, in whom almost all philosophes and their supporters continued to believe in one form or another. This counter-trend to the more secular-radical Enlightenment thesis had its first beginnings some decades ago. However, although some historians now include Christian belief rather than only scepticism, deism or atheism when researching the Enlightenment, the idea that traditional politico-religious conflict played a major role in the formation and development of key aspects of the Enlightenment is not yet so readily accepted. The idea that the Enlightenment was overwhelmingly formed and driven by radical secularism still retains the allegiance of many historians. Thus part of the intellectual legacy of that earlier more oppositional view of reason versus religion is still with us. Even though many historians came to realize that reason against religion was a misleading formulation, the alternative formulation of reason against the Church continued to assume the existence of a large (if not properly homogenous) European ‘party’ of deists and fellow travellers. This was because, at root, it was not conceived possible that the project of bringing about secular modernity could have been accomplished by

The myth of Enlightenment deism

anything less than the concerted efforts of radical thinkers. As we have seen, the myth of the deist movement is not dead, and Goldie was perhaps a little over optimistic in the early 1990s when he declared that 'European thought in the eighteenth century is now seen to have been characterised by an ameliorated Christianity rather than by a militant crusade to overthrow it'.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, amongst the dissident voices in Enlightenment studies – whose work has helped inform my own – the work of Labrousse,⁴⁶ Kors, Korshin⁴⁷ and Van Kley has been of great importance in establishing Christianity as a legitimate object of study within Enlightenment studies. In particular, Van Kley and O'Brien have contributed to our understanding of how conflict within Catholicism led to the suppression of the Jesuits in France – an order much hated by the philosophes and symbolic of their struggle against superstition and clerical arrogance – and to an increased desire for religious toleration.⁴⁸ J. C. D. Clark's *English Society 1688–1832* (1985) also argued for the importance of the Church in understanding the development of the Enlightenment. Similarly the work of Harrison,⁴⁹ Fitzpatrick,⁵⁰ and especially that of Young has helped to break the undue concentration on the thought of Enlightenment radicals.⁵¹ Champion's work has helped reinsert the importance of the nexus between politics and religion into debate on the origins of the English Enlightenment, as has that of Goldie.⁵² In *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe* (2001), edited by James Bradley and Dale Van Kley, the interface between politics and religion across Enlightenment Europe is examined. Also useful in this context has been Nigel Aston's edited collection *Religious Change in Europe 1650–1914* (1997). The research of Haakonssen and Munck (and to a lesser extent Chartier⁵³) has helped demonstrate that the traditional clear dividing line between the secular enlightened and the religious non-enlightened does not correspond to eighteenth-century reality.⁵⁴ In assessing the context and views of John Toland, I am also indebted to the pioneering content of Sullivan's *John Toland and the Deist Controversy* (1982).

As we have seen, the weakness of the assertion of a deist movement is that there were too few deists to fulfil the role historians have assigned to them. When, by the 1980s, it was accepted by one or two historians that there was insufficient unity amongst so-called deists to continue to use the term deist movement without qualification,⁵⁵ the numerical problem remained generally unacknowledged.

The Enlightenment and religion

As we will see, even those who wanted to rehabilitate religion into Enlightenment studies were still reluctant to accept that there were in fact few deists to be found in the historical record. There was, thus, no discernible shaking of the altar to modernity. In the 1990s, however, some of the strains of the contradiction between claims and evidence began to manifest themselves. As a result of their scarcity in relationship to their perceived historical role, deists were endowed with a collectors' value. Thus, at times, certain thinkers whose writings appeared to be radical have been turned into deists or proto-deists. The supposedly 'lesser figures' of the English deist movement were thereby brought to the fore, so helping to flesh out a very sparse picture indeed. As we shall see, from Clark's *English Society* (1985) to Porter's *Enlightenment Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000), English Dissenters or dissenters (i.e. non-aligned individuals or those who remained nominally Anglican) who were prone to the use of strong critical language, such as Robert Howard or John Trenchard,⁵⁶ have been transformed into deists. The question, then, is how, in terms of evidence, could such claims come about? In order to broach this question, we must take into account the broad context in which such radical Protestant thinkers developed their intellectual and religious outlooks.

There is abundant evidence that, amongst Restoration Dissenters, presbyterianism was the preferred form of Church organization. The problem has been a tendency to consider presbyterianism as foremost a form of piety – often identified with Puritanism – rather than as an ecclesiastical polity with broad politico-religious implications. No matter what disagreements might exist amongst historians on the causes or origins of the English Civil War, all admit that Puritanism played a significant ideological role in the momentous conflicts of the 1640s. Virtually all would also agree that the Puritan movement flew apart in those years and could not later be reassembled. The problem is that most historians have also thought that, after the Restoration of 1660, most or all of the key ideas of Puritanism were also dead or in steep decline. As a consequence, a coherent politico-religious challenge to the Anglican Church–state set-up could not be launched. There is evidence, however, to illustrate that, rather than fading away, the presbyterian polity of Puritanism remained a vital component of the Restoration politico-religious context. The heart of Puritanism was the desire for an independent presbyterian grass-roots ecclesiastical polity,

The myth of Enlightenment deism

modelled upon the simple, non-hierarchical apostolic Church. Presbyterians were thus implacable opponents of Church–state collusion in the denial of religious freedom to good Protestants. An independent non-hierarchical Church was of course anathema to the English political and ecclesiastical status quo, a direct political challenge to the Restoration state and Church settlement, where the Church was seen as a crucial official adjunct of the state in its desire for order and identity.

Those familiar with the history of the Civil War know very well that presbyterian politico-religious thinking could be most radical. Some late Restoration presbyterian polemic was so radical, in fact, that the authors could and have been mistaken for deists. Most notably, this was the case with John Toland, perhaps the most infamous of late-seventeenth-century English religious radicals and eventually certainly a deistical thinker. There is good evidence, however, that when he wrote his most notorious work, *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), he was a presbyterian of the Unitarian (Socinian) type and commonly known as such. It might seem strange that most modern historians have chosen to ignore this facet of Toland's biography, along with the fact that the label deist was only applied to him in what can only be described as a politico-religious slur campaign. As we shall see, ignoring this evidence is also to ignore how the fabric of the deist movement could begin to be woven by the spin-doctors of the day. The fact that the analysis contained in his radical but reform-orientated *Christianity not Mysterious* does not seem out of place within the deistic canon means, however, that the question of the Restoration transition from Puritanism to a more amorphous or variegated presbyterianism across various tendencies is of some importance. It has been argued by some that presbyterianism – because of its politico-religious past – had become an unattractive alternative to many Whigs, and that presbyterianism stood condemned along with popery and Anglicanism. Such men as Robert Howard and John Trenchard then opted instead for a deistic alternative of 'civil religion'.⁵⁷ As we will see, the problem is that the evidence adduced for this decisive abandonment of presbyterianism or a secularizing 'civil religion' is minimal and mostly circumstantial, with potential evidence to the contrary, or at least indicating a different situation, in equal supply.

It was of course natural that, once the fabric of the deist movement had been woven, its demise had, eventually, to be charted.

The Enlightenment and religion

Bishop Butler's *Analogy of Religion* (1736) is more or less unanimously credited with finally defeating deism, that relentlessly dangerous foe of the Anglican Church. But, as we now know, Butler's sharp and learned logic of course only disembowelled a very modern fiction. Or did it? For there is no doubt that the Church and Bishop Butler were indeed understood by some contemporaries to be battling a mighty deist movement. Some modern commentators have even argued that 'the Evangelical movement came as a reaction to the Deists'.⁵⁸ Perhaps Anglicanism really was subject to the point of an antichristian bayonet only manfully thrust aside by Butler? Or was it all a scam, a fiction playing on the hearts and minds of the faithful in order to encourage loyalty and bring waverers back to the fold? Eighteenth-century protagonists were just as interested in constructing in the minds of others their own preferred reality for their own ends as many twentieth-century historians have been to construct the history of modernity. The historical record, then, will provide us with some data and vast gaps, but it also provides us with sophisticated projections of how certain eighteenth-century minds perceived their reality according to their own ideological outlook. Thus, for many churchmen, conservative thinkers and others, the deist movement certainly did exist, and self-evidently so. On the other hand, we know that Jansenists and Jansenist supporters undoubtedly existed in some considerable numbers in France (especially in Paris), yet in practice they have to be carefully sought for in the historical record because they habitually denied their own existence.

The myth and the historical record

In setting out to vindicate or conceal their own views, past writers, whether they were conscious of it or not, have often 'falsified' the historical record. That is to say they have simply given *their own* account of their present and past which, in itself, cannot be taken as evidence of historical reality, but rather as one layer of a past reality composed of various interactive layers. If a more general overview is to be sought, historians must contrast one layer against other layers. As if this situation were not difficult enough, what historians are prone to take for granted – the historical record – has also been 'falsified' by historians themselves when they define periods or make characterizations about them. If the Enlightenment marked

The myth of Enlightenment deism

the beginning of modernity, then the historical record is of course bound to reflect that, and when it does not seem to do so sufficiently, efforts must be redoubled. Those who seem like moderns are brought into the field while vast quantities of ‘non-modern’ data are left to gather dust.

Fundamental to the now mostly defunct Age of Reason perspective was the view that the eighteenth century saw a large rise in unbelief, eventually producing a sceptical or atheistic tendency or ‘party’. Naturally, some historians set out to chart this rise,⁵⁹ for, after all, what could be more evidently modern than an atheist movement, and in so doing they constructed a tradition of infidelity going back to the Renaissance or sometimes to the English Civil War. Unfortunately, the death knell for this construct is not yet as strong as it should be. The principal reason is that, whereas the reason-versus-religion view (and the subsequent rationality-versus-the-Church retrenchment) was primarily a review of a generalization, the infidelity tradition prided itself on detailed research relating to individuals, publications and definite ideas. What has thus been regarded by some as a quasi-empirical approach – elucidating a core of self-evident textual truth – has served as a partial shield from the more general shift in perspective. This does not, of course, mean that the tradition of a growth in infidelity is not a construct. We might accept that the texts and individuals were real, although the public ‘figure’ of the atheist was certainly exploited by interested political and religious tendencies.⁶⁰ The connections between real atheists, however, and their relationship to any perceived change in eighteenth-century attitudes to religion amount to little more than the reification of ideas by historians. The problem of reification, in terms of the philosophy of history in general, has not altogether been ignored. Gunnell, amongst others, long ago noted that in principle what has ‘been taken to be *the* tradition’ of influence or pattern of intellectual development is often rather only ‘a piece of academic folklore’.⁶¹ But this lesson or perspective has not so far been sufficiently applied to Enlightenment studies.

There is as yet no substantial evidence to support the notion of any significant rise in unbelief in eighteenth-century Europe. This remains the case despite the fanciful assertion that there was an elite underground atheist ‘movement of thought’, of which the public mind was unaware. Apparently, via the most subtle of textual devices, this underground subversive movement sought ‘to influ-

The Enlightenment and religion

ence the public mind without allowing it to become aware that it was being influenced'.⁶² Constructions of tales such as these should be understood as a symptom of a widely shared – almost subconscious – view that one of the primary tasks of twentieth-century early modern studies was to illustrate the history of secular modernity: that is to say, *construct it*. We should hardly be surprised, then, that this underground atheist movement, in terms of hard currency it seems, amounted to very little. In the *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century History*, for instance, atheists are listed in fewer numbers than even deists. Faced with such little evidence, at least one or two historians have openly questioned the validity of atheistical conspiracy theories of the Enlightenment.⁶³ As we shall see, a text's notoriety for atheism or atheistic tendencies should not be understood as a necessary indicator of its potential or actual influence, but rather or equally as an indicator of its highly unusual and unrepresentative nature, and as a product of fashionable scandal-mongering. There was always a certain audience prepared to be titillated by outrages in print, but whether they themselves held to those ideas is of course a very different question. Thus, what have often been regarded as transparent indicators of radicalism can equally be seen as just the reverse.

So, the problem facing Enlightenment studies is that the revision away from the reason-versus-religion thesis has arguably included insufficient reassessment of the historical record from which historians (at least in part) make their generalizations. Similarly, the ideological position of deism as a factor in early modern Europe has been subject to little specific discussion, rather remaining at the level of often vague generalization or inference from specific cases. One of the aims running through this book, then, is to discuss how one might go about considering such a revision – the central questions, contexts, problems and methodology. In this respect, we are immediately confronted with important methodological and philosophical considerations, the necessarily first of which is whether the 'reality' of eighteenth-century Europe is (as we are told by postmodernists) merely a series of competing tales told by professional historians?

My short answer is no. Indeed, if it were possible in this book, I would like to assert that my aim is to reflect on eighteenth-century *reality*. My deceptively simple aspiration cannot be realized on account of the long-held understanding of some historians that

The myth of Enlightenment deism

there was not one unified eighteenth-century reality any more than there is any one unified present reality. If we accept that those who lived in the eighteenth century often had disagreements on the nature of their present, why on earth should historians imagine that the writings of a tiny minority of elite but often divided writers can form any straightforward guide to that century? The great scientist Joseph Priestley, for instance, noted that, 'being a Unitarian', he disagreed with the historical interpretations of Trinitarians,⁶⁴ even 'when there is no dispute about the facts'.⁶⁵ Even if the historical record was not 'falsified' by its participants, how can we expect present-day historians, who cannot agree on the nature of their present, to agree on the nature of the past? Complex societies (and even those less complex) contain, at various levels, moments of consensus and conflict which shift in relation to each other and in relation to their own past, and here we are concerned above all with eighteenth-century urban Europe rather than rural life. This shifting dynamic of change cannot now, or then, be captured in its entirety in any one research snapshot.

Over time, we have seen the development of a variety of approaches (political, social, structural, economic, religious, literary, etc.) to the past. The perennial problem is of course how to generalize from those specialized approaches in order to gain some overall understanding of a period. Making academic distinctions between social, religious, economic and political aspects of history, while helping to deepen our historical gaze in some respects, is in itself an intrinsically problematic procedure, not least so in the early modern period. As we shall see, in order to discuss the early modern Church and religion, it is also necessary to discuss politics, economics, social structure and more. So readers of this book will, in terms of Enlightenment studies rather than eighteenth-century studies, be presented with a less conventional stratum of the reality of eighteenth-century Europe.

On the issue of reassessing the historical record, the obvious point to make is that the early modern historical record is overwhelmingly biased towards the literate and especially the elite – in terms of education, wealth and social standing. On questions of eighteenth-century economic theory, for instance, this consideration is of relatively less relevance. When we are looking at belief systems and the level of adherence to traditional institutional Christianity, however, adopting a frank attitude to the nature of the historical

The Enlightenment and religion

record is crucial: the thought of the vast majority of eighteenth-century minds is unavailable to us because those individuals had the temerity to die without leaving a written record of their own views. We know, however, that the public background to any belief system is of course a gradation of belief to unbelief. This is what, it seems to me, John Bossy in his *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (1985) has failed to illustrate, that piety and dissent are – thankfully – features of any belief system. Wherever possible we should probe the extent to which public anticlericalism, directed either at the clergy in general or at aspects of it, formed the broad milieu in which the views of elite writers underwent gestation. In early modern France, for example, significant numbers within the lower echelons of society certainly expressed views which dissented to one degree or another from those of the established Church. We can safely assert this much on account, as we shall see, of the level of mass conflict between orthodox and non-orthodox Catholics. Yet relatively few of these lower-order rebellious Catholics left written testimony to their views. Being buried as a good Catholic or leaving a ‘Christian’ last will and testament is of course no sure guide to the views of the deceased, but more of a guide to established forms of exit from this world and the views of those who continued to live. Thus, in a social echelon more or less unrepresented in the historical record, by definition, anticlericalism and dissent will often go more or less unrecorded.

It is of an entirely different order, however, to assert that religious dissent and anticlericalism were not noticed by contemporaries or did not have influence upon others. Indeed, to have avoided noticing religious controversy and anticlericalism in cities would have been virtually impossible. As we shall see, this is graphically demonstrated by the wide levels of popular and elite politico-religious conflict which finally forced the French monarchy to suppress the Jesuits. This book is primarily about the urban experience, but those who lived and wrote in a more rural setting could not possibly be ignorant of the attitude of the poor to the wealth and corruption of the prelacy. As McManners has noted in his valuable study of the French Church, church tithes had lost their religious content and were viewed as one component of state–Church oppression. Thus, ‘[t]he history of the guerilla war against tithes waged for so long in law courts is essential evidence in any study of rural anticlericalism in France’.⁶⁶ Above all, such considerations

The myth of Enlightenment deism

mean that the simple picture of Enlightenment religious development as one of the progressive elite fighting the religiously backward despots of Europe on behalf of the inert masses is rendered much less secure. It also means that the accompanying traditional notion of intellectual influence as always proceeding from the top down becomes less secure in equal measure, for the status of the Church in eighteenth-century minds formed part of the broad social mentality in which the philosophes developed their ideas. Hence, for any researcher interested in the abandonment of the institutional Church and resignation to a non-interventionist God, the question of the level of forms of non-elite dissent from the Church in the early modern period cannot be irrelevant. It is surprising – with the partial exception of England – that such a question is so infrequently addressed in Enlightenment studies.

Elite opinion is usually portrayed as developing without influence from the lower echelons and, in so far as elite ideas were passed down the social scale, without any intellectual reciprocity. Yet how many historians are prepared to assert that hermetic seals or Chinese walls between social orders were possible in early modern Europe? Voltaire was able to launch his defence of the persecuted Huguenot Calas family in 1762–63 precisely because of the climate of opinion against the established clergy which had resulted, much against the will of King and government, in the suppression of the Jesuits in 1762. Voltaire joined the struggle against religious intolerance when he, for reasons not yet clear, felt he could no longer effectively ignore religious persecution as he had done for decades. We know that the leading force in propagating and organizing attacks upon the Jesuits and their supporters amongst the orthodox clergy consisted of Jansenists, Catholic dissenters. As Van Kley has noted, ‘the Jansenists, in loudly denouncing “despotism”, were generally ahead of the philosophes in the 1760s in disseminating a kind of political rhetoric that became commonplace in “enlightened” literature on the eve of the Revolution’.⁶⁷

Indeed, as we shall see, there is evidence to demonstrate that ‘until less than twenty years before the Revolution the century’s most frontal protest against Bourbon absolutism was organized largely if not exclusively by Jansenists’. Interestingly, during the French restoration, the Marquis de Bouillé still blamed the Revolution on the Paris *parlement*’s Jansenist ‘party’.⁶⁸ As Munck has illustrated in his *The Enlightenment*, the divisions between the

The Enlightenment and religion

enlightened and non-enlightened in various contexts, times and places were nowhere so stark as we have been too often led to believe.

Instead of being pulled out of space and time and placed on an intellectual but ultimately historically disconnected stage, when the thought of the philosophes is placed alongside the wider battle of politico-religious ideas fought out in great urban centres such as Paris and London, their intellectual stature is certainly not diminished. Their thought does, however, become part of a larger canvas, in which they, as part of a tiny elite and thus relative onlookers, are seen to reflect and express the attitudinal changes which were occurring in front of them. The potential stumbling block for those historians reared on a traditional ideological diet of the hunt for modernity, however, is that these were not always battles which upon first sight might seem to be about secular enlightened ideals, but rather were more about religious rights or class privileges. The essence of the intellectually rich and complex phenomenon we have termed the Enlightenment cannot, however, be captured with such one-dimensional labels as political, religious, philosophical or scientific. The French Jansenist camp naturally included a range of thinkers – from the *advocats* (advocates) of the *Parlement* of Paris, to humble but intensely religious supporters – who opposed what they understood as the despotic nature of the monarch–bishop alliance. The philosophes, it goes without saying, did not want to be associated with such religious zealotry and thus were careful to deny or ignore any religious elements of the struggle against the old regime. Despite the failure of the philosophes to acknowledge it, the struggles of the Jansenists were about the politico-religious issues of the day, equally germane to the philosophes as to the middle and lower echelons of urban society.

It has long been noted how very little the philosophes achieved in terms of enlightened government policy. The implicit assumption, however, has been that they achieved a good deal more in terms of the history of ideas, and were a considerable force in their own right in terms of confining the influence of the Church and promoting a general secularization of thought. We are thus presented with a choice. If the writings of the philosophes themselves, their supporters, and the positive press they have received from historians are considered in isolation, then it may well seem they disposed of very great influence. If, however, evidence for them

The myth of Enlightenment deism

disposing of influence sufficient to accelerate significantly any general secularization process is actually sought, the case for influence looks decidedly less convincing. On the more narrow issue of curbing the power and influence of the Church, the result is the same (and is not altered by the fact of the brief period of the dechristianization phase of the French Revolution, which was certainly not part of the programme of the philosophes). The gamut of trenchant evidence from the state–Church struggles in France, England and Italy amply illustrates how the most effective opposition to the Church was in fact mounted by dissenting Church factions with various degrees of popular support. Those struggles resulted in a significant deepening of cynicism and anticlericalism towards the Church hierarchy and its political allies. Here lies palpable evidence of what has been termed a general Western European secularization process, the current of which the philosophes (and the supposed deist movement) formed only a tiny part, but with a hugely disproportionate historical visibility.

The myth and the construction of modernity

As a ‘modernizing’ period, the Enlightenment is said to have had some role in the general process of secularization, and the notion of the secular has almost come to embody the notion of modernity. The term secularization is at times problematic, however, and although the process of secularization does not in itself constitute a focus of this book, a brief comment upon it is perhaps necessary. At least three elements within the secularization process can be usefully isolated in the context of this book. One element is the secularization of government and social norms; another is the secularization of religious attitudes, for example the existence or widespread acceptance of the desirability of religious toleration.⁶⁹ Another mode concerns that of levels of piety, belief itself. The now defunct reason-versus-religion view of the Enlightenment held that, on the basis of the evident anticlericalism of the philosophes and a wider recourse to reason in religious thought, levels of belief were declining and piety was becoming increasingly more ‘rational’. Most now agree that this view is untenable because study of the Enlightenment presents us with a Europe in which trends and counter-trends were the norm. The greater explicit recourse to reason – or at least the rhetoric of it – was certainly visible, but there is no

The Enlightenment and religion

significant evidence of declining belief. In any case, there were counter-trends to the recourse to reason, as the fideism of Bayle, the considerable growth of Pietism in the Germanic states, Holland, Scandinavia, Switzerland and the United States, the impact of Catholic Pietism (Jansenism) in France and Italy, and the birth of Methodism in England amply demonstrate.

There is no corpus of evidence to suggest that the use of reason constituted the motor of changing attitudes towards the Church. The explicit recourse to reason was visible in religious dispute within Christianity long before the arrival of the supposed deist movement. Thus those who have in effect focused on the secularization of the forms of religious discourse have focused on a certain register of discourse produced in definite circumstances. But language is a means subservient to ends, and reifying language into a force in its own right is very likely to produce distortions in our perception of intellectual change.⁷⁰ Of course, it cannot be argued that language has no role in the creation of reality, for that is indisputable. But this is a very different statement from that of according it universal causal primacy in intellectual or practical endeavour. Thus, the language of reason was the product of religious conflict and not vice versa. More accurately, we know that religious conflict was most often politico-religious conflict, and it is to the politicization of religion that we should look for one of the main motors of secularization. As Bradley and Van Kley have succinctly put it, 'religion and religious controversy acted as the chrysalis as well as the casualty of the modern political world, and ... if ideology and ideological conflicts gradually preempted religion's place in a politicized "public sphere" largely of religion's own making, they did not cease in one way or another to bear the marks of various Christian origins'.⁷¹

Neither can it be argued that deism was an unambiguous, explicit promoter of the secularization process, because there was a very great difference between personal conviction and public reality. One of the important consequences of the deistic outlook is that belief makes no demands upon the Church or indeed upon society. As a deist, one could, in purely spiritual terms, live a life of splendid isolation amongst great religious controversy. So (with the appropriate discretion), deism could form a potential haven for individuals, a personal route of exit from the perceived ills of traditional religion. The question we must ask, however, and one rarely posed,

The myth of Enlightenment deism

is whether deism was a form of personal piety with the *potential* of becoming a movement? Would the politico-religious culture of early modern Europe have been compatible with relatively large-scale public withdrawal from the pale of the Church (either Protestant or Catholic)? We certainly know that amongst all strata of society there was agreement on one fact: that the Christian ministry might or might not need reforming, but abandonment or abolition of it was unthinkable. Without the ideological tutelage of the Church to reinforce that of the state, most agreed, an acceptable social order was not possible. It was widely believed that without the Church, persons and property were not guaranteed safety. To actively advocate deism and a deist 'movement' was to advocate dissolution of one of the guarantors of property and persons.

The philosophes were clear on this point: that the unrestricted use of reason was not advocated for the lower orders because of the inherent danger posed to social order. For the intellectual elite, usually privileged and wealthy, to advocate deism was, in the final analysis, to play dice with their own social, economic and political circumstances. Clearly, only under exceptional circumstances could a general call to deism be put abroad, as for instance occurred during the French Revolution. The consensus on the need for the Church was a traditional part of the intellectual bedrock of the European intelligentsia, clerics and the wider laity. In seventeenth-century England, as in the Italian peninsula, the vast majority believed there was a benign role for Christianity within the state in terms of social control. Perhaps inevitably, fears for the social order were often expressed by those who had much to lose. Indeed, it was commonly argued that some of the 'complexities' of religious thought should not be made available to the masses in order to avoid the danger of religious 'confusion'. Such fears were acknowledged by the Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, and by later thinkers such as Isaac Newton, Bishop William Warburton and Humphrey Prideaux. In his *A Letter to the Deists* (1696), Prideaux presented what remained in the eighteenth century the standard opinion that the Church 'is so highly necessary and useful, that it is impossible that any Government should subsist without it ... [it alone] makes a Ciment capable of uniting those societies in any manner of Stability'.⁷²

English deists and philosophes such as Voltaire also sometimes identified and accepted the need for a 'benign' priestcraft – that is to

The Enlightenment and religion

say the continuation of the established Churches in one form or another for the benefit of society – but both naturally condemned the corruption of religion by crafty priests for their own ends. This public–private dichotomy of radical attitudes to religion must be emphasized if we are to understand the very impossibility of a broad deist movement, for the class outlook of the philosophes precluded it. As Voltaire declared in a letter to Frederick the Great of Prussia, in a sentiment not at all unusual amongst the philosophes, ‘Your majesty will do the human race an eternal service in extirpating this infamous superstition [Christianity]. I do not say among the rabble, who are not worthy of being enlightened and who are apt for every yoke; I say among the well-bred, among those who wish to think.’⁷³ The unspoken logic behind this arrogant tirade was of course based on property and privilege and it would therefore be quite problematical to suggest that deism could have systematically promoted a secularization process. The fear of a social and political order not founded upon Christian precepts and policed by the Church was a consideration which continued to exercise Italian Catholic anti-curial and pro-curial thought in the eighteenth century. It was, for example, a fear sufficient to prompt Sicilian thinkers to draw back from proposing Enlightenment reforms that might have disturbed the delicate but essential symbiosis of Church and state. Thus, as Woolf has noted, in Italy few were ready to follow the likes of Alberto Radicati (Count of Passerano) from religious doubt to deism or atheism.⁷⁴ As Champion has argued in his *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, the need for a state Church was also recognized by many English radicals.⁷⁵

In conclusion, the same fear of infidelity, antichristianism and heterodoxy that produced the witchcraft craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also produced the early origins of the deist scare. In the eighteenth century, deists remained scarce and, aside from a few high-profile moments in France, they never fulfilled the role assigned to them by admirers or detractors. In the twentieth century, deism was resurrected and imbued with new force by historians and made to appear as one of the great contributors towards secular modernity.

Notes

- 1 C. J. Betts, *Early Deism in France. From the So-Called ‘Déistes’ of Lyon (1564) to Voltaire’s ‘Lettres philosophiques’ (1734)* (The Hague, Boston and

The myth of Enlightenment deism

- Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), p. 6.
- 2 D. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution. From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 220.
 - 3 D. Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 34.
 - 4 B. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England. Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 4–5.
 - 5 W. Ward, *Christianity under the Ancien Régime 1648–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 162.
 - 6 J. A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists. The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 6, 10, 12, 205, 211.
 - 7 D. Daily, *Enlightenment Deism. The Foremost Threat to Christianity* (Pennsylvania: Dorrance, 1999), p. 53.
 - 8 J. Walsh and S. Taylor: 'The Church and Anglicanism in the "Long" Eighteenth Century', in C. Haydon, J. Walsh and S. Taylor (eds), *The Church of England c.1689–c.1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 21.
 - 9 J. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 233.
 - 10 M. Jacob, *The Enlightenment. A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, Mass.: St Martin's/Bedford, 2001), p. 12. D. Berman, in his *A History of Atheism in Britain* (New York: Croom Helm, 1988), presents an analysis similar to that of Jacob.
 - 11 M. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment. Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 27.
 - 12 J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832. Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 280.
 - 13 Betts, *Early Deism in France*, pp. 3–4.
 - 14 I. Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment. Vol. 2: Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 15.
 - 15 D. Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998; 1st edn 1993), pp. 380, 591.
 - 16 R. Porter, *Enlightenment Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 112, 115.
 - 17 J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 610.
 - 18 E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962; 1st edn in German 1932), pp. 174–5.
 - 19 P. McGuinness, 'Christianity not Mysterious and the Enlightenment', in P. McGuinness, A. Harrison and R. Kearney (eds), *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious. Texts, Associated Works and Critical Essays* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997), p. 237.
 - 20 G. R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason 1648–1789* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 77.
 - 21 P. Gay, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation. Vol. 1: The Rise of Modern*

The Enlightenment and religion

- Paganism* (London: Norton, 1995; 1st edn 1966), pp. 327, 374–5.
- 22 I. Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment. Vol. 1: Esprit Philosophique* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 178.
- 23 W. Doyle, *Jansenism. Catholic Resistance to Authority from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 73.
- 24 Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, p. 241.
- 25 For a discussion on this see, for instance, Van Kley's *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*.
- 26 D. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France 1757–1765* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 233.
- 27 J. Black and R. Porter (eds), *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 83–4, 151, 166, 187, 198, 538, 627.
- 28 Clark, *English Society*, p. 289.
- 29 R. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 190.
- 30 Gay, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, pp. 375–85, Thomas Woolston, Anthony Collins, Thomas Morgan, John Toland, Conyers Middleton, Matthew Tindal, Montesquieu, Diderot, Freret, Boulanvilliers, Voltaire.
- 31 Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason*, p. 159, Tindal; p. 161, Collins and Bolingbroke.
- 32 J. Byrne, *Glory, Jest and Riddle. Religious Thought in the Enlightenment* (London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 108–12, Toland, Tindal, Woolston, Collins, Shaftesbury, Paine. On Voltaire see pp. 121–2.
- 33 D. Nichols, *God and Government in an Age of Reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), ch. 6, Bolingbroke, Blount, Collins, Toland and Tindal.
- 34 J. V. Price (ed.), *The History of British Deism* (8 vols, London: Routledge, 1995).
- 35 Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, pp. 210, 214, 236.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 37 Black and Porter (eds), *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century History*, p. 191.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 39 See, for example, M. Fitzpatrick, 'Toleration and the Enlightenment Movement', in O. Grell and R. Porter, (eds), *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); I. Wade, *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971); Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment*, p. 177; and Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*.
- 40 M. Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 38–9.
- 41 Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, pp. 245–6.
- 42 On Gibbon and Protestant historiography see my *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests. The Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (London: Macmillan, 1999).
- 43 In the 1996 edition of his *Reason, Ridicule and Religion. The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660–1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 35, John Redwood, for instance, still describes Bayle as a sceptic, as does Ward in *Christianity under the Ancien Régime*, p. 165.
- 44 M. Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism', in N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner (eds), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge:

The myth of Enlightenment deism

Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 209.

- 45 Ibid.
- 46 E. Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983; 1st edn 1963).
- 47 See, for instance, A. C. Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729. Vol. 1: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990); and A. C. Kors and P. J. Korshin (eds), *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France and Germany* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1987).
- 48 See Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits*; C. H. O'Brien, 'Jansenists on Civil Toleration in Mid-18th-Century France', *Theologisches Zeitschrift*, 37 (1981). On the same subject see also Doyle, *Jansenism*; and G. Adams, *The Huguenots and French Opinion 1685–1787. The Enlightenment Debate on Toleration* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1991). For its wealth of detail on the French Church see also J. McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
- 49 P. Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Avon: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 50 M. Fitzpatrick, 'Heretical Religion and Radical Political Ideas in Late Eighteenth-Century England', in E. Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture. England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: German Historical Institute, 1990).
- 51 Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England*.
- 52 Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, see especially pp. 172–3; see also his "'To Govern is to Make Subjects Believe": Anticlericalism, Politics and Power, c. 1680–1717', in *Anticlericalism in Britain c. 1500–1914* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000). On M. Goldie, see especially his 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism'. See also J. Bradley, 'The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in England, Scotland and Ireland, 1662–1800', in J. Bradley and D. Van Kley (eds), *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2001).
- 53 R. Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).
- 54 K. Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion. Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); T. Munck, *The Enlightenment. A Comparative Social History 1721–1794* (London: Arnold, 2000).
- 55 For discussion of the difficulties in trying to define deism see, for instance, D. Pailin, 'The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion', *Religion*, 24 (1994); Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*; and Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, pp. 61–2.
- 56 On Howard and Trenchard see also my *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests*.
- 57 See, for instance, Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism'; J. G. A. Pocock, 'Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment', in P. Zagorin (ed.), *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); and Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*.

The Enlightenment and religion

- 58 J. C. Wand, *A History of the Modern Church* (London: Methuen, 1971; 1st edn 1930), p. 186.
- 59 On the charting of the ‘career’ of scepticism and atheism see, for instance, R. H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt, *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1993); and R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; 1st edn 1960).
- 60 On the public role of the figure of the atheist see, for instance, M. Hunter, ‘The Problem of Atheism in Early Modern England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 35 (1985).
- 61 J. Gunnell, ‘The Myth of the Tradition’, in P. King (ed.), *The History of Ideas* (New Jersey: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 252; originally published in the *American Political Science Review*, 78: 1 (1978). These sorts of observations were, however, also being made much earlier, as in Quentin Skinner’s ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History and Theory*, 8 (1969).
- 62 Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*, p. 105. For conspiracy theories of the Enlightenment see also Jacob, *The Enlightenment*; Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*; and Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*.
- 63 See, for instance, Goldie, ‘Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism’, p. 211.
- 64 Trinitarianism is the doctrine that God is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and one substance, as opposed to the Unitarian (Socinian) view of the unipersonality of God.
- 65 J. Priestley, *A General History of the Christian Church from the Fall of the Western Empire to the Present Time* (4 vols, Northumberland, USA, 1802–3), vol. 1, preface, p. 12 (This is the continuation of Priestley’s *A General History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire*, 1790).
- 66 McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, vol. 1, p. 140.
- 67 Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits*, p. 236.
- 68 Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, pp. 268, 309.
- 69 On toleration in the Enlightenment see the very useful collection of articles in Grell and Porter (eds), *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*.
- 70 This has been a criticism, for instance, of J. G. A. Pocock’s view of intellectual change advanced in his *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law. A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957). See D. Boucher’s *Texts in Context. Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (Lancaster and Dodrecht: Nijhoff, 1985).
- 71 Bradley and Van Kley (eds), *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe*, pp. 36–7.
- 72 Humphrey Prideaux, *A Letter to the Deists* (London, 1696), pp. 80–1.
- 73 Quoted in Daily, *Enlightenment Deism*, p. 44.
- 74 On the concerns of Sicilian thinkers to preserve the balance of Church and state deemed essential to an acceptable political order see S. Woolf, *History of Italy 1700–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991; 1st edn 1979), pp. 78–9, 139.
- 75 See, for instance, John Toland, *Tetradymus. Containing ... Clidophorus; or, of the Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy ... of the Antients* (London, 1720).