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HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ENLIGHTENMENT: A VIEW OF THEIR HISTORY

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I

This essay is written on the following premises and argues for them. "Enlightenment" is a word or signifier, and not a single or unifiable phenomenon which it consistently signifies. There is no single or unifiable phenomenon describable as "the Enlightenment," but it is the definite article rather than the noun which is to be avoided. In studying the intellectual history of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth, we encounter a variety of statements made, and assumptions proposed, to which the term "Enlightenment" may usefully be applied, but the meanings of the term shift as we apply it. The things are connected, but not continuous; they cannot be reduced to a single narrative; and we find ourselves using the word "Enlightenment" in a family of ways and talking about a family of phenomena, resembling and related to one another in a variety of ways that permit of various generalizations about them. We are not, however, committed to a single root meaning of the word "Enlightenment," and we do not need to reduce the phenomena of which we treat to a single process or entity to be termed "the" Enlightenment. It is a reification that we wish to avoid, but the structure of our language is such that this is difficult, and we will find ourselves talking of "the French" or "the Scottish," "the Newtonian" or the "the Arminian" Enlightenments, and hoping that by employing qualifying adjectives we may constantly remind ourselves that the keyword "Enlightenment" is ours to use and should not master us.

There is resistance to the employment of these premises, and it seems to arise in at least two ways. In the first place, "Enlightenment" in the twenty-first century denotes to some writers (including some historians) a cause or programme—typically a secular liberalism—with which they identify themselves and which they desire to defend against its enemies. Others—at least until recently—have seen in it a historical process they attack as harmful, while describing it in

much the same terms as do its champions. Both groups consequently find in the eighteenth century phenomena to whose discovery they are ardently and whiggishly committed. In the second place, there is a superstitious fear that to reduce "Enlightenment" to a number of processes going on in a number of contexts is to imprison "it" within "national" contexts, which are presupposed to be in various ways undesirable. This is fallacious; of the various "contexts" in which "Enlightenments" are seen as going on, some were "national"—as there is no reason why they should not have been—and others were not. In this essay, I shall present "an" Enlightenment which occurred in "a" particular context—one that was multinational but specific and entailed the pursuit of certain intellectual objectives to the exclusion of others in a manner which distinguished it from other "contexts" and other "Enlightenments," but does not exclude them from inclusion in further narrative in which it would be possible to generalize about "Enlightenment," without reducing "it" to a unifiable process.

One of several growth points for this essay is provided by John Robertson's admirably challenging *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1740*.[1] A point from which "Enlightenment" in Scotland and Naples is seen to have begun was located in neither kingdom, but in Rotterdam, where Pierre Bayle in *Pensées diverses sur la Comète* made the claim that a civil society erected and maintained by atheists was conceivable and therefore possible.[2] This challenging statement was distributed and taken up throughout the *république des lettres*, and Robertson shows how, first in Naples and then more far-reachingly in Scotland, it was answered, first by a moral philosophy that made humans capable of society without needing recourse to God, and then by a political economy that elaborated their capacities in the settings of history and commerce. Robertson's "Enlightenment" therefore takes place notably in the contexts of Naples and Scotland, but also in the contexts of philosophy, society, and the history of both society and philosophy. As "Enlightenment" is now increasingly perceived in the settings of natural law and political economy, so it is perceived as a process taking place in philosophy and the history of philosophy in a changing eighteenth-century sense. It might not be too much to say that Robertson's account merges with others to present us with the, or a, dominant paradigm in Enlightenment studies as presently conducted. That is to say, we currently see "Enlightenment" as the growth of a non-theocentric "philosophy" of civil society, with political economy and a history of society and *l'esprit humain* among its outgrowths.[3]

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1 John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1740* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

2 Robertson, *Case*, 130 and *passim*.

3 I attempted a portrayal of the latter in J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

I wish now to narrate a process deserving of the noun "Enlightenment" that takes shape in disciplines of the mind other than those entailed by, if at the same time very closely connected with, Robertson's narrative, and originates at a place and moment non-identical with, if very close to, those at which Bayle made the claim found in *Pensées sur la Comète*. Before the narrative begins, however, it seems necessary to state clearly that the discipline concerned is theology, and that the issue raised is not the origin of civil society but its relation to a different society, namely the Church. In a recent essay,[4] Fania Oz-Salzberger has observed that Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* contain little that is "Christian," i.e. founded in the New Testament (though a Christian will see the Old Testament as assimilated into and fulfilled in its successor). This is more significant than surprising. The Old Testament offers a history of creation, humanity and civil society—indeed, the orthodox history of all three, which a non-theocentric philosophy was obliged to replace—and was relevant to the purposes of both Filmer and Locke. The New Testament, on the other hand, is situated at a specific moment in recorded history—datable to the principates of Augustus and Tiberius, the consuls for the relevant years in the Roman *fasti*, the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate in Judea—and offers to recount how that history was transformed forever by a series of divine actions giving rise to the new society of the Christian Church. The "Enlightenment" now to be described dealt with the character of those actions and the person of Jesus Christ.

It is an Enlightenment so widely disseminated among Protestant cultures—though not confined to them—that an account of it must not be mistaken for an alternative history of "the Enlightenment." During and after the Wars of Religion (insular as well as Continental), and notably during the 1680s,[5] the need to assimilate religious authority to the authority of civil society and its magistrates was perceived as so acute as to demand reassessment of the much-controverted manner in which Christ redeemed humans from their sins and, in turn, of the manner in which he partook of the divinity of God the Father. "The early Enlightenment" may be said to have begun, and "the Enlightenment" in Protestant countries to have continued, a revival and historization of the debates over Christ's nature conducted in the first six centuries of the Christian Church's history, and this cannot be omitted from "Enlightened" history.

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4 Fania Oz-Salzberger, "The Political Thought of John Locke and the Significance of Political Hebraism," *Hebraic Political Studies* 1/5 (2006), 568–92.

5 For a preliminary account, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), chap. 2.

II

In Amsterdam, early in 1685, Bayle's future rival Jean Le Clerc wrote to John Locke to say that he had been studying, in manuscript form, the arguments later published as the *Essay on Human Understanding*, and was about to apply them to the study of ancient literature.[6] It is of the first importance to remark that by "ancient" Le Clerc meant both "classical" and "patristic." He was about to join in the textual criticism of those postbiblical and biblical documents which possessed sacred authority and at the same time defined it, and we are faced with an "Enlightenment" whose base was in an *ars critica*. What he had learned from Locke was that the mind formed ideas about things it had perceived, and that the process of forming them might be accessible to human intelligence where the original perception was not. Written texts contained the ideas in formation, or rather the formation of language in which the mind expressed its ideas not only to others but to itself; "ideas" were therefore dependent upon words and language. But human languages were multiplex in origin and formation, and exposed to all manner of historical contingency and change, usually ill-known to the users of language themselves. It could happen, therefore, and usually did, that we had access to the historically changing and imperfectly controlled languages in which humans had tried to organize their ideas about what they had seen; we could not, from their language, find out what this last had been and perhaps still was.

Le Clerc went on—he was not alone in this—to apply these maxims to what we know as revelation. By this term we are accustomed to mean some proposition claiming authority on the grounds that it has been directly uttered to us by God or his accredited agents, but for Le Clerc revelation meant, and had occurred in, the direct encounters of the original apostles with the person of Jesus Christ. The apostles, unlettered Galileans, had faced the task of saying what this utterly transforming encounter had been, and had originally limited themselves to relating what they had seen and heard Jesus do and say—in some cases after his resurrection from the dead. But the evangel or gospel could not stop there, and had been carried on by John, one of the original twelve, and Paul, an apostle unlike the others in that the Christ self-revealed to him had been Jesus in the risen and ascended flesh, perhaps not accessible to Paul through his ordinary senses. These two had written in Greek, or a Hebraized dialect of the same, because they were involved in the culturally transforming experiment of the mission to the Gentiles, and this was reported, at least as early as Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians, as entailing an encounter with "philosophy," an activity of the mind

[6] Gabriel Bonno, ed., *Lettres inèdites de Jean Le Clerc à John Locke* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 33–4. A fuller study of Le Clerc in his relation to Gibbon is in preparation for a projected fifth volume of *Barbarism and Religion*. See, meanwhile, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, 131–2, 218.

so central to late Hellenic culture that it would come to shape the history of the Christian gospel itself. Paul had observed that the Christian "word," the message of Christ's life and presence, was "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,"[7] but had nevertheless been triumphant in the latter capacity. John, as author of the Fourth Gospel, had raised the triumph of this "foolishness" to greater heights by proclaiming that Jesus Christ had himself been the "word" or Logos, at once God and that by which all things were made, itself made flesh and incarnated as a person dwelling among us. At the root of these claims he was going beyond his fellow evangelists, who had merely reported the words and deeds of Jesus born and risen in this life. John was offering not only a history of actions but a theology of natures. It was a long way from the unlettered fisherman of Galilee, and in Christian tradition John was accorded a very long life-span, perhaps a hundred years, in which he had become the philosophically sophisticated author of a gospel that drew on Greek metaphysics to explain the Christ he had known.

Jean Le Clerc had thus taken a long step towards replacing theology with the history of theology in a language world. As Father and as Son, God exceeded anything that could possibly be said of him, and we were left with the history of a language in which Christians had struggled to say something; as Augustine had put it, they said what they could (or could not) so that they should not be left saying nothing.[8] Their position was the reverse of Wittgenstein's: whereof they could not speak, thereof they could not remain silent. The necessity they were under was crucial. The God known in western Eurasia was a God eternally active as a creating Word (Logos); it was farther east that humans worshipped a silence and depth (Bythos) beyond all being. But if Christians did not confront a silence, they had to do with a Word beyond interpreting; they could believe and say *that* Christ was the Son of God, but could never decide with finality *how* he was that Son, or how this statement could be explained. It was possible, therefore, to construct an altogether sceptical and "Enlightened" history of theology, as a series of vain attempts to express the original encounter with Christ, which had served only to perplex believers and distract them from it (assuming that it had happened). In some of these histories,[9] the Prophet Muhammad appeared as the knife that had cut through the unending disputes of Christian theology, only to substitute his own revelation for the Incarnate Word. But most left the inexpressible nature of Christ intact at their starting point; to go further must be to say that there was no original Christ, or God, only a history of language constructing him.

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7 I Corinthians:23.

8 "[N]on ut aliquid diceretur, sed ne taceretur," quoted from Augustine's *De Trinitate* by Le Clerc in *Ars Critica* (second English edn, 1698), 117.

9 E.g. Arthur Bury, *The Naked Gospel* (Oxford, 1690), a work endorsed by Le Clerc.

It is possible that John Toland took this step; whether Pierre Bayle took it remains disputable. Scepticism might end either in reducing Christ to a being describable in human terms, or in an irreducible claim to have met him and been reborn in the encounter. This is how Enlightenment left Protestant Christianity polarized between two extremes—the one unitarian and the other evangelical—a polarization that persists in the politics of the United States of America.

Only within fairly severe limits, then, have we to do with an "Enlightened" rationalist critique of the divinity of Jesus Christ. His nature, human and/or divine, is left unexpressed at the beginning of a history of attempts to define it. He has revealed only himself, it is open to the enquirer to think of him in any of a number of ways, and the emphasis is rather on the difficulties and disputes involved in the long process—beginning as early as the apostles themselves—of determining what he has been and how to say it. In these difficulties those authors ultimately recognized as orthodox are as deeply involved as any others; even those who argued that consubstantiality and Trinity were acknowledged before the Council of Nicaea did not suppose that these doctrines had been revealed by Christ himself, but conceded that they had taken time to formulate. It was history in the form of philology, not philosophy in any but a casually Enlightened sense of the word, that was claiming an ascendancy over theology; but it was theology, the complex, doomed and misguided attempt to define a nature that exceeded human language, at which this kind of Enlightenment was aimed. When Gibbon wrote that it was the theologian's "pleasing task [to describe] religion as she descended from heaven, arrayed in her natural purity,"[10] he was failing to make a point he took up later in the *Decline and Fall*. It was only after the descent of revelation from Heaven that theology appeared. And the target of criticism, ancient and modern, orthodox and Enlightened, was and had always been philosophy: philosophy in the ancient senses (there were more than one) of the word, the ancient metaphysics which Paul had encountered at Athens and with which the Christian gospel had been obliged to contend once the decision to extend the mission to the Gentiles had been taken.

There had been a crucial moment in the second Christian century, when Justin Martyr had declared—Augustine following him centuries later—that Platonic philosophy had taught him that knowledge of God was possible, but added that to attain that knowledge he must believe that the Word had become incarnate. From that moment, philosophy and gospel had become inseparable anti-selves. Philosophy must be overcome—philosophers like Marcus Aurelius might act as persecutors—before Christian belief could be attained, yet philosophy, unable

[10] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ed. David Womersley (London: Allen Lane, 1994), 1: chap. 15, 446.

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fully to express that belief, was nevertheless necessary to its expression. The position was vastly complicated by the cultural hybridity of the late antique world: Graeco-Iranian philosophy had generated Gnosticism and Manichaeism, Graeco-Egyptian philosophy had generated hermeticism and Neoplatonism. Isaac de Beausobre, one of the exiled French Huguenots who settled in Berlin in the 1690s, held that the entire history of heresy and orthodoxy could be explained in terms of ancient philosophy's inability to believe that God had created matter out of nothing, a belief which even Christians took some time to formulate, so that its history had to be written.[11] And even a strictly Christian Platonism, bringing philosophy home from the Orient to Athens, and aiming to express how the Logos had become incarnate, had raised the fatal question of whether its incarnation was consubstantial with his Father. The mission to the Gentiles had met with philosophy, philosophy had become the author of theology, and both in their Christian form resisted the attempt to reduce them to history, that enterprise which is one of the constitutive elements in the processes of Enlightenment.

III

The target of this Enlightenment is in a sense philosophy, but we are at a polar opposite to what is said to be the Straussian contention that philosophy is essentially the enemy of revelation,[12] perhaps because Strauss supposed the content of revelation to be law, whereas for Christians it is grace superseding law. At all events, in the critique shaped in both late antiquity and early modernity, philosophy is both the ally and the enemy of revelation. What has been revealed is Christ, the Incarnate Word; philosophy, in one way transcended by this revelation, in another way has offered to make it intelligible, and in so doing has made its own categories of explanation identical with, or substitutes for, the revelation itself—or rather, himself. The product is theology, begotten by philosophy upon revelation. The advocates of a simple gospel, whether that of Jesus as man or of Christ as divine, now seek to dispel theology by representing it as history: the history of human attempts to express the inexpressible. The original revelation, which is the starting point of this history, may either disappear, absorbed by history, or survive as an evangel, but the content of the texts now emerging will be a history of how philosophy begat theology. As far back as Thomas Hobbes can be found some extremely trenchant statements that this happened because of the fundamental error, the essentialism or substantialism, of ancient, meaning primarily Greek,

[11] Isaac de Beausobre, *Histoire de Manichée et du Manichéisme*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1734–29); Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 5, forthcoming.

[12] Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological–Political Problem* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

philosophy, but later authors such as Beausobre, less equivocally Christian than Hobbes, had set out to explain how both heresy and orthodoxy were the products of the encounter of the gospel with philosophy, whether Platonic or "Oriental" (meaning either hermetic or magian). An important branch of historiography developed from this point, a history of philosophy from ancient to modern, but one not reducible to the mere statement of new, meaning post-ancient, philosophical positions.

Theology might survive this criticism of its foundations in ancient—meaning first Platonic and then scholastic—philosophy, but must do so at a cost. Brian Young has shown[13] how Locke's impact on English theology, from Tillotson to Warburton, led to a perception (often denounced as Socinian) of Trinitarian doctrine as arrived at in the Church through a process of debate, decision and consensus; not at all unlike Le Clerc's proposal, with which Locke had so much to do, that there was no way for humans to discuss divinity other than to struggle with their language and its history. Theologians as well as freethinkers might join in constructing a history of philosophy hinging upon the abandonment of the "ancient" in favour of the "modern." A number of such histories were in formation, and the era either side of 1700 is important as that of an increasing concern with the historiography of philosophy and so with philosophy as a historic variable. Johann Jakob Brucker, whose *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (1742) is the greatest of these "eclectic" histories, follows and enlarges Beausobre in depicting the growth of a pre-Christian and pre-Hellenic metaphysic—less a philosophy, he says, than a theogony—carried on by Plato so as to saddle the Church with the patristic and scholastic theology from which only the philosophical revolution wrought by Bacon, Grotius and Locke (for these are his heroes) could deliver it. Here, then, we have an Enlightenment—*l'illuminismo di Dio*, as a recent scholar[14] has called it—based on a criticism of theology and ancient philosophy that brings history close to the "autonomy" which Joseph M. Levine has shown it claiming,[15] an autonomy limited only by the persistence of a faith in Christ's person never quite absorbed by the history of attempts to define it.

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[13] B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debates from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[14] Roberto Bordoli, *L'Illuminismo di Dio: alle origini della mentalità liberale. Religione, teologia, filosofia e storia in Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791)* (Torino: L. S. Olschki, 2004).

[15] Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); *idem*, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Cornell, 1991); *idem*, *The Autonomy of History: Truth and Method from Erasmus to Gibbon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); *idem*, *Re-enacting the Past: Essays on the Evolution of Modern English Historiography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

This is an "Enlightenment" originating and proceeding independently of that traced by John Robertson, and to that extent subversive of the claim that his or any other (this one included) deserves to be exclusively described as "the Enlightenment." There remains the possibility that both, if not all, "Enlightenments" display similarities and may perhaps have had shared origins and effects. Robertson's takes place in the language-universe of natural law, social philosophy and political economy; its starting point is Bayle's affirmation that a society of atheists may be possible. That traced here occurs in a discourse tending to replace theology with a history of language, not necessarily entailing a philosophy of society, but Bayle was active in promoting this discourse too, and developed a philological scepticism so aggressive that many have recounted its history with him, and not Le Clerc, as its mover and shaker. Yet historiography and philosophy are distinct enterprises, and there is an Enlightenment achieved by historians of the Church, its theology and authority, rather than philosophers and political economists. I propose this Enlightenment by noting that Le Clerc, Beausobre, Brucker and others—J. L. von Mosheim is a crucial figure—were authors important to Edward Gibbon in the history of the early Church, providing several key chapters in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Gibbon's fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, published at the end of his first volume in 1776, make some use of Le Clerc, Beausobre and Mosheim[16] in presenting a history of the Church before Constantine made it the religion of empire. Because this history concentrates on secular causes for the spread of Christianity, ignoring those held by Christians to be evidence that God was at work, and because of the note of irony and disrespect in much that Gibbon has to say about the early believers, these chapters have ever since been read as conveying his unbelief and, even more, as written in order to convey it. A close analysis of them, however, may yield a somewhat different interpretation, suggesting that the theme to which they constantly return is that of the growth of the authority of bishops over the congregations of believers whom that authority tends to unify into "the Church" as the organized "republic" within the empire it has become by the time of Constantine. The central statement around which these chapters are built is that the distinction between clergy and laity is that which differentiates "modern" history from "ancient";[17] Gibbon uses "modern" as the opposite of "ancient," not, as we do, the opposite of "medieval," and therefore of the clerical and the Christian. The distinction he identifies is based on authority more than function: the authority of priests, bishops and in due course popes will come to rival that of emperors, magistrates and citizens, because it is based on God's

[16] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1: chap. 15, 458, note 32.

[17] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1: 490. See further J. G. A. Pocock, "Perceptions of Modernity in Early Modern Historical Thinking," *Intellectual History Review* 19/1 (2007), 79–82.

supposed intervention. Christian theology is therefore central to the shaping of post-ancient history; it is part of that history and has a history of its own which goes to shape it. The structure of history as Gibbon writes it is changing as he begins writing his chapters on Christian history, and the history of theology is at the heart of the change. The challenge of spiritual to secular authority is the form of the change itself, and the growth of theology provides the spiritual with its discourse.

In the structure of the *Decline and Fall* as a whole, the growth of theology may be more important than the secondary causes for the growth of Christianity, which Gibbon made his fifteenth chapter notorious by exploring at some length, but it emerges slowly from their shadow, and plays a less than conspicuous role in this chapter. Gibbon here limits himself—and his use of Le Clerc, Beausobre and perhaps Mosheim—to a rather cursory account of the controversy with Gnosticism,[18] which down to Beausobre had played a crucial part in the formation of Christian orthodoxy from the apostles to Irenaeus. For Gibbon's full account of the rise and effects of theology in the Roman Empire we must turn to later volumes of the *Decline and Fall*. Chapter 21, published in 1781, explores the origins in Platonic philosophy of the Arian controversy leading to the Council of Nicaea, the moment at which theological dispute enhanced the authority of the bishops by obliging the emperor himself to pay attention to it and attend the council in person. Chapter 47, published in 1788, reviews the whole course of the controversy over Christ's nature for the two and a half centuries preceding the Council of Chalcedon: the moment at which Christian religion may be said to have contributed to the fall of the empire, since the alienation of the Nestorian and Monophysite churches leads towards the later loss of Syria and Egypt to Islam. In both chapters, Gibbon pursues the history of theological debate in considerable detail, and irony and innuendo are not as conspicuous in either chapter as so many have found them to be in the chapters published in 1776. He may—indeed he does—think the entire debate founded in a false philosophy of substances, essences and natures, but he knows this philosophy to have been deeply and authentically held by men of powerful intellect, and he recognizes that its history can only be written by taking it seriously. He avoids the Voltairean error of dismissing the histories one does not like, but the effect of the later chapters is to call into question the chapters of 1776, by which his work as a whole came, and continues, to be interpreted. They can no longer be taken as the key to Gibbon's history of the Church; there is much that they omit to deal with. The later chapters did not satisfy Christian readers,[19] but these were not outraged by

[18] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1: 456–9.

[19] See, in particular, Nigel Aston, "Infidelity Ancient and Modern: George Horne Reads Edward Gibbon," *Albion* 27/3 (1995), 561–82; and *idem*, "A 'Disorderly Squadron'? A Fresh

their supposed flippancy. They may, however—even the most resolutely high-church men among them—have reached the point of regarding the philosophy of Christian antiquity as a historical phenomenon.

IV

The species of "Enlightenment" before us consists of the conversion of theology into its history as a human endeavour. Initiated by Le Clerc and others of his generation, it is carried on by Beausobre and Mosheim, the last of whom links this history with that of the rise of the clerical authority so explicitly that there are points at which Gibbon may almost be said to have been following his Lutheran and orthodox predecessor. He goes beyond Mosheim, however, in enlarging the theme into a historical grand narrative, in which the rise of theology and the revolution in authority constitute the transformation of ancient history into "modern." Here we may renew the linkage of Gibbon with what in an early volume of *Barbarism and Religion*[20] was termed "the Enlightened narrative," in which a succession of historians traced the supersession of Graeco-Roman polytheism and philosophy by a "Christian millennium," lasting from Constantine to Charles V or from Charlemagne to Louis XIV, and marked by the ascendancy of the Roman Church in west European culture and its disruption by the Wars of Religion, entailing and terminated by the establishment of a system of monarchies and republics. At this point "Enlightenment" and "modernity," in our terminology, may be said to replace the "medieval." Gibbon relates only the supersession of Roman by Christian culture, and does not narrate, though he clearly takes for granted, the supersession of "modern" history in his sense by one "modern" in ours; he chooses instead to pursue the history of Constantine's Eastern Empire as far as its fall in 1453. The *Decline and Fall* is, however, plainly based on an awareness that an ancient history of *imperium et libertas* has been replaced by one of *imperium et sacerdotium*—his "modern" history—and that in turn by one of *imperium et commercium*: the last very recent in his own time, though after the interlude of an Age of Revolutions (1789–1989) we find ourselves once more living in it. Much of what we mean, and Gibbon might have meant if he had used the word, by "Enlightenment" is entailed by the histories of commerce and commercial society which were coming into being in his day, from Montesquieu whom he admired to Adam Smith who was his friend, and it is possible to relate the "Enlightenment" in which this essay suggests he took part, to "Enlightenment" in other senses of the term.

Look at Clerical Responses to the *Decline and Fall*," in David Womersley, ed., *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 253–78.

[20] Pocock, *Narratives of Civil Government*.

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The Enlightenment traced by John Robertson took place in the field, and the history, of social theory, then as now termed "civil philosophy." Following Pierre Bayle's suggestion that atheists might form a society, "philosophers" and *philosophes* explored the possibility that sociability might be so far "natural" to human beings as to necessitate no knowledge of God—let alone his direct intervention in history. This discussion had to do with the proposed replacement of "ancient" philosophy by "modern," but the principal development studied by Robertson is the enlargement of a "natural" philosophy of law and society by a political economy that entailed a "natural" history of society, such as the famous "four-stages" scheme elaborated by Scottish theorists after David Hume. Such a history, however, conceived by theorists of civil society who had realized that their theories entailed a process of development over time, is distinct from, though it may not be unconnected with, a "civil" history based on the recorded pasts of human affairs. The historians including Gibbon who constructed the "Enlightened narrative" were relating what they supposed to have happened in and to European civilization since Greek and Roman times, and the construction of such a narrative differs from, though it may be connected with, the construction of a normative system. Above all, the "enlightened narrative" involved the advent of the Christian Church, for which no general theory of civil society could possibly find room; nor had it anything to say about events sacred or secular, supposed to have taken place in Roman Judea shortly after the establishment of the Augustan principate. What then became of the central event of Christian history, the birth of Jesus Christ or the Word made Flesh? Historians of Enlightenment need to ask themselves this question.

V

The Enlightenment here seen as set going by Jean Le Clerc—Bayle was of course deeply and critically involved in it—had the effect of reducing Christ and his nature to the history of thought, or rather discourse, about him. Its further effect, and to all appearances its purpose, was to lessen the authority which any church might claim as continuing his mission, in competition with that of the civil magistrate, and there are obvious affinities here with Bayle's suggestion that neither God nor a knowledge of God was necessary to the being of civil society. The intention of reducing or eliminating the independence of the sacred from the civil is common to so many of the phenomena we term Enlightened that we may be tempted to group them all under it as "the Enlightenment." The purpose of this essay is less to object to such a procedure than to query the use of the definite article to which it gives rise. To this writer the specificity of "Enlightenment" is better displayed in its plurality than in its unity; there is more, and richer, Enlightenment if there are many and diverse Enlightenments than if it is reduced

to a single process. In the present case, it was one kind of Enlightenment to question whether God was necessary to society, another to question whether any church continued the being of God as man. The former had consequences in the field of civil philosophy, the latter in the field of history both sacred and political. They converged, but they followed different routes from different starting points. Edward Gibbon, an actor in their story, was of the opinion that Le Clerc was a more reliable scholar than Bayle; the latter allowed his scepticism to play with ascertainable facts.[21]

Gibbon's narrative employs theology, and therefore ancient philosophy, as one mode of transition from the Roman world to the Christian, though the philosophy he admires in the former is not the Platonist but the Ciceronian. There is a historization of philosophy going on, a consequence of Le Clerc's historization of theology, but though Gibbon—an admirer of Hume's *Natural History of Religion*—leaves us in no doubt that he lives in the world of post-ancient philosophy, his narrative does not reach the time when that philosophy superseded the scholastic. There was going on in the generation before Gibbon's, and in his own, a deepening of interest in the history of philosophy, and even in its historiography, and contemporary scholarship, in Italy, Britain and Australia,[22] is bringing out the importance of this development, but we are not to look for it in Gibbon, perhaps not even by implication. Scottish theory on the stages of the progress of society came together with what we are terming "the Enlightened narrative" at one concluding point; it was commerce which had made possible the ordered states and the polite manners—we may safely add (but did they?) the critical and civil philosophy—that were superseding the ecclesiastical authority of the "Christian millennium" and the ecclesiastical anarchy of the Wars of Religion. In the literature Gibbon knew on the origins of society, it was made clear that the growth of agriculture and the exchange of surplus produce had been necessary before early humans could exchange ideas with goods and begin to think in society. Is there a stadial account of the progress of philosophy, through pastoral and agricultural stages, until Locke and Hume are made possible by the

[21] For Gibbon's judgments on both authors, see the Bibliographical Index to Womersley's edition of *Decline and Fall*, 3: 1196 (Bayle), 1233–4 (Le Clerc).

[22] Giovanni Santinello, ed., *Storia delle Storie della Filosofia*, vol. 1, *Dalle origini rinascimentali alla 'historia philosophica'*, vol. 2, *Dall'età cartesiana a Brucker* (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 1981–79), T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger and Ian Hunter, eds., *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

growth of an enlightened commerce? It would not be surprising to come upon one.[23]

Whatever the relations between historiography and philosophy, it is the "Enlightened narrative"—in this account originating with the conversion of theology into history—that has become the grand narrative through which Euro-American civilization relates its history: the journey from polytheism through monotheism to secularity. Le Clerc is an early actor—there can have been no first actor—in a process of converting God's nature into a history of human language and construction. It can be said that historiography, the construction of an ever more complex narrative of secular circumstances, contingencies and changes, has been a principal instrument in the reduction of the divine to the human, but if "Western" history has been related as, and through, the supersession of the sacred, it cannot be related without the constant presence of the sacred it claims to supersede. It will follow that the history of some other civilization, in which the sacred has not achieved an institutional dominance it has been necessary to overthrow, cannot be the history Western civilization relates of itself, and it is even possible that it cannot be "history" as we are accustomed to use the word; can there be a secular without a sacred to overthrow? This was a problem faced by historians in Enlightened Europe as they considered the civilization of China and made it the antithesis of their own. Confucian China, they believed, worshipped only its own customs and civil society; the secular was the sacred, and Confucius, alone among ancient legislators, had avoided the mistake of calling in gods and setting up priesthoods to distort his work and compete with civil authority. It could be argued—Ricci and Leibniz to the contrary notwithstanding—that Chinese philosophy was non-theist, sharing with Spinoza the doctrine that spirit and matter were of one substance,[24] so that Bayle's hypothesis had been realized on an imperial scale. But it might follow that China was a despotism, though one of manners rather than of men, for the reason that it was incapable of change and had no history. Only a dialectic of sacred and secular, monotheism and civil society, could provide a history in which humans might be free because they were compelled and able to make historic choices. All these beliefs have been dispelled, or so we like to think, and yet we do not really know in what terms Chinese relate their history, or whether these terms are those of "history" as we use the word. The sooner we find out the better.

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[23] Kames's chapter on the history of theology (*Sketches of the History of Man*, Book III, Sketch 3, "Principles and Progress of Theology") speaks of the theology of savages, but does not proceed to that of shepherds. It appears unconnected with the stadial schemes of Smith or Millar.

[24] Pocock, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, 157–68; Beausobre, *Histoire de Manichée et du Manichéisme*, 1: 167–8.