

Theology and the Enlightenment: A Critical Enquiry into Enlightenment Theology and its Reception

Paul Avis

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In his preface to this volume, Paul Avis tells his reader that the impetus for him to write it came, not only from a personal need to have ‘some kind of reckoning’ with the Enlightenment, but also from his ‘growing exasperation as [he] saw the Enlightenment stereotyped, caricatured and misrepresented by Christian writers, including scholars who should have known better’ (p vi). This, then, is not only on one level a deeply personal book, but also one written with a clear sense of mission, which it amply fulfils.

Let us be honest: Avis’s exasperation is justified. I suspect that many of us who work in the field of law and religion, fall into the category of ‘scholars who should have known better’. I know that I do, and I accept the justice of his rebuke. How often do we, in our work, set up the Enlightenment as the monolithic bogeyman which stands for the exclusion of religion from the public square, and for the triumph of reason over faith? Avis, coming to his task as a leading scholar of historical theology to whom I certainly owe a debt of intellectual gratitude, administers a much-needed antidote to such laziness and anachronism.

Setting out to undertake a ‘Christian theological assessment’ (p vii) of the Enlightenment and its reception in scholarship, Avis first debunks the idea of the Enlightenment as a monolithic and homogeneous entity. While common threads are identifiable in the emphasis upon freedom, confidence, progress, and the supreme authority of reason, he recognises and embraces the fluidity and complexity of the Enlightenment as an international and transatlantic movement. It is complicated. It is also, Avis argues, completely unavoidable. We have to engage with the Enlightenment as a ‘massive, unavoidable, simply inescapable, presence in our intellectual environment’ (p 30). We can recognise that its inheritance is a decidedly mixed blessing for modernity, but we cannot reject it. Christians must, Avis argues, adopt an attitude of at least ‘ambivalent engagement’ (p 30) with its history, ideas and legacies.

The Enlightenment is complicated, and we cannot limit our engagement with it to an uncritical rejection of what it stands for, or to using it as a scapegoat for modern ills. Neither, Avis argues, can we disclaim its theological heritage or acquiesce in its secularisation. Avis rejects the assumption, which he argues often lies behind these reactions, that reason is incompatible with revelation, and that criticism and faith are incompatible (p vii). Rather than typifying the

Enlightenment as something which was antipathetic to religion, he argues that, in England, Scotland, Germany and the Netherlands, its ideological centre was religious, and predominantly Christian. In its mainstream manifestations it was 'moderate and conservative in its tendency and significantly clerical in its constituency' (p 68). Further, in England, perhaps more than anywhere else, the Church was one of the most significant institutional means by which Enlightenment thought and sentiments came so profoundly to pervade and influence the life of the nation. Nor, he argues, are these new ideas. Rather, he asserts:

In the light of studies going back half a century, it is clear not only that the existential centre of gravity of the Enlightenment was not a secular, irreligious and unbelieving ideology, but also that the Enlightenment was a dominantly Christian, ecclesiastical and indeed theological movement, especially in England and Germany. (p 137)

Not only, then, have we been inexcusably simplistic in our treatment of the Enlightenment, but in treating it uncritically as part of the history of secularism, we have been guilty, not only of mischaracterisation and oversimplification, but also of failing to keep pace with developments in modern scholarship. It is fortunate, then, that Avis has stepped into the breach in order to help us to mend our ways. This he does in his customarily lucid and engaging way.

In a preliminary chapter on 'Engaging with the Enlightenment' Avis sets out his stall, defines his subject matter and explores the 'objectively ambiguous' (p 30) character of the Enlightenment. He establishes its identity as an intellectual and theological phenomenon that creates patterns of light and shade which demand our critical engagement, rather than our uncritical rejection. Avis follows this with a second chapter on 'Scapegoating the Enlightenment', in which he explains why a fresh examination of the Enlightenment is both justified and necessary. His third chapter on 'A Virtuous Enlightenment' seeks to rehabilitate the Enlightenment, or at least to highlight its 'virtuous achievements' (p 67) as a corrective to the common tendency, in theological circles at least, to focus on its vicious tendencies. There then follows a chapter on 'The Anglican Enlightenment', shifting attention from the Enlightenment as an international movement, to the Enlightenment as a key feature of 'the unique phenomenon of the theological culture of the Church of England in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries' (p 210). A broader focus is then re-adopted for a penultimate chapter on 'Enlightenment and the History of the Bible', which explores the historiography, philosophy and philosophical history of the Enlightenment in order to 'put the record straight' (p 275) with regard to the contribution of Enlightenment historians and philosophers, particularly in respect of new forms of biblical scholarship and criticism. The final chapter on 'The Enlightenment in the Frame of Christian Theology' brings this masterful survey to a conclusion with a discussion of the 'continuing significance, meaning and value of the Enlightenment in the perspective of Christian theology' (p 335).

I have benefited enormously from reading this book, as I knew I would. Lawyers, particularly in the arena of human rights, love binary arguments and dichotomies, and it is in this setting which we often engage with the idea of the Enlightenment, if not in any meaningful sense with its reality. Yet, as a historian, I have long grappled with the perplexity and complexity of intellectual and social movements, and thus with the often deeply flawed ways in which lawyers engage with them. This book stands as both a powerful corrective to such failings, and as an immensely palliative and accessible means of coming to grips with the Enlightenment. Taking the form often, though not always, of lucid literature reviews and vignettes, together with Avis's own critical analysis of the works and ideas discussed, it amounts to an incredibly useful and thought-provoking whistlestop tour of the Enlightenment, its reception and legacies in England, Scotland, France, Germany and the Netherlands. I would strongly commend it to anyone who, like me, has ever uncritically or unthinkingly referred to the Enlightenment as a monolithic and secularising entity.

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The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Trent

Edited by Nelson H. Minnich
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Cambridge University Press recently produced a new edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This beautifully produced little red hardback amusingly restored His Majesty's claim to the Kingdom of France through editorial error. No such claims are made in this first edition of the Companion to the Council of Trent. Unfortunately, no papal claims of jurisdiction are affirmed either. Nevertheless, before considering the content of this good introductory text, readers should be aware that there are a number of typographical errors throughout. Those likely to be distracted by even small oversights should be aware.

Responding to the crisis brought about by the Protestant Reformation, and the need for internal reform of the Church's discipline and governance, Pope Paul III decided to convene a council. It was to be held in the city of Trent, a compromise location which was acceptable both to the French King and the