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THE SPECTER OF REASON: AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS AND THE
HISTORICIZATION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT, 1910-1969

By

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents, Rita and Marcel LeFlem, my mother, Michele, and all the friends I’ve known and loved.
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ABSTRACT

In the wake of World War II, intellectuals and historians whose faith in progress had been shaken looked to the eighteenth century as the source of modernity’s ills. From the Holocaust, to Soviet totalitarianism, to the bland conformity of mass society in 1950s America, the Enlightenment was viewed as the cradle of some of the twentieth century’s most undesirable qualities. Beginning in the interwar period, historians began to discuss what the Enlightenment symbolized; from debates on its scope, influence, and present-day relevance, there was a concerted effort even before World War Two to identify the philosophical movements of the eighteenth century which came to shape the modern world. Yet after World War II and during the early years of the Cold War, historians sought to define the West’s intellectual heritage to distinguish it from its ideological opponent, the Soviet Union. And it is here that the majority of Enlightenment historiography begins. For these reasons, I will examine the ways in which scholars instrumentalized the Enlightenment for particular ends, be they political, moral, or religious. Through the selective uses of sources, competing interpretations of the Enlightenment’s influence and denunciations of its fundamental challenges to revealed religion were common, particularly among conservative figures. I hope to analyze the ways in which these scholars contributed to the era’s creation as an historical concept.
PREFACE

As a master’s student whose interests have shifted from the debates of early modern Europe, to the vagaries of U.S. foreign relations, then into the even more treacherous waters of American Intellectual history, I’ve gotten used to the urgency with which my colleagues and advisors question the often sweeping conclusions that are apt to plague someone who can’t be satisfied with just one historical period. Accordingly, it was with hesitation that I undertook so large a project as American intellectuals’ historicization of the Enlightenment. As the Age of Reason\(^1\) has featured prominently in dozens of books written in the last few years, I underwent the usual bouts of hesitation and second guessing that beset even the most confident graduate students: when I imagined the seemingly endless debates with which I would be engaging, it seemed unlikely that the Enlightenment’s historicization hadn’t been covered in one of Isaiah Berlin’s newly recovered essays, a lost article by Peter Gay, or an issue of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* that was missing from JSTOR’s archives; surely, I thought.

Yet, with the delicate prodding of my advisory committee I hope to have contributed a small but useful portrait of the creation of a phenomenon which continues to arouse polemics from the left and the right, from postmodernists to conservatives, feminists to political scientists. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Darrin McMahon, who pointed out this curious gap in Enlightenment historiography, and Dr. Neil Jumonville, who helped me place the debate within the context of American intellectual history. In creating the Enlightenment as an historical period, historians and intellectuals alike polarized the debate in a fashion eerily similar to the intellectual and political battles in which the Enlightenment philosophers were themselves embroiled. Thus my argument is doubly the story of how scholars created and instrumentalized the Enlightenment, and how this dialectical process mirrored the very debates which characterized the epoch they came to construct.\(^2\) By drawing the Enlightenment into debates whose outcomes shaped competing visions of American identity, these historians and intellectuals proved that writing and interpreting history can never remain objective, despite our best efforts.

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\(^1\) While “The Age of Reason” is somewhat of a misnomer given the resurgent sensibility contained in Enlightenment discourse, many contemporary books continue to employ this term when describing the eighteenth century.

\(^2\) The dialectical interpretation, made popular by Hegel is but one of many competing visions of what constituted the struggle of Enlightenment figures; but for the sake of argument I am adopting its conclusions.
INTRODUCTION:

ENLIGHTENMENT CONTESTED

What, then, is this event that is called the Aufklärung and that has determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think, and what we do today? – Michel Foucault, 1978

While few historians writing today would deny the importance of the Enlightenment in the creation of the modern West, many scholars continue to take for granted both its creation as an historical epoch and its influence on debates of American identity -- debates which continue to rouse polemical attacks between academic disciplines and across the political spectrum. As Dorinda Outram observes, “The Enlightenment has suffered a particular fate and a particular career. No other historical period has been defined with such intensity with relation to our own. No other has so consistently been viewed as the latency period for the twentieth century.” And with particular regard to the age’s relationship to American identity, the controversies surrounding the Enlightenment that were born out of the 1940s and 1950s – and which constitute a large portion of this essay – have not abated. From questions of America’s religious heritage, to the nation’s place in the historiography of eighteenth-century ideas, to competing liberal and conservative interpretations of the Constitution, the Enlightenment and its aftermath are still with us, like it or not. Indeed, as John Patrick Diggins noted as recently as 2007, “Who would have thought that today, in the first years of the twenty-first century, America would still be ravaged by intellectual wars that were supposed to have been resolved in the eighteenth century?” This persistence is more than a curiosity. And by searching for those fleeting traces of reiterated discourse and their reemergence in contemporary portrayals of the Enlightenment, I hope to display, in the words of Edward Purcell Jr., that “ideas have practical significance as they subtly interplay with human hopes and values, social institutions, and important historical events.” Those who ignore the influence of ideas perform a great disservice to our interpretations of the past.

While modern medicine, advances in science, and secular politics are all facets of the West which have existed since the eighteenth century, until recently few scholars writing about the Enlightenment had

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3 Michel Foucault, translated from the French by Matthew Henson, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières ?" (What is Enlightenment?), in P. Rabinow, editor, The Foucault Reader, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32.


acknowledged the fundamental problems surrounding the era’s creation as a reified concept. While terms like Enlightenment and the Age of Reason have trickled down through the years, from Kant’s famous 1794 letter to the popular German magazine *Berlinische Monatsschrift* responding to the question, “Was ist Aufklärung? (What is Enlightenment), to Peter Gay’s two volume *Enlightenment: an Interpretation* series in the late 1960s, the Enlightenment has no shortage of interpretations. Yet as Graeme Garrard is correct to note, there exists a significant methodological problem when comparing “The Enlightenment” of Peter Gay, for example, with the phenomenon Kant described in his reply to the *Berlinischer Monatschrift*: Kant’s Enlightenment did not correspond to a specific historical epoch in the sense that the Enlightenment of twentieth-century scholars like John Grier Hibben (*The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 1910) or Carl Becker (*The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, 1932) did. For Kant, Enlightenment was a process of becoming, of “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.” And while this may seem both an obvious observation or a mere curiosity to those who take for granted the impossibility of widespread agreement on any given historical period or movement, the Enlightenment’s historicization has exercised an unusually strong influence not just on the history of the eighteenth century, but on American intellectual history and its interaction with questions of American identity during World War Two and long into the cold war. Indeed, as early as 1910, Arthur Lovejoy – who founded the History of Ideas program that very year at Johns Hopkins University – argued that “the word [Enlightenment] is one about whose connotation and scope some agreement should prevail among historians of literature and philosophy. It is no service to the historiography of ideas to widen such a term’s meaning to the point of extreme indefiniteness.” For these reasons, I have chosen the frame my inquiry around the years immediately preceding World War I to the late 1960s, when Peter Gay’s *Enlightenment: An Interpretation* series was published. I have done so for two reasons: I hope to show the relationship between contemporary events and Enlightenment historiography, and avoid the significant methodological challenges posed by later movements like postmodernism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The debates from 1910 through 1969 ran a large enough gamut, and more clarity’s sake, ending the debate before feminist and postmodern critiques only makes sense. The first half of the twentieth century was one of the most transformative periods of Western history, and as historians and intellectuals first created the Enlightenment as a reified concept during this period, we must account for the changing climates of opinion.

Consider that the Declaration of Independence, that landmark document in American political history, was signed at the very height of Enlightenment thought. At a time when French philosophes like Diderot,


Voltaire, and d’Holbach were reaching the heights of their long careers of challenging the Catholic Church, while across the English Channel figures like David Hume and George Berkeley had left their indelible mark of scientific empiricism, the fledgling American republic with its revolutionary system of representative government was arguably a manifestation of Enlightenment discourse. Yet so complex an event as the ideological underpinnings of the American colonies’ independence from Britain should neither be reduced to a simple nod to Enlightenment ideals, nor simply cast as a more conservative reaffirmation of traditional British governance in defiance of George III’s abuses, as the historian Russell Kirk argued in defense of what he viewed as America’s fundamentally conservative, religious heritage in contradistinction to the French Revolution’s abstract notions of the Rights of Man. Rather, through a nuanced examination of the actors involved in both the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and more importantly, the authors of the Federalist, which serves as a compendium of the debates surrounding the signing of the Constitution, historians could have perhaps come to a more balanced assessment of America’s creation in the context of the Enlightenment.

Yet, wishful thinking aside, historians and notable intellectuals have done precisely the opposite throughout much of the historicization of the Enlightenment, particularly with regard to its relation to the creation of the liberal state and the founding ideals of American identity. From the oft-reiterated cries for and against the separation of church and state, to debates on American educational policy, to the moral values the United States stood for during the rise of totalitarianism during the 1930s and later during the cold war, scholars, politicians, and religious leaders alike drew the Enlightenment into these unfolding disputes. As James Schmidt notes, “despite the best efforts of its admirers, [the Enlightenment] has come to serve as a convenient scape-goat on which those who feel ill at ease in the modern world can vent their frustrations.” And while the story of church and state, and of science versus religion, has a detailed and exhaustive catalog in the historiography of American intellectual history, the specific question of how scholars during the first half of the twentieth century created the Enlightenment as an historical epoch is much less clear. While it is a painstaking task to determine when the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century is being implicitly critiqued in many of the attacks waged against science, liberalism, and secular politics, for example, it is impossible to deny the influence of these debates on the particular question of how scholars came to view the eighteenth century, and in turn, create the Enlightenment. As all three of these tenets were arguably products – at least in part – of the Enlightenment, it is with due consideration that we include general critiques of the secular, scientific worldview in the history of the Enlightenment’s creation in twentieth-century scholarship.

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My account examines the first American authors detailing the Enlightenment’s legacy in the pre-World War I era, the changing dynamic of Enlightenment historiography during the interwar period, and the postwar critiques waged by those who had lost all faith in humanity’s ability to better itself through appeals to Enlightenment discourse. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that the historical creation of the Enlightenment in the West – particularly in the United States – was as much a product of debates within American intellectual circles – debates which Edward Purcell Jr. described in detail in his *Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* – as it was a reaction to the scathing critiques of European émigrés like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Eric Voegelin. Much of the Enlightenment’s historicization was a result of internal strife within the United States as intellectuals came to grips with the rise of empirical science during the early twentieth century. Purcell’s *Crisis of Democratic Theory* is perhaps the most comprehensive source of the debates surrounding the rise of the empirical sciences – particularly experimental, anti-metaphysical philosophies such as pragmatism – in early twentieth-century America, yet his work skirts the issue of the birth of Enlightenment as a concept almost entirely. This is not to suggest that his book falls short in any measure, but illustrates how little historians have focused on American intellectuals’ reception of the Enlightenment during the early and mid twentieth century.

CHAPTER 1:

WAS IST AUFKLÄRUNG?

For it is, after all, to the watchwords of the Enlightenment that humanity must always appeal, as it is constantly required to fight and do battle against entrenched superstition and the advances of obscurantism.\(^{13}\) – J.E. Creighton, 1910.

Origins

Before discussing the most heated debates surrounding the creation of the Enlightenment – those which began in the 1930s and 1940s with the rise of Hitler’s Germany and the realization that American democracy was a concept that needed a clear definition to distinguish itself from the black cloud of ideology looming across the Atlantic – we must return to the relative tranquility of the prewar years, the decade before two world wars transformed the intellectual landscape of Western history.

While the purview of our inquiry begins in the early twentieth century with John Grier Hibben’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, published in 1910, it would be remiss to ignore the continuity between debates which began in the eighteenth century, were fought long into the nineteenth, and then reemerged in the early twentieth. As Richard Hofstadter observed in his investigation of the “paranoid style in American politics,” critiques of the scientific method, secularization, and other values born out of Enlightenment philosophy were rife in eighteenth and nineteenth century America. Decrying the alleged syndicates of Illuminati that were undermining religious devotion in the fledgling nation, the Massachusetts preacher Jedidiah Morse proclaimed in 1795, “Secret and systematic means have been adopted and pursued, with zeal and activity, by wicked and artful men, in foreign countries, to undermine the foundations of this Religion (Christianity), and to overthrow its Altars, and thus to deprive the world of its benign influence on society.”\(^{14}\)

While countless other denunciations of philosophical challenges to the authority of revealed religion abounded across America and Western Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment – particularly after the French Revolution and its Terror – it is important to note that in America, at least, the same rhetoric that was used by preachers like Jedidiah Morse would reemerge in the twentieth century with the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe. Indeed, commenting on this dogged persistence of rehashed anti-Enlightenment discourse long into the twentieth century, James Schmidt argues, “The enlightenment these critics attack[ed] [was] largely a


creature of their own (or, more likely, Hegel's) making and might best be regarded as the latest form taken by a literature whose scholarly credentials have long passed their expiration date.”

Preceding the debates over American education and its relation to religious devotion and philosophy during the 1930s and 1940s were the fiery speeches of preachers like the president of Yale, Timothy Dwight, at the end of the eighteenth century. As Darrin McMahon notes, “He preached a sermon…in which he denounced the orchestrated plot, hatched by Voltaire, Frederick II, the Encyclopedists, and the Society of the Illuminati to destroy the Christian religion and abolish the French monarchy, citing Barruel and Robison in support of his claims.” As the Abbé Barruel and John Robison were respectively prominent French and Scottish figures opposed to the secular philosophers of their age, Dwight’s alarm was far from an isolated event. And as the eighteenth century drew to a close, and the revolutionary Terror spawned by Robespierre gave way to the total war of the Napoleonic era, figures borrowing from the discourse of Dwight, Barruel, and Robison pointed to the philosophes’ critical break with established religious and political traditions as the source of their century’s crisis. Similarly, as an American figure like Ralph Waldo Emerson shifted his beliefs from a faith in nature to one grounded more in experience during the mid nineteenth century, he is representative of this loss of the romantic impulse which stood in opposition to rationality and science as the arbiters of knowledge. While it is not the intention of this analysis to trace the long and complex history of Counter-Enlightenment thought from the eighteenth century onward – the very term is particularly misleading when one considers the great variety of arguments posed against the various philosophical tenets of the Enlightenment – it is essential that some form of continuity be preserved in order to understand both the origins of later anti-Enlightenment rhetoric and the danger of appropriating centuries-old critiques of the Enlightenment during the interwar and postwar years.

The Hundred Years Peace

When John Grier Hibben’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* was published in 1910, it was met with far less criticism than one would expect had it been written only a few decades later during the tumultuous 1930s. Western Europe had experienced a period of relative stability during the post-Napoleonic years and before the start of the First World War, so it is fair to suggest that critics looking back could view the Enlightenment as an unfinished yet worthwhile project, given their nations’ respective historical progress.

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When one considers the lack of conflicts on scales approaching anything like the Napoleonic wars which raged from roughly 1803 to 1815, European and American scholars could point to the vast advances in technology, the emergence of the liberal state, and the apparent triumph of laissez faire capitalism and imperialism as manifest proof of the Western historical project’s success. As Karl Polanyi, a Hungarian intellectual writing in America during World War II argued, “even the fiercest of nineteenth-century conflagrations, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, ended after less than a year’s duration with the defeated nation being able to pay over an unprecedented sum as an indemnity without any disturbance of the currencies concerned.”¹⁹ This is of course not to discount the tremendous shock brought on by the Civil War in American intellectual circles, but to illustrate the prevalent climate of comparatively peaceful coexistence compared to earlier centuries. Indeed, it was a period of truly astonishing advancement, especially in the United States, which by the turn of the century looked nothing like the quiet pastoral country of Whitman and Emerson only decades before. Railways, steam powered turbines, and the harnessing of electricity were all beginning to create what a baffled Henry Adams could only describe in 1900 as “a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old.”²⁰ And while there certainly existed dissenters and critics of the West’s historical trajectory, the material, political, and scientific advancements that characterized the late nineteenth century were largely followed by a truly heartfelt confidence by many intellectuals in the human capacity to improve society. As Ira Katznelson notes,

Just before the trauma of the First World War and Europe’s subsequent festival of cruelty, the disclosure and invention of knowledge were girded by a profound optimism that reason, which so often had been represented in the image of the light of a rising, ever-brighter, ever-warmer, sun, could shine on all aspects of human politics, morality, and political economy to realize the title of Pierre-Paul Prud’hon’s painting of 1798 announcing that “Darkness Dissipates as Wisdom and Truth Descend to Earth.”²¹

With the increasing influence of Darwinism on both the scientific and humanistic traditions, social scientists, historians, and pragmatic philosophers were transforming America’s intellectual landscape at a pace that nearly matched its industrial growth. As Edward Purcell Jr. notes, American intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century “saw change as given, order as accidental, process as nonteleological, behavior as adaptive, values as experiential, and absolutes of any kind as superstitions.”²² The pre-Darwinian stability of the still largely agrarian, unindustrialized America of the first half of the nineteenth century, where religion could still

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²² Edward Purcell Jr., The Crisis of Democratic Theory, 9.
command the respect of community leaders and policy makers, was slowly being replaced by the discoveries of scientific naturalism. The results were transformative given the diffusion and application of Darwin’s conclusions across the disciplines of law, anthropology, philosophy, and history, to name the most prominent; the already weakened influence of post-eighteenth-century religious dogma was straining to check the advances of scientific naturalism.

It would be unfair to paint the typical picture of science and religion locked in mortal combat after Darwin, as many sophisticated theologians and ministers actually embraced the scientific method, reconciling their religious traditions with naturalism’s own conclusions in a curious fashion, a persistence that even today manifests itself in the theory of “intelligent design.” Yet a fundamental revaluation of American conceptions of society, religion, philosophy, and history certainly occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century with the rise of the empirical sciences and their subsequent challenges to religious authority and rational (i.e. non-empirical) philosophy.

The rise of empirical sciences after Darwin’s landmark discovery of the evolutionary basis for human existence was perhaps the first wave in the coming debates over the scientific method and its relation to the democratic way of life. This is not to suggest that critiques of the Enlightenment – or the very conception of the term – had their roots in or among post-Darwin debates on evolutionary biology. Yet I am proposing that to more fully grasp the context in which later debates centered on the Enlightenment were argued, we must be conscious of this mid to late nineteenth century phenomenon that beset America’s intellectual community.

The Promise of Enlightenment

The American professor of philosophy, John Grier Hibben, published The Philosophy of the Enlightenment in 1910, only two years before he was elected president of Princeton University. As an ordained Presbyterian minister who had delivered sermons across Pennsylvania during the 1880s, Hibben represents a somewhat curious figure in the creation of an historical era usually associated with impiety by contemporary scholars. As his utter lack of disparagement – and outright praise at times – towards the deistic and atheistic philosophes of Enlightenment France may attest, the opening stages of the Enlightenment’s historicization among American scholars were far less partisan than later interwar and postwar attempts. A throat illness prevented him from delivering sermons, and Hibben began to concentrate in philosophy and logic, teaching both at Princeton from 1891 until his appointment as president in 1912.  

The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, rather than a standalone work, was part of a thirteen volume series entitled, “Epochs of Philosophy,” which Hibben edited. For his own epoch, Hibben painted a picture of the Age of Enlightenment which overall was very favorable: describing the era’s general character, he argued,

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With all its obvious limitations and defects, this method of inquiry [the scientific rationalism and empiricism born out of the Enlightenment] was nevertheless frank, open-minded and ingenuous. The right of individual opinion was respected; a spirit of tolerance prevailed; and philosophy was afforded a free forum.\textsuperscript{24}

Beginning with Locke’s \textit{Essay Concerning Human Understanding} in 1690, and culminating in Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} published in 1781, Hibben’s Enlightenment looks similar to many recent works of Enlightenment scholarship which share both his chronology and central figures. For Hibben, the Enlightenment was an international phenomenon stretching across Britain, France, and Germany, characterized by “a restless spirit of inquiry” in which the “authority of the church, of the state and of the school was no longer regarded as the court of last appeal.”\textsuperscript{25} Detailing the accomplishments of major figures like Hume, Voltaire, and Diderot throughout his work, Hibben’s book followed a traditional (and by early twentieth-century standards born out of scientific naturalism and more sophisticated historical analyses, a fairly anachronistic\textsuperscript{26}) teleological approach to writing history. That is, according to Hibben, one great thinker built upon the edifice of knowledge created by his predecessor, until the great Enlightenment project – which for Hibben was left foundering and incomplete until Kant’s 1781 \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} reconciled rational and empirical philosophy – drew to a close nearly a decade before the French Revolution. As a self-described Hegelian, Hibben’s approach is unsurprising. This is an important periodization, as Professor Hibben avoided the causal accusations that later historians would lay on Enlightenment’s doorstep. He did not link the Enlightenment to the French Revolution, Robespierre’s Terror, or modernity’s ills. Indeed, as many of those ills had failed to materialize before 1914, Hibben stood at the end of what Karl Polanyi would later describe as the “Hundred Years Peace” when \textit{The Philosophy of the Enlightenment} was published in 1910.\textsuperscript{27} At the same time, he made few if any suggestions that would echo later historians’ claims that the American Revolution represented the culmination of Enlightenment thought.\textsuperscript{28} As a significant contribution to the historicization of the Enlightenment in American intellectual history, \textit{The Philosophy of the Enlightenment} was met with little opposition from fellow historians or philosophers at its time of publication.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{26} This was the view shared by Hibben’s reviewers, not the opinion of the author of this thesis. Many, including J.E. Creighton and Ernest Albee both deemed Hibben’s effort praiseworthy, yet dated, given its strict Hegelian interpretation and climax.

\textsuperscript{27} Karl Polanyi, \textit{The Great Transformation}, 3.

\textsuperscript{28} See Peter Gay, \textit{The Enlightenment, And An Interpretation: The Science of Freedom}, and Crane Brinton, \textit{Ideas and Men: The Story of Western History}. 
Reviewing the book in 1910, Professor J.E. Creighton of Cornell University claimed that it was actually *not optimistic enough*. It is worth quoting at length Creighton’s views of Hibben’s book, as he proposed methodological and conceptual suggestions regarding the historicization of the Enlightenment that curiously reflect even the most recent scholarship: Creighton begs,

It might be possible, I think, to represent the thought of the period as a process of immanent criticism, in which its initial presuppositions were being progressively transformed and rendered more adequate. This would necessitate some account of the seventeenth century, and of the new dogmatism and obscurantism that had taken possession of both Catholic and Protestant theology, and had almost succeeded in stamping out the free thought that the Renaissance had ushered in. It would be necessary, too, to give some account of the results of the new science, and of Descartes and Hobbes (especially of Hobbes), the men who asserted the validity of scientific methods, and the authority of clear and distinct ideas, and are therefore to be regarded as making the Enlightenment possible. To exhibit eighteenth-century philosophy in this way, as continuing the great liberating movement to which we owe our modern civilization, gives a clearer conception of its significance and essential unity than if we emphasize too much its shortcomings and failures.\(^{29}\)

Similarly, reviewing *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* in 1910, Ernest Albee, a professor of philosophy at Cornell, faulted Hibben’s book for not sufficiently addressing the practical achievements of the eighteenth-century philosophers. As he argues in their defense,

Even when we tend to belittle these noble champions of intellectual and political freedom, we unconsciously pay them the high compliment of comparing them with what we, at any rate, believe to be the greatest minds that have appeared since, and comfortably forget the powers of darkness they contended against, - religious obscurantism and political tyranny. This dramatic and intensely interesting side of eighteenth-century thought is hardly brought out sufficiently in the present volume.\(^{30}\)

Two of the most detailed opinions of the Enlightenment during the first decade of the twentieth century were actually contained in Albee and Creighton’s brief reviews, as much as within Hibben’s book. Yet it is unsurprising given the relative political stability between the great powers of the West, and the optimism born out of the tremendous advances granted by the natural sciences. Also, as Arthur Lovejoy founded the discipline of the history of ideas in the very year Hibben’s book was published, these early scholars’ contributions were among the first of their kind, even though none claimed the title of intellectual historian, and most remained strictly professors of philosophy; a fact which is often overlooked when historians point to Charles Beard, Carl Becker, and Ernst Cassirer as pioneering scholars in the historicization of the

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Enlightenment. While Beard, Becker, and Cassirer did in fact make significant contributions to the field of eighteenth-century history, many of their arguments – particularly those contained in Cassirer’s similarly titled *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (original German, 1932, translated into English in 1952) – were already put forth by Hibben. As James Schmidt observes, Ernst Cassirer cited Hibben’s *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* multiple times in his own liked-titled and similarly structured book.  

It was from these hopeful beginnings that subsequent critiques and portrayals of the Enlightenment would depart. And, while history never seems to fit the discreet categories in which scholars tend to place it, the world in which Hibben wrote his book differed profoundly from the one that emerged less than a decade later in the wake of the World War One. As scholars like Hibben, Albee, and Creighton could take solace in the relative peace of their untroubled age, praising their eighteenth-century predecessors for laying the groundwork for the modern world they enjoyed, the Great Depression and the rising tide of fascism provided more world weary figures like Carl Becker, a source at which to point when proclaiming the bankruptcy of the philosophes’ alleged optimism in humanity. Both the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the first signs of fascism creeping into European consciousness – initially with Mussolini’s appointment in 1922 and later with the rise of Hitler’s National Socialist Party in 1933 – led American scholars across disciplines to probe the depths of their nation’s intellectual heritage for answers to the world crisis unraveling before them.

As Ira Katznelson points out, During and especially after World War Two, a learned array of scholars whose biography had placed them perilously close to Europe’s abyss joined others fortunate enough to have been protected by distance to defend liberality and systematic thought while insisting the tradition of Enlightenment required a new realism, a good deal of repair, and much fortification.

While Katznelson refers to émigrés like Hannah Arendt and Karl Polanyi, who were respectively German-Jewish and Hungarian intellectuals writing in the United States during and immediately after World War Two, his description also applies to figures like Daniel Boorstin, Peter Gay, and pragmatists like Sidney Hook, all of whom in various degrees defended Enlightenment values against the accusations of those who blamed

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32 Again, it cannot be stressed enough that Carl Becker’s portrayal of French Enlightenment figures as unduly optimistic, naïve, and impractical has remained one of the most enduring myths of Enlightenment historiography. “New Conservatives” like John Hallowell and Russell Kirk later cited Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Philosophers* in many of their own works. They also borrowed his arguments nearly verbatim in their own denunciations of the Enlightenment during the 1950s, when the term had become a more reified concept.

33 Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, 1.
totalitarianism – and more often than not, modern societies’ ills at large – on ideas born out of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{34} I include Daniel Boorstin since he figured prominently not only as a champion of liberalism, but also because he was a central figure at the annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1956. Deemed the Conference on The Present Day Relevance of Eighteenth-Century Thought, it represented the kind of gathering that Katzelson refers to, as members from many historical fields gathered to discuss how the United States was indebted to the Enlightenment and liberalism; a popular theme during the opening stages of the cold war.
CHAPTER 2:
THE RISE OF TOTALITARIANISM, AND THE
COMING OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Since the rise of fascism, violence has become unqualified and universal; and it is civilization itself – not this or that patch of civilization – that is threatened with ruin. – Lewis Mumford, 1940.

The Heavenly City

When Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* came off the press in 1932, the comparatively stable world of John Grier Hibben and his admirers was becoming a distant memory, though only two decades had elapsed. World War I’s staggering death tolls – ten million dead, twenty million wounded – the economic burdens the Allies imposed on Germany after Versailles, and, even more shocking to Western society, the Great Depression of the 1930s, all deeply impacted American and European intellectuals. Indeed, as C. Vann Woodward argues, “people who lived through the years of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Second World War – only half the years normally assigned to one generation – experienced more bewildering changes than had several generations of their predecessors.”

Becker’s book was undoubtedly a reflection of the times leading up to this transformation described by Woodward. Indeed, as Johnson Kent Wright notes in the forward to the second edition of Becker’s slim volume, “By the time [Becker] took up his pen again to write *The Heavenly City*, modern liberal civilization had arrived at its moment of deepest crisis – three years into the first Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union, two into the Great Depression, on the cusp of the Nazi seizure of power in Germany.” And while it would be dangerously reductive to ascribe all of Becker’s conclusions about the Enlightenment philosophers’ achievements and motivations to the unfolding economic and political crises taking place in America and


Europe during the early 1930s, we should not deny the power of contemporary events to shape historians’ interpretations, however firmly they appear grounded in solid evidence or “objectively” presented.

For Carl Becker, who was already a renowned historian at the time The Heavenly City was published in 1932, the philosophes of the Enlightenment were a praiseworthy, yet ultimately misguided group. Describing their allegedly quixotic ambitions to transcend the confines of their century’s repressive traditions and religious obscurantism, he claims, “They start out, under a banner of objectivity and with a flourish of scholarly trumpets, as if on a voyage of discovery in unknown lands. They start out, but in a very real sense they never pass the frontiers of the eighteenth century, never really enter the country of the past or of distant lands.” What is strangest about Becker’s interpretation is that his conclusions suggest an author of either conservative or religious bent. Becker’s book paints French skeptics like Denis Diderot and his close friends Baron d’Holbach and Claude Helvétius as still bound to their religious faith despite their outpourings of anticlerical and anti-metaphysical tracts, due partly to their religious upbringing in Old Regime France and their inability to forsake so deeply entrenched a notion as eternal salvation. Equally troubling for the Enlightenment’s reputation—whether or not Becker intended it—are his conclusions about nineteenth century philosophies of history taking their point of departure in the secular “faith” of progress proposed by French philosophes. “Supplied with the dialectic of Hegel and the evolutionary theories of Darwin,” he argues, “Marx formulated, in Das Kapital, the creed of the communist faith which was to replace, for the discontentsed, the democratic faith of the eighteenth century.” Becker maintained that “between the Russian and the French revolutions, as between the democratic and the communist faiths, there are no doubt many points of difference; but what concerns us is that the differences, in the long view, are probably superficial, while the similarities are fundamental.” This is a key suggestion, as this very line of reasoning would reemerge in the works of authors like Eric Voegelin and his conservative admirers, John Hallowell and Russell Kirk, during the 1950s. All three of these authors placed great emphasis on this link in their own respective books.

Yet for all of his apparent belittling of the philosophes, Becker was a liberal of the first rate—along with other notable historians of his time like Charles Beard—and a firm proponent of the scientific, anti-metaphysical method embodied in modern physics and the pragmatic and empirical schools of his day. Indeed, as Becker notes with stoic reserve when describing the inevitable conclusions modern scholars must necessarily draw from scientific discoveries, “Man is but a foundling in the cosmos, abandoned by the forces that created him. Unparented, unassisted and undirected by omniscient or benevolent authority, he must fend for himself, and with the aid of his own limited intelligence find his way about in an indifferent universe.”

41 See Eric Voegelin, From Enlightenment to Revolution, John Hallowell, Main Currents in Political Thought, and Russell Kirk, A Program for Conservatives.
Yet The Heavenly City’s arguments regarding the philosophes naïveté would be instrumentalized by religious conservatives long after its publication. “New Conservatives” like Russell Kirk and John Hallowell, who were both influential public intellectuals in the early and mid 1950s, both borrowed Becker’s conclusions to support their own agendas while simultaneously proposing a revived spirituality to counter what they perceived as the devastating consequences of modern secular culture, culminating as it did in the godless existentialism born out of postwar French intellectual culture. As Peter Gay would note with some impatience in 1957, the decade in which figures like Kirk and Hallowell were most active in recasting both America’s intellectual heritage and the Enlightenment, “Becker was no conservative, but the conservative implications of the Heavenly City are plain.”

Liberal and conservative admirers alike immediately placed The Heavenly City among the most engaging – if not altogether convincing or rigorously researched – works of eighteenth-century scholarship, hailing it as “graceful and witty,” a most valuable contribution to the field. Yet interestingly, even among its admirers, the book seemed to have aroused more attention due to its polemical nature than anything else. As Max Lerner argued while reviewing the book shortly after its publication, “The Philosophers were interested enough in an intellectual revolution, so long as it did not involve a real break with the social heritage. But they stopped short of social revolution because they were themselves an integral part of the world that would thus be destroyed.” Other reviewers cast similar doubts on Becker’s conclusions regarding the Bolshevik Revolution’s intellectual indebtedness to the eighteenth-century philosophers’ allegedly revolutionary nature. Critics received the book with open arms if for no other reason than Becker’s beautifully written passages, his ironic wit, and his reputation as a preeminent historian -- a testament to the merits of a graceful pen, perhaps, but a distressing misstep for latter-day critics like Peter Gay.

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42 Ibid., 15.
43 This was the name attributed to the postwar resurgence of American conservatism, embodied in the figures of Russell Kirk, John Hallowell, and Peter Viereck, to name the most prominent.
A Cosmic Tragedy

If World War I ushered in an age of industrialized warfare on an unprecedented scale, transforming Europe’s economic, social, and political landscapes in a manner never before experienced in modern history, World War II left an even deeper scar on Western consciousness. With the rising tide of fascism in Italy, Spain, and Germany during the 1930s, to the increasingly plausible realizations by American and European intellectuals that the Soviet Union resembled a totalitarian rather than a socialist regime in the wake of the Moscow show trials of the late 1930s, the period was characterized both by a general disillusionment with historical progress among intellectuals, and an urgent sense to trace the origins of the unfolding world crisis. For figures like Karl Polanyi, who was an influential Hungarian Marxist intellectual writing in America during World War II, the shock of witnessing a second world war only a few decades removed from one of history’s bloodiest ordeals was truly baffling. Polanyi understood even before war’s end the lasting implications of this world historical transformation, and predicted that “if industrial civilization shall not disintegrate or turn toward degenerative solutions, a recasting of the foundations of human consciousness is imperative. Only at this price can freedom be retained.”  

His call to arms would not go unheard.

It is for these reasons that the years leading up to World War II proved one of the most contested arenas into which intellectuals and historians pulled the Enlightenment. Again, Enlightenment historiography traditionally points to the 1950s, the emergence of the cold war, and the public and scholarly writings of towering figures like Isaiah Berlin when ascribing the origin of “The Enlightenment” as an organizing concept in historical writing. While there is a great deal of truth to this, the term’s emergence was not only engendered by debates formed before and even during the war, but the very expression, “The Enlightenment” with a capital “E” was used by intellectuals engaged in these disputes, albeit to a lesser extent due to the lack of a convenient foil, namely the Soviet Union at war’s end.

World War II was arguably the most transformative event in twentieth-century history when one considers both the scope of its destruction and the power of ideology in ensuring its cosmic stakes. The absolute barbarity of Hitler’s war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and world Jewry, and the Allies’ own brutal tactics on the long road to victory, shocked intellectuals who had pinned their hopes on the potential for peace in the wake of World War I. From the rise of totalitarian regimes in the years leading up to war, to the undreamt horrors of the Holocaust, to the slow trickle of embittered émigrés from Stalin’s Russia who would reveal the dystopian nightmare of the Gulag, the conflict led many intellectuals to fundamentally reevaluate their most deeply held beliefs. Indeed, in distinction from World War I, The Second World War was characterized by “a total reordering of the globe…a struggle not only for control of territory and resources but

47 Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation, 256.

48 Here I refer particularly to the Allied firebombing of German and Japanese cities; particularly those civilian populations bombed with the intention to reduce morale in places like Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo. Obviously the dropping of the atomic bomb was another watershed in brutality for many intellectuals observing the war.
about who would live and control the resources of the globe and which peoples would vanish entirely because they were believed inferior or undesirable by the victors." In this sense, World War I, while devastating considering the utter waste of human life on a heretofore unimagined scale, the disintegration of historical empires, and displacement of populations, was still a fundamentally different type of conflict. If we accept that scale is a convenient, but often misleading comparison once motivations are analyzed, then World War II takes on a much more disturbing shape upon closer examination.

In Europe during World War II, powerful, irreconcilable ideologies of the left and right clashed on a scale that can hardly be comprehended -- a phenomenon which was not present in World War I when the breakdown of a complex treaty system and the proximate cause of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s Serbian crisis of 1914 led to the catastrophic countdown to war. Similarly, the very rules of war, where opponents recognized each other as humans first, soldiers second, and which had existed throughout many of the fiercest battles of World War I, were not applied to a majority of campaigns in World War II. Indeed, addressing senior military officers in March, 1941, only months before Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler urged, “We must forget the concept of comradeship between soldiers. A Communist is no comrade before or after the battle. This is a war of annihilation.” Thus the lines were drawn: Nazi ideology left room for only the victors and the vanquished, for those who would rule and those who would either serve or perish.

Accordingly, the chaos of this total war undermined many American and European intellectuals’ faith in human progress. As the Columbia historian Carlton J. Hayes observed only months after Hitler’s invasion of Poland, “The factors which now make for totalitarianism, for its embodiment in dictatorship, and for its warfare against historic civilization seem so obvious and overwhelming that the whole process assumes in one’s mind the nature of a cosmic tragedy, remorseless and inevitable.” Describing the unparalleled nature of the war to his audience of scholars gathered at a November, 1939 conference at the American Philosophical Society, Hayes continued,

It is a revolt against the moderation and proportion of classical Greece, against the order and legality of ancient Rome, against the righteousness and justice of the Jewish prophets, against the charity and mercy and peace of Christ, against the whole vast cultural heritage of the Christian Church in the Middle Ages and modern times,

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against the enlightenment, the reason and the humanitarianism of the eighteenth century, and against the liberal democracy of the nineteenth century.  

Hayes’ observation was prevalent among Western intellectual discourse during the opening years of the war, as Nazi war aims represented a grim new chapter in the history of the West that few could comprehend at the time.

More crucial to the Enlightenment’s historicization, World War II caused many outspoken critics of secular and scientific worldviews to point to the eighteenth-century philosophes’ break with the Christian past as the source of the contemporary crisis. That is, pre-Enlightenment Europe’s close ties between the religious and legal realms, between piety and education, in nations like France and Germany, for example, had been irrevocably altered in many regions of Europe by the concerted attacks of skeptical Enlightenment figures; particularly the radical philosophes in France like Denis Diderot, Baron d’Holbach, and even Voltaire considering his bitter denunciations of the clergy. And in the twentieth century, intellectuals opposed to the scientific method, the dearth of purely religious educational programs on a national level, and the generally diminished influence of religion in the political decision making process, began a critique of the Enlightenment that reflected the already mounting challenges empirical science and pragmatic philosophy posed to religious concepts of education and politics. As this essay hopes to convey the ways in which these debates are an ongoing source of conflict, both within the academy and in the public sphere, we must bear in mind that they continue to manifest themselves in contemporary discourse, in a fashion little changed from the period surrounding World War II. Indeed, one need only check recent surveys performed by reputable bureaus to note both the considerable influence of religion in American society and the subsequent challenges this poses to proponents of non-religious education and secular legislation.

Tropics of Discourse

Since it was largely after World War II that historians and intellectuals alike created the Enlightenment as a more reified concept of Western history – while borrowing from the sparse but influential Enlightenment literature described earlier – it is impossible to ignore this tumultuous conflict’s impact on the views of those debating the “true nature” of the West. While few scholars deny the impact of World War II and the subsequent cold war on the Enlightenment’s creation as a rallying cry for liberalism or a scapegoat for modernity’s ills, there is relatively little work dealing with the prelude to the emergence of this term. And, as should be clear by this point, we must account for the debates in American academic culture born out of the rise of scientific naturalism as much as the trauma and disbelief caused by the Holocaust, the millions killed, and the cold war that were all products of World War Two. Also, as many of the same tropes used by eighteenth and nineteenth century anti-rationalist and anti-secular figures reemerged in the writings of
twentieth-century postwar intellectuals and historians, the Enlightenment remained a bitterly contested issue in mid twentieth-century America for more than symbolic reasons.

Academics like Mortimer Adler and his close friend and colleague Robert Hutchins, who served as the president of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1945, held that the very character of American society was antithetical to the empirically-oriented scientific methodology born out of the eighteenth century. For others like the American pragmatic philosopher Sidney Hook, the scientific method and the secularization of politics were the most enduring and praiseworthy accomplishments of the eighteenth century. As ideas undoubtedly influence the decisions of policy makers at many levels of society, it is important to stress that for a large number of postwar figures, America’s foreign policy, domestic crises and educational reforms were all shaped by its intellectual inheritance, implicitly drawing the Enlightenment into the contested arena of debate when the era was not explicitly denounced.

The failure of the modern West to live up the predictions of some of the Enlightenment’s more optimistic figures like the Marquis de Condorcet, led many intellectuals to deeply question the validity of the Enlightenment’s progressive liberalism. Many scholars blamed the emergence of Soviet and Nazi totalitarianism on the secularism and applied science of the late eighteenth century, and some argued that these trends must be checked both by a more conservative political outlook and a partial return to a pre-Enlightenment, faith-based cosmology where religious devotion provided a framework for life. From the challenges posed to the religious cosmology of pre-Enlightenment Europe by French and British skeptics, to the birth of the liberal tradition and the promise of tangible improvement here on earth, the eighteenth century was viewed by American scholars during World War Two as a fundamentally different era for legitimate reasons.

Indeed, as the historian Walter Dorn noted in his 1940 work, *Competition for Empire*,

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53 Ibid., 18.

54 Condorcet is often set up as a straw man against whom critics of the Enlightenment can support their claims that the philosophes were naïve to believe in the perfectibility of humanity. Given the context of the Jacobin Terror in which he wrote his final testament proclaiming his enduring hope for historical progress, hiding as he was from his captors, Condorcet served as an ideal figure through which to ridicule the Enlightenment’s alleged optimism. Yet as recent research has demonstrated, Condorcet was neither blindly optimistic, nor detached from the harsh realities of the consequences of the Revolution, and sought tentative and gradual solutions to society’s ills. See Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

55 This position was exemplified in the person of Robert Hutchins, who, as president of the University of Chicago, proposed a return to medieval theology to check the decline towards anarchy and amorality which he believed was imminent during the mid 1930s.

56 Though not typically associated with Enlightenment historiography, Dorn was a close friend of Peter Gay, and both scholars were present at the 1956 Conference on the Present Day Relevance of Eighteenth-Century Thought. As Peter Gay notes Dorn’s influence in the preface to his own magnum opus, the two-volume *Enlightenment, An Interpretation* series, Dorn remained a contributor to the nascent field of Enlightenment historiography when his 1940, *Competition for Empire* was published, whether he realized this or not.
It was the Enlightenment, not the Renaissance or the Reformation, that dislodged the ecclesiastical establishments (though scarcely religion in the larger sense) from their central and controlling position in the cultural and intellectual life of Europe, and by emancipating science from the trammels of theological tradition rendered possible the autonomous evolution of modern culture.  

If nothing else, as Louis Dupré argues, the Enlightenment “permanently inured us against one thing: the willingness to accept authority uncritically.” While there are numerous interpretations of the period’s scope and influence, few historians today would deny that modernity as conceived by current scholars had its beginnings in at least the second half of the seventeenth century with Spinoza’s conception of unified matter. (According to Spinoza a person’s thought capacities were purely a function of material rather than metaphysical causes.) And if the seventeenth century laid the radical foundations of modernity, as Jonathan Israel claims, it was only later, during the eighteenth century, that figures like the French Revolutionaries and Thomas Jefferson manifested them in revolutionary politics. These actions were exemplified, as historians like Peter Gay and Crane Brinton would optimistically conclude in the 1950s and 1960s, in the American Revolution and the signing of the Constitution.

With the failure of the French Revolution to live up to its professed ideals during the Jacobin Terror and later during the Napoleonic wars, many eighteenth-century critics, such as the Abbé Barruel and Edmund Burke, needed little encouragement to blame the Revolution’s excesses on the Enlightenment. Both the loss of the “organic” foundations of traditional society due to the abstraction of reason and the secularization of French politics were attributed to the increasing influence of radical philosophes. For Burke and his latter day admirers, the conservative historians Russell Kirk and John Hallowell, it was incredibly naïve and potentially dangerous to undo centuries of painstakingly established hierarchies between social classes and political bodies. In proclaiming the famously universal Rights of Man, the French revolutionaries had opened a Pandora’s box of expectations which could never realistically be met in so complex and unstable a world as the one both Burke and Kirk conceived, forged as it was in the delicate interplay of historically established “organic” bonds between members of society. Interestingly, the cries of the Barruels and the reflections of conservative figures like Burke would find their way into the early nineteenth century with the denunciations of philosophical impiety by American religious figures – among other critics – and reemerge during World War II. As the Enlightenment was such a transformative epoch of Western history, regardless of how one defines its merit or scope, the opinions of those opposed to its fundamental tenets (i.e. secularization, the

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scientific method, liberal reform) continued to resonate in debates during the postwar era, finding their way into historiographical battles still raging today.

**Into the Breach**

Before addressing the postwar interpretations of the Enlightenment, which constitute the majority of Enlightenment historiography, it is useful to note that during the war, the seeds of the coming debates were already being sown by those who sought to explain the unfolding crisis. While there were countless denunciations of the West by Communists committed to unveiling their Marxist dialectic at work in the clash of bourgeois nations, there also existed a criticism of the cultural crisis born out of the eighteenth century’s break with the Christian past. Again, it would be a gross oversimplification to cast the pre-Enlightenment West as devoutly religious and the post-French Revolution world as fully secular; but it would be similarly remiss to deny that a fundamental revaluation of religion’s relationship to politics, education, and culture was fostered through the attacks of the philosophes, the rebuttals of their theological opponents, and the culture of science born out of the period. As Roy Porter argues, “In the new climate of criticism and with the tempo of life accelerating, old ways were challenged, and no longer did hallowed custom or ‘God’s will’ automatically provide answers to life’s questions.” When one considers that many aspects of the modern world (reliable medicine, the welfare state, religious toleration, the legal separation of church and state) were products of the eighteenth-century, the Enlightenment’s legacy became not merely the stuff of antiquarian debates between academics, but an engaging, invested discussion of American identity. And it is to such engagements that we now must turn.

The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, held in New York City on September 10, 1940, directly addressed these issues. American intellectuals and historians convened the meeting as an attempt to bring meaningful discussion, pertinent to the unfolding chaos of world war, back into American academic culture. Members as influential and diverse in background as Louis Finkelstein, Harold Lasswell, Mortimer Adler, Paul Tillich, Robert MacIver, Van Wyck Brooks, Franz Boas, and Enrico Fermi, all filled the boardroom in an attempt to make sense of the turmoil which had enveloped Europe. As Lewis White Beck observed, “it was [the members’] unanimous belief that democratic society [was] threatened by a crisis from within no less than from one without, and that democracy [could] be based ideologically only upon a belief in the supreme worth and moral responsibility of the individual human

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60 Dwight Macdonald, of the New York Intellectuals, was one such critic. In his article, “The Future of Democratic Values,” which was part IV in the series “The New Failure of Nerve” in the January-February, 1943 Issue of *Partisan Review*, Macdonald opposed Sidney Hook, John Dewey and Ernest Nagel (respectively the authors of Parts I, II, and III of the “New Failure of Nerve” series) for their allegedly unbridled confidence in scientific naturalism’s triumph over religious solutions to the crisis of World War Two. For Macdonald, who remained a Trotskyist until the mid 1940s, nothing short of a global socialist revolution could ensure a stable postwar world.
For the twenty-five members huddled together in the conference space, the gathering represented a concerted effort by members of disparate academic fields, be they religious studies, the natural sciences, philosophy, or history, to reconcile methodological differences and determine what they held most dear about democracy. Though the notes from the conference suggest a general accord among most members present, Mortimer Adler’s paper, entitled “God and the Professors,” stood out as one of the most vehement critiques of American intellectual life.

At the time of his 1940 presentation, Adler was working at the University of Chicago as a professor of humanities and a member of various committees devoted to exploring educational reforms in higher education. Adler, in associating with Robert Hutchins would later become famous – or infamous to some critics – for his role in the Great Books project, which was his attempt to organize a canon of Western philosophical, historical, scientific, and literary texts from Greek antiquity to modern times. Both Adler and Hutchins were powerful figures during both the prewar and the early postwar period, and as such, they held much power over the dissemination of knowledge and higher education. Knowing that his views represented an extreme minority position, he was reluctantly persuaded by his colleague Robert Hutchins and his close friend, the neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain, to speak at the conference. For Adler, who was not Catholic himself, but who sympathized deeply with the church’s teachings, the secularization of the university system was one of the primary reasons for American intellectual culture’s inability to check the advance of totalitarian threats to democracy. The fractured, specialized division of knowledge, he argued, was to blame for the general breakdown of society. In addition, as twentieth-century students lacked the firm prescriptions of faith-based teachings and the authority of personal religious convictions, Adler indicted the trends of secularization for causing the contemporary crisis. His beliefs as presented in “God and the Professors” reflect his historical determinism, as he attributed the unleashing of world war to the apocalyptic consequences of replacing faith with the scientific worldview rather than to the agency of dictators or the economic conditions in Europe: “Hitler and Mussolini…are but paranoiac puppets, dancing for a moment on the crest of the wave – the wave that is the historic motion of modern culture to its own destruction.”

Ominous visions of the fate of the West were not uncommon, both during the mid 1930s and later during the years of World War II, as secular and religious figures vied for control of American educational

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policy. As Father Polo of St. John’s University proclaimed in 1935, “The professor who teaches American youth the false philosophies of Hegel and Kant and Croce and Dewey as ideals – that professor is a thousand times more a dictatorial or communist threat than if he wore a brown shirt and steel helmet or waved the murderous red flag of the Soviet.” Adler was not well received among the crowd gathered before him at the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, and he left with the bitter enmity of someone who believed that his religious faith had instantly reduced his credibility in the increasingly secular West. He retreated from academics only a few years later, but went on to write numerous books portraying the decline of American education and culture as the result of the scientific method taking precedence over metaphysical concerns concerning American society’s moral destiny.

Seated quietly among the crowd gathered at the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, the American pragmatist Sidney Hook noted with distress the cries of the faithful at a time when “scientific” proposals were urgently needed. As he later claimed in his memoirs, Hutchins and Adler “seized upon the fear and horror of the American public at the successive triumphs of Hitlerism and charged that Hitlerism was nothing more than the philosophy of naturalism and progressive education carried to their logical conclusions.” Hook, a professor of philosophy at New York University, was alarmed by Adler’s assertions that the scientific method, which Hook held as the best means of analyzing societal problems, could possibly be related to the outpouring of denunciatory fascist rhetoric and the passionate allegiance of Hitler’s legions.

Hook’s later 1943 article “The New Failure of Nerve,” which appeared in the magazine, Partisan Review, was a defense of scientific naturalism and the pragmatic disposition against what he viewed as the misguided attacks of the faithful. The article’s main theme involved the origins of totalitarianism – particularly fascism – and claimed that rather than being attributable to the cold rationality of the scientific method, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School would argue only years later, Nazism was a product of more romantic appeals to the emotions, to a lack of reason rather than a brutal appropriation of it. Describing the spirited attacks against him by his religious critics, specifically Mortimer Adler, Hook proclaimed, “Into the breach has stepped the motley array of religionists filled with the élan of salvation and burdened with the theological baggage of centuries.” For a pragmatist like Hook, the methods of scientific naturalism were still the benchmarks against which all theories must be tested, be they metaphysical or empirical. Describing this approach, Hook explains,

67 Peter Gay’s would borrow this very term in his own The Enlightenment, an Interpretation series; describing the eighteenth-century philosophes’ restored confidence in science, medicine, and secular politics, he titled the first chapter of his Science of Freedom, “The Recovery of Nerve.”
The naturalist does not despair because he cannot demonstrate what is by definition indemonstrable. Nor can he rely upon intuitions or revealed dogmas because of their irreducible plurality. He believes he can show that although not demonstrable, his assumptions can be made reasonable to “reasonable” men. And the mark of a “reasonable” man is his willingness to take responsibility for his actions, to explain why he proceeds to do one thing rather than another, and to recognize that it is his conduct, insofar as it is voluntary, which commits him to a principle or belief rather than any form of words where the two seem at odds with each other.  

As a disciple of John Dewey, the influential American pragmatist and educational reformer most active in the 1920s, Hook was drawn to tentative, experimental methods to improve society rather than totalizing a priori assumptions about the “nature of man” and his rightful destiny. And as Purcell claims, Hook’s hesitation was a product of the intellectual climate of scientific naturalism and its many inroads: “By the early thirties the most fundamental epistemological assumptions of American intellectuals rejected the idea that any prescriptive ethical theory could possess rationally compelling authority.”

Indeed, in the “New Failure of Nerve,” he goes to great lengths to expose the logical inconsistencies involved in reducing questions of great importance – in this articles’ case, the origins of the current crisis of world war and the United States’ role in it – to simplified terms of good and evil, to the prophesies of those who longed for a return to the relative stability of the old religious traditions of the pre-Enlightenment era, where faith remained outside the bounds of radical criticism and salvation offered an escape from the tragic course of worldly affairs. In this particular piece, Hook took issue with Adler’s assertion that the post-Enlightenment secularization of politics and culture was responsible for the unfolding world war, defending the gains of science and philosophy in a manner that reflects debates between radical philosophes and their religious opponents nearly two centuries earlier. And while Hook never directly attempted to historicize the Enlightenment as thoroughly as later historians would, the philosophical tenets he addressed were arguably born out of the eighteenth century. At times he makes oblique references to this fundamental shift in Western attitudes during the age of the philosophes, thus pointing to the spirit of the Enlightenment without explicitly referring to the era as historians, for example, might have.

For Adler, the crisis that was engulfing the world at the time of Hook’s article was a direct result of the fractured nature of Western society, of a breakdown of cultural stability caused by the diminished influence of religion due in large part to the rise of the modern university system’s tendency to compartmentalize knowledge while failing to provide a totalizing prescription for modern life. As he claimed in 1941, “The prevalence of positivism today requires the [religiously inclined] philosopher to face an audience radically skeptical of anything he may say, doubtful even that he can say anything worth listening to at all.” According to Adler, the turmoil of world war was equally due to the scientific method’s persistent

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questioning of religious conclusions – a phenomenon whose origins primarily lay in the eighteenth century. And like Hook, though he rarely, if ever, employs the word Enlightenment, the issues raised by Adler are undeniably tied to the eighteenth century and the philosophes.

Adler was quick to note the apparent incommensurability of religion and science in the modern West. And as the scientific method, though born in the centuries preceding the eighteenth, was truly brought to the forefront of intellectual discourse in the late seventeenth and later, in the age of Enlightenment proper – the eighteenth century is implicitly denounced in Adler’s account. Before taking at face value the heated attacks against the Enlightenment’s legacy by figures like Mortimer Adler, it is worth examining the achievements of those eighteenth-century philosophes whose beliefs later came to be denounced in the postwar years. To view the world of the philosophes, whose writings paved the way for the secular society enjoyed by so many in the modern West, is to better understand the persistence of debates whose fundamental shape changed little in the centuries from the Enlightenment to World War II.

Indeed, the exercise is twofold: as so frequently figures of the Enlightenment were denounced on the basis of secondary readings of their work or the rehashed interpretations of their eighteenth and nineteenth century critics, by engaging with the philosophes within the context of their own times, we may more fully appreciate the struggles they faced, and remain ever watchful of dubious links laid upon their doorstep by postwar critics. Also, taking a cue from Daniel Boorstin at the Conference on The Present-Day Relevance of Eighteenth-Century Thought, by examining a small number of figures and their interactions, arguments, and political and philosophical contributions, we avoid the sweeping and haphazard conclusions that plague even the most rigorous Enlightenment scholarship that seeks a homogenous definition of the age. As Boorstin framed the question in anticipation of the problems this posed, “Does this mean, then that intellectual history must be a form of biography? In the strictest sense, it does. But may there not also be a collective biography, which takes into account the inner tensions and disorders, the limited vision and local needs of groups of particular men in particular places?”71 We may do well to heed his advice and step back, however uneasily, into that tumultuous world of the eighteenth century.

CHAPTER 3: ENLIGHTENMENT REVISITED

The Enlightenment furnished man an increasing command of the best thought of his own and former times, struck the shackles from opinion, brought education within general reach and gave the individual an ennobling dignity.\textsuperscript{72} Allan Nevins, 1940.

The Culture of Criticism

When Isaac Newton forever changed our perspective on reality by discovering that matter’s natural state was in fact \textit{not} at rest, as the Christian tradition held, but in motion due to a mysterious force deemed gravity, science was already making inroads in Europe. Slowly, if unwittingly, undermining many religious teachings which had dominated intellectual and philosophical discourse for centuries, while also posing a considerable threat to Cartesian rationality, Newton stood as the epitome of empirical science’s power to unseat the prevalent doctrines of his age, particularly in France. Voltaire, Newton’s great popularizer, noted with characteristic wit when he described the fundamental differences between rational and empiricist tendencies, “A Cartesian declares that light exists in the air; but a Newtonian asserts that it comes from the sun in six minutes and a half.”\textsuperscript{73} Thus, in a manner reflected in the works of other scientists and empirical philosophers of the Enlightenment, Newton’s discoveries helped set in motion that vague and oft-misused term: secularization. As a brief aside, it must be noted for clarity that my use of the word, ‘secularization,’ neither confirms its absolute ascent against an immobile and inflexible religious establishment, nor ascribes to it a reified value as an historical phenomenon. Rather, I accept Jonathan Sheehan’s view that “secularization… must be treated as a contingent and active set of \textit{strategies} that change religion over time.”\textsuperscript{74} With that established, we will hopefully have avoided some of the confusion associated with a concept which remains ambiguous and famously difficult to measure.

Newton was no atheist, remaining a Unitarian until his death. Yet in challenging religious authority through his scientific discoveries – albeit unintentionally – he paved the way for others to follow in his

\textsuperscript{72} Allan Nevins, “Or is it ‘Wave of the Past’?” \textit{New York Times}, Dec 29, 1940.

footsteps as his works of mathematics and optics were vigorously adopted in other fields of science. Voltaire, Newton’s admirer across the Channel, would forever praise him for giving science the weight it needed to destroy the Catholic Church’s hold over the superstitious peasants of France. And with the works of atheists like Denis Diderot and Baron d’Holbach the scientific method became a way of reaffirming secular morality; Voltaire still believed that the Church he sought to destroy would require a religious replacement to prevent what he viewed as the amoral consequences of widespread atheism. Perhaps an even closer glimpse into eighteenth-century Europe will shed more light on both the foundations of the perceived spiritual crisis that intellectuals like Mortimer Adler, Robert Hutchins, and their close friend Jacques Maritain bemoaned during the 1940s, and the odd tendency of the postwar debates to mirror those fought in age of the Enlightenment. The twentieth century was a time of increasing secularization among Western industrialized nations – with the United States as a particularly strong exception – where the dominance of the church in everyday affairs had largely receded. Yet this shift was not inevitable, and, as Sidney Hook remarked, Until Jacques Maritain’s teachings and influence modified its position, the Catholic Church in the United States subscribed to the papal encyclicals that condemned liberalism as a heresy, taught that there was no salvation outside the Church, and denied the legitimacy, even in a secular state, of freedom for propagation of other religious confessions.75

Accordingly, it is important in understanding the crisis debated by Hook and Adler in the context of World War II to be able to identify the origins of this diminishing of church authority in the eighteenth century. Only a few centuries ago, before the attacks on orthodoxy by radical philosophers and the advances of the natural sciences, religion was the foundation against which most of morality, politics, and education were judged. As James Byrne notes, “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a purely secular life was a virtual impossibility; religion impinged on your life whether you wished it to or not.”76 The fact that in much of the modern West, the concept of a separation between church and state forms an ideological cornerstone of society is in no small part due to the efforts of eighteenth-century free thinkers who, by challenging the traditions of religious and state power, helped usher in an age of tolerance and secularization against overwhelming resistance. From the salons of Paris to the Scottish highlands, eighteenth-century Europe was rife with philosophers whose influence continued to shape policy in the world that postwar intellectuals inhabited. Again, it would be inaccurate to attribute secularization to purely anti-religious figures, as “enlightened Christians” like John Locke certainly did more to usher in secular political systems than many


75 Sidney Hook, Out of Step, 335.

76 James Byrne, Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), x.
radical free thinkers. And one of the most difficult challenges faced by these free thinkers, particularly those in France, was the Catholic Church’s opposition to their refutation of religious traditions.

**D’Holbach’s Coterie**

Though numerous studies have focused on deism and the scientific method in challenging the church in eighteenth-century Europe, a significantly smaller amount of attention has been paid to the harshest critics of religion, including atheists like Baron d’Holbach, whose philosophical critiques continue to trouble even the most thoroughly educated theologians: as the prominent philosopher of religion Louis Dupré notes, “D’Holbach’s often casually formulated objections hide serious questions concerning fundamental concepts in Western religion.”

By no means the only atheist in France during the eighteenth century, d’Holbach is noteworthy for both his comprehensive arguments against religion and his systems of secular morality proposed in a variety of books and pamphlets, systems that would come to frame postwar discussions on Western morality.

He represented the epitome of what became known as radical French materialism, borrowing much of his philosophy from a diverse body of English, Scottish, and French free thinkers while forming his own unique morality which pushed these ideas to what he viewed as their inevitable conclusions. As one of the most militant opponent of religion in eighteenth-century France, d’Holbach serves as an ideal focal point on the controversy surrounding religion’s role in both affairs of the state and in morality. Since his most unyielding opponents felt that morality was inextricably linked to religion -- a view he spent his life trying to refute, and one that would remain a major theme in the conflict between religious and secular intellectuals in twentieth-century America – he is worth addressing, if for no other reason than to show the persistence of his critiques in the works of non-religious philosophers like Sidney Hook in the postwar period.

Looking back on the mounting increase in free thought during the middle of the eighteenth century, the exiled French abbé Augustin de Barruel was just one of the many critics of d’Holbach’s influence on the French Revolution. Alan Kors, paraphrasing the abbé’s 1797 memoirs observes, “Writing in exile in London, Barruel described what he saw as a twenty-five year conspiracy of philosophes and freemasons that had culminated in the French Revolution. The center of this conspiracy was the home of Baron d’Holbach on the rue Royale butte Sainte Roche, where strategy and propaganda were formulated”

Again, though it would be overly simplistic to push too far the parallels between the musings of Barruel and the alarming proclamations of those who, like Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, blamed the degeneration of American culture and the world crisis on a loss of faith, the similarities are striking enough to warrant consideration. This is especially

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77 Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment & the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 266.

true given the persistence of arguments in favor of religion in light of the vast advances of science, a fact noted with some regret by pragmatists like Sidney Hook who demanded verifiable evidence before accepting a claim.

Though proposing radical ideas (even by the standards of fellow radical philosophers and critics), d’Holbach became one of the most influential hosts in France, while surprisingly maintaining strong relations with mainstream nobles and ambassadors from a diverse body of European nations. Members from Denmark, England, Naples, and Sweden among other countries, all sought his famous philosophical dinner parties. To say that his influence among the Enlightenment’s intellectuals was great is an understatement; included among notable guests between the 1750s and 1780s were Adam Smith, David Hume, Thomas Gibbon, Denis Diderot, and even Benjamin Franklin. Even Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to a close friend, described d’Holbach as one of the “most virtuous of men.”

The rich atmosphere of d’Holbach’s gatherings stood out as a beacon of free thought and scholarly exchange in a society that was still rooted in centuries-old monarchical traditions and Catholic orthodoxy. When d’Holbach settled in Paris during the middle of the eighteenth century, France was still ruled under Louis XV, who, according to tradition, claimed the divine right of kings. Though not living up to the eminence of Louis XIV, France’s monarch from 1710 to 1774 remained very influential, especially under the guidance of the Cardinal de Fleury, who in effect ruled France from 1726 until his death in 1743. As the Catholic Church was an integral part of court life, the king was anointed at his coronation with holy chrism said to have been brought from heaven by a dove, and it was widely thought that, as evidence of his special status, he could cure scrofula (a form of tuberculosis) by his touch. In fact, up to 1788 the Roman Catholic Church retained in France unusually broad doctrinal rights and social prestige, compared to much of Europe, especially the more tolerant countries in northern Europe.

Before the French Revolution of 1789, the Catholic Church was the primary keeper of both birth and death certificates and also the de facto censor of literature. The perceived danger of free thought was evident in the clergy’s increased attention to censorship: there were roughly forty Catholic censors during the first half of the eighteenth century, while on the eve of the Revolution there were nearly one hundred and sixty. Rousseau’s Émile, which was burned in 1762 by order of the Parlement de Paris, was just one example of the countless works banned by the opponents of free thought prior to the Revolution. d’Holbach’s first major work, Le Christianisme Dévoilé (Christianity Unveiled), published under the pseudonym N.A. Boulanger in 1761, was banned by the Catholic church due to its vehement argument that Christianity was both irrational and fundamentally harmful to society. “Among the priests of a poor and crucified God, who found their


81 James Byrnes, Religion and the Enlightenment, xi.
existence upon religion, and pretend that without it there could be no morality,” d’Holbach wondered, “do we not see reigning amongst them, pride, avarice, wantonness, and revenge?”

La Mettrie, another materialist, was forced into exile by the church in 1748 when officials discovered that he was conducting autopsies on cadavers to discover the “divine essence” allegedly separating humans from the animals of the natural world. Sidney Hook, in his Education for Modern Man, would denounce the metaphysical claims of religious opponents like Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, who sought to define the “nature of man” in an attempt to reform American educational policy. By way of exposing the logical fallacies, echoing indirectly d’Holbach’s attacks while forming his own pragmatic philosophy of social democracy, Hook was a modern agent of Enlightenment.

As just one brief comparison illuminating the curious persistence of anti-secular rhetoric long into the twentieth century shows, the culture wars of Enlightenment France were far from settled: in his ominous address to the academicians gathered at the 1940 Conference on Science, Religion, and Philosophy, Mortimer Adler proclaimed in a manner that eerily reflected the denunciations of secular culture in Revolutionary France, “Until the professors and their culture are liquidated, the resolution of modern problems – a resolution which history demands shall be made – will not even begin. The tower of Babel we are building invites another flood.”

Adler felt that secular academic culture was the underlying cause for the ideological drives backing Hitler and Mussolini’s alliance, as by its very nature it never sought to prescribe moral absolutes or totalizing, a priori judgments on how society should be organized.

Moving back to the eighteenth century, another notable undertaking of many Enlightenment figures was their belief that knowledge should be available to the common person, free of theological baggage or the arbitrary restraints of tradition. Exemplifying the concerted effort of the philosophes to disseminate information to the public was Diderot’s ambitious Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres. This massive project was begun in 1745 and published under the direction of Diderot and d’Alembert, with 17 volumes of text and 11 volumes of plates between 1751 and 1772. Building on the Scottish Cyclopaedia of Ephraim Chambers, which was a much more meager work before Diderot took on the project, the new Encyclopédie would include entries on subjects as diverse as chemistry, philosophy and anatomy. Containing 72,000 articles written by more than 140 contributors, the Encyclopédie was a truly invaluable reference work for the arts and sciences, laying a foundation for future reference and research in a time when

82 Baron d’Holbach, attributed to Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, Le Christianisme Dévoilé, 3.

few sources of such comprehensive scope existed. Diderot went so far as to hire professional artists to render the Encyclopédie’s rich illustrations, which accompanied the text’s numerous entries. In Diderot’s own words, his goal was “to form a general table of the efforts of the human spirit in all of the genres and in all of the centuries; to present these objects with clarity; to give to each of them a convenient understanding.”

The Encyclopédie, though immeasurably important to the advancement of knowledge in all fields, was harshly opposed by the Catholic Church, which viewed itself as the organizer and disseminator of knowledge in pre-Revolutionary France. It was officially banned from publication from 1752 to 1759 under the pretense of promoting dangerous secular ethics, yet the Encyclopedists managed to publish around 5,000 copies of their incredible achievement. By 1748, a few years after he began work on the Encyclopédie, Diderot was a household name among the reading public in Paris due in large part to the success of his Lettre sur les aveugles (Letter on the Blind). This work in effect established the basis for teaching the blind to read by touch, a concept that would be later explored in the nineteenth century by Louise Braille.

Concerning Diderot’s religious skepticism, the pamphlet argued against the notion that God’s existence could be proven through the magnificence of the natural world. How, Diderot asked, could a blind man be expected to perceive the alleged presence of God if he could only experience darkness? This was all the pretense the Catholic Church needed to both ban his work and throw him in jail for three months, first at Vincennes and later in the grim chambers of the Bastille. It was also shortly after the completion of the Encyclopédie that d’Holbach’s most comprehensive work, Le Système de la Nature, was published under the pseudonym Jean-Baptiste de la Mirabaud. While paraphrasing would no doubt deliver an accurate image of d’Holbach’s views on revealed religion, his absolutely relentless style of argument would be

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84 Mortimer Adler, “God and the Professors,” 135.
86 Denis Diderot, Collection complète des œuvres philosophiques, littéraires et dramatiques de M. Diderot. ... Vol. 1. Londres [i.e. Amsterdam?], 3. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group.
lost, diminishing his views while failing to explain the shock with which they were received – a shock whose reverberations would be felt in the years surrounding World War Two, when similar non-religious proposals appeared to counter appeals to faith. In a typically relentless manner, the Baron begs,

If God wishes to be known, to be loved, to be thanked ... why not manifest himself to the whole earth in an unequivocal manner? In place of so many miracles ... could not the lord of the spirits convince the human mind in an instant of the thing he wants known to it? Instead of suspending a sun in the vault of the firmament, instead of orderlessly scattering the stars and the constellations which fill space, would it not have been more consistent with the picture of a God so jealous of his glory and so well disposed toward men to write in a manner not subject to dispute, his name, his attributes, his immutable will in ineffaceable characters, readable equally by all the inhabitants of the world? No one then would have been able to doubt the existence of God, his clear will, or his visible intentions. ... 

In effect, even if we admit the existence of the God of theology and the reality of the conflicting attributes which we give him, we could not conclude anything therefrom to authorize the conduct or the worship with which we are enjoined to requite him. If he is infinitely good, what reason would we have to fear him? If he is infinitely wise, why should we be anxious about our fate? If he knows everything, why inform him of our needs and weary him with our prayers? If he is everywhere, why build temples to him? If he is the master of everything, why make him sacrifices and offerings? If he is just, why fear that he will punish creatures he has filled with weakness? ... If he is all-powerful, how offend him, how resist him? ... If he is immutable, by what right do we presume to say that his decrees are changed? If he is inconceivable, why concern ourselves about him? If he has spoken, why is not the universe convinced? \(^{89}\)

As seen in Diderot’s arrest and the numerous bans placed on both his works and those of many other philosophes, the musings of d’Holbach and his contemporaries went far from unnoticed. Yet faced with the Catholic Church’s attacks, they continued to produce a truly copious amount of literature in defense of their philosophical, political, and ethical musings. As mentioned earlier, d’Holbach himself did not produce much in the way of completely original material insofar as philosophy was concerned, but rather adapted the musings of a diverse body of European theorists into his own unique synthesis, which was displayed at length in his 1770 two-volume magnum opus, *Le Système de la Nature*. Within his diverse body of work, the Baron outlined his atheistic beliefs, yet stood out among contemporaries for additionally proposing a code of ethics to replace religion as a moral and political framework. It is for this reason that he is notable as both representative of a departure from purely critical diatribes against religion, and as one of the Enlightenment figures whose themes of morality without God would take center stage, both during World War Two and later.

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\(^{89}\) Baron d’Holbach, attributed to Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, *Le Système de la Nature*, \(\text{(Project Gutenberg's The System of Nature E-Book, based on a facsimile reprint of an English translation originally published 1820-21.)}\)
during the postwar years. Again, I am not suggesting a connection between the radical wing of the French Enlightenment and such distant figures as John Dewey and Sidney Hook in the twentieth century; the pragmatists’ intellectual lineage is more intimately tied in with the pragmatic school’s founders, first Charles Sanders Peirce, and later, William James. Yet much of the pragmatic tradition derived its tenets from the empirical skepticism of figures like David Hume; and French materialists like d’Holbach pushed Hume’s already irreverent conclusions to atheistic extremes in an attempt to combat religious influence on political and cultural affairs. Thus this comparison seeks to display the continuity, however tenuous, between ideas born in the Age of Enlightenment and their modern adaptations in American intellectual history.

And, with more direct relation to later postwar debates on the America’s intellectual inheritance, free thought was taking finding its way into the founders’ writings. As with some English deists, whose God had created the earth, but remained a distant observer rather than an active agent in human affairs, both Jefferson and Franklin still felt that religion could exist in society as long as it was neither mandated nor harshly prohibited, and as long as it promoted virtue. Indeed, along with John Locke’s early writings, Jefferson’s “Letter to the Danbury Baptists” is often cited as one of the first mentions of the still-contested “separation of church and state:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.\(^{90}\)

Yet one has to wonder, as d’Holbach anticipated in his works – and surely as Sidney Hook and other naturalists later would in the twentieth century\(^{91}\) – whether this separation proposed by the founders was tenable considering the overwhelming influence of religion in people’s lives in the eighteenth century. There is little doubt the founding fathers deplored the Catholic Church’s repressive tendencies in Old Regime France, yet could a more natural religion based on a quasi-Protestant belief in a personal relationship between man and God so easily co-exist with a political and legislative body from which it would ideally remain separated?


\(^{91}\) See Sidney Hook, Religion in a Free Society.
D’Holbach felt that politics, ethics, and religion were inextricably linked, due no doubt to the considerable influence of the Catholic Church in the society in which he lived. In his most notable works, he proposed his vision of an ideal society based on the promotion of virtue in the absence of religious beliefs, government-sanctioned or otherwise – a belief that was reiterated by Richard Rorty in more recent times: When describing his religious and philosophical beliefs in 2001, he argued, “Getting rid of our sense of being responsible to something other than, and larger than, our fellow human beings is a good idea.”

Valuing the general welfare of society as the ultimate end of government in a time when class division was particularly entrenched in society, the progressive beliefs of the radical materialist were far from welcome under the Old Regime, however politically conservative he and his fellow philosophes remained.

**The Specter of Enlightenment**

Publishing right up to his death during the year of the French Revolution, 1789, Baron d’Holbach never faltered in his belief that the human capacity to reason was its greatest tool in understanding morality and the natural world. And it is for this reason that this particularly lengthy digression into his Enlightenment world was undertaken. As he represented a figure whose ghost continued to haunt nineteenth century Romantics who felt disgusted by his cold portrayals of a universe devoid of spiritual guidance and driven by the mindless forces of matter in motion, while being explicitly denounced by Counter-Enlightenment figures like Abbé Barruel, he serves as an example of an Enlightenment philosopher whose controversial faith in the human capacity for reason was contested at every step. Though his works were attacked throughout his life by Counter-Enlightenment figures of the Catholic Church and disparaged by scholars who lay bare the flaws of his deterministic faith in the perfectibility of humanity through secular education, d’Holbach nevertheless influenced a generation of European philosophers through his cordiality, acumen, and firm conviction in a system of ethics rooted in secular values. His influence lasted long after his unceremonious burial, as could be seen in the works of continental and British naturalists, chemists, philosophers, and writers who were all to varying degrees building on the fundamental propositions of the strictly material basis of reality which were proposed by d’Holbach and the non-religious contemporaries of his coterie. In America, scientific naturalism and its pragmatic followers from Peirce onward, were little influenced by radical materialism, yet their reliance on empirical evidence was arguably a product of the victories gained against obscurantism and rational a priorism in the Enlightenment.

Again, this is in absolutely no way suggesting that Darwin and other evolutionary biologists, for example, were philosophically indebted to the radical materialists; indeed, there is little evidence that he read d’Holbach, Diderot, or others of the circle. However, without the radicals’ critiques of revealed religion and the secularization they helped usher in across Europe and the United States, the scholarly audience to which figures like Darwin addressed may not have existed. Science and its reception as an authoritative corpus of knowledge were not inevitable trends to which we can attribute no visible agents. And while the Enlightenment was vastly more widespread and far reaching than the small flock of men of letters huddled around d’Holbach’s dinner table, we must give them credit for their accomplishments, however limited they appear in the larger scheme of eighteenth century criticism.

Pertaining to the current inquiry into American intellectual discourse, the backlash against philosophes like d’Holbach, Diderot, and d’Alembert could still be felt in the years surrounding World War II where Sidney Hook and Mortimer Adler fought their battles. Again, this is not to obscure the multifaceted battles waged by postwar intellectuals, as nationalism, totalitarianism, and critiques of mass society were all equally prevalent. Yet as all three of these latter phenomena were not present in the eighteenth century world in which philosophes like Diderot and d’Holbach lived, I have focused on simply one aspect that continued to be debated after the Enlightenment. Questions surrounding morality’s indebtedness to religious devotion would be raised even more strongly in the postwar years when historians like Peter Gay sought to defend the radical philosophes from the conservative and religious criticism of Hallowell and Kirk. Since Christians’ religious beliefs had in many ways failed to reconcile with the discoveries of science and the increasingly secular trends of modern Western culture, the twentieth-century defenses proposed by the faithful retained many of the same tropes and themes as those eighteenth and nineteenth century critics opposed to aspects of the Enlightenment. These included the denunciation of liberalism as born out of the eighteenth century, and a widespread fear of secular alternatives to religious education, in particular. Further illuminating this thread between the struggles of the philosophes and their subsequent portrayal after the French Revolution into modernity, Darrin McMahon argues, “Whereas the Enlightenment summoned its enemies into existence through its unprecedented attack on revealed religion, the Counter-Enlightenment in turn ‘created’ the Enlightenment as the specter and source of modernity’s ills, reaffirming religion’s place in the modern world and prescribing a program to heal it that was both idealistic and radical.” This was especially true after the surreal Terror under Robespierre. Reactionaries like Barruel were quick to point the finger at radical philosophes like Baron d’Holbach and his coterie for violently unhinging their centuries-old influence on society, curiously ignoring both the basis of his arguments and the possibility of a stable, moral society based on purely secular ethics.

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Similarly, the same denunciations were laid at the table of the American secular academic culture by figures like Hutchins and Adler, who advocated appeals to divine revelation and the Catholic tradition to imbue American youth with the convictions and outlooks necessary to defend the West from the totalitarian forces of Europe. As Hutchins begged, looking back on the wake left by World War II, “Why should we love our neighbors? Why should we regard all men as brothers? The brotherhood of man must rest on the fatherhood of God.” This view, which Hutchins made explicit during his tenure as president of the University of Chicago, and long after the war’s end, and which Mortimer Adler and Jacques Maritain tried desperately to bolster in their own work, would find its way into postwar critiques when “New Conservatives” like John Hallowell and Russell Kirk sought to define America’s intellectual inheritance. For Kirk and Hallowell, whose writings were both among the most prominent and detailed of cold war treatises on cultural conservatism, Hutchins’s insistence on morality’s inextricable link to religious faith and revelation was a defining aspect of their writing.

This rather lengthy digression into the eighteenth century is certainly not the first to address the heated topic of secularization or propose a comparative analysis. Yet the issue remained largely unresolved, both during World War II and long into the cold war that followed – with critics resorting to ambiguous quotes from the founding fathers to defend their beliefs of the inherently “Christian” nature of America. One hopes that its inclusion clarifies the sweeping attacks of those opposed to the scientific method and secularization, broadly defined. As World War II progressed, and an Allied victory became a real possibility, these concerns did not disappear.

Indeed, the era to which contemporary historians point when locating the Enlightenment’s primary historicization is the postwar years, and we need only examine the outpouring of conservative, religious, and even radical left-wing attacks against the Enlightenment during the late 1940s and early 1950s to see that the phenomenon remained a bitterly contested issue long after the war’s end. With the Soviet Union poised against a United States which had quickly come of age on the world scene, the West’s intellectual heritage assumed center stage among intellectuals and historians alike, once again drawing the eighteenth-century Enlightenment into the contingencies of contemporary events.

CHAPTER 4: 
THE POSTWAR YEARS

Only four or five years ago there was serious question – more serious than we realized – whether the liberal ideas of the French Enlightenment...could withstand the modern wave of tyranny and oppression. We have been forced to re-examine the historical bases of our most cherished institutions.95 – Norman Torrey, 1945.

The New Conservatism

America during the 1950s was a period of relative cultural conservatism compared to the 1940s and especially the 1930s – where the Popular Front of American communists still claimed a large number of followers. The dangers intellectuals perceived in the power of ideological convictions to lead nations to ruin was apparent in the literature of the postwar scene, yet as early as 1940 Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon had shed light on the power of ideas. Similarly, in 1960, Daniel Bell’s The End of Ideology reflected the tail end of this pervasive desire to check ideological impulses through pragmatic and tentative social programs. Even the former radicals of the New York Intellectuals group, including Sidney Hook, were becoming more attuned to social conservatism, shedding their socialist leanings in favor of a more compromising position that recognized the merit of the West compared to the Soviet Union.96 As Jennifer Burns describes, “when self-conscious, articulate, and ambitious “new conservatives” first appeared in the postwar years, liberals greeted them as valuable contributors to political and social debate.”97 For these radicals turned liberals, like some prominent members of the New York intellectuals, conservatism was to be welcomed as a useful voice in the American cultural and political scenes.

From this climate of conservatism emerged the bulk of literature on the Enlightenment, as recognized by current scholars who traditionally point to the early years of the cold war as the era’s historicization. Yet the debates leading up to this period had laid the groundwork for subsequent interpretations, while World War II shook radical and conservative intellectuals alike in its atrocities and underlying motives of the Axis. As the Enlightenment had before been denounced largely out of the widespread challenges to scientific naturalism and pragmatism during the 1930s and early 1940s, the postwar era added new categories to critique. Mass society, the truly astonishing power of technology – embodied in the atomic bomb – and the emergence of an historically novel phenomenon, namely the division of the world into two blocs, Soviet and Western, all


provided new sources for indicting the Enlightenment. Describing this prevalent climate of cultural conservatism and disillusionment with radical liberalism, Daniel Aaron claimed in 1954, "This disenchantment set in even before the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but whether it is to be attributed to the ugly aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, the display of depravity in extermination centers and slave camps, the novels of Koestler, Orwell and company, or simply to the banality and flatness of the socialist-liberal imagination, it is enough to say that many of the opinion makers of the thirties have been replaced by what Mr. William Barrett has called the Counter-Enlightenment." 98

The primary figures of this new movement included John Hallowell, a professor of Christianity at Duke University; Russell Kirk, a professor of history and a preeminent American public intellectual of the 1950s; and Peter Viereck, a professor of European history at Mount Holyoke. Yet it was primarily the former two, rather than Viereck who were engaged in historiographical discussions related to the Enlightenment. It should be noted that the New Conservatism of Kirk, Hallowell and Viereck differed considerably from the conservative opinions of, say, William F. Buckley Jr. New Conservatives despised any form of collusion between big business and intellectual culture, and were more concerned with a return to tradition and a less optimistic view of humanity than radicals and liberals, for example. As Aaron observes, "Conservatism with them is not so much a program as a disposition or attitude or temper, and their chief doctrine is the radical or the sentimental progressive who despises history, exaggerates the power of reason, prefers abstractions to men, and unwittingly usurps the power of God." 99 These themes would take precedence in both Kirk and Hallowell’s interpretations of the Enlightenment, and would be attacked in both Crane Brinton’s early work, Ideas and Men (1950), and most powerfully in Peter Gay’s two-volume Enlightenment, an Interpretation series in the mid 1960s.

**Enlightened Totalitarianism?**

Before engaging with the New Conservatives’ interpretation of the Enlightenment, we must account for another strain of criticism; this time from the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were German Jewish émigrés who lived in the United States during the middle of World War II, having fled the Holocaust. While their seminal work, Dialectic of Enlightenment, which they published in German in 1944, was not translated into English until 1973, the two theorists were connected with American intellectual circles and toured the nation giving talks on topics ranging from the perils of technology and mass society to the Holocaust. Also, while the late 1940s and early 1950s were characterized by an increasingly conservative climate in America, to include their interpretation of the Enlightenment is to

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more clearly understand the scope of the ongoing debate. Radicals and conservatives alike denounced tenets of
the Enlightenment throughout its troubled history, and rather than casting the New Conservatives and their
admirers as a unified “Counter-Enlightenment” group opposed to liberals, it is more accurate to note critiques
which came from all sides of the political spectrum.

One of the harshest indictments of the Enlightenment ever produced was contained in Dialectic of
Enlightenment. Writing with the images of fascist atrocities fresh in their minds, their seminal work, 1944’s
Dialectic of Enlightenment, is a particularly ruthless critique of Western philosophy. Focusing on the
commodification of nature and the subsequent objectification of human beings for political ends through the
lens of a vague and ill-defined process they deem “enlightenment,” the critical theorists attributed the
contemporary Western crisis of totalitarianism to the unchecked triumph of reason, and arguably the liberal
worldview born out of the Enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer begin their inquiry into the origins of the
Enlightenment with the poet Homer of Greek antiquity. Yet, regarding the eighteenth century, they claim that
figures like the Marquis de Sade and Immanuel Kant, while championing freedom, only paved the way for the
industrial overreach and undreamt-of warfare of the twentieth century by replacing morality with impersonal
reason. As they famously proclaimed, “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment
has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened
earth radiates disaster triumphant.” That is, the Holocaust, the bland conformity of American mass society,
and the inability of the Enlightenment (as they define it) to halt the spread of totalitarian impulses stand as
testimony to the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment’s virtues.

Gazing back on the two worst wars Western civilization had yet encountered, the two scholars
doubted the West’s ability to improve itself through reason; indeed, while the term “enlightenment” is both
contained in the book’s title and scattered throughout its abstruse passages, it is truly reason that bears the
brunt of their attack. And as historians generally attribute reason’s rise to the eighteenth century’s project of
enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno often implicitly address this revolutionary era without directly
engaging with historical figures or political changes; their brief forays into the eighteenth century touch on
figures like the Marquis de Sade and Immanuel Kant, whom the two authors view as the embodiment of a
systematized, depersonalized philosophy: “The architectonic structure of the Kantian system, like the
gymnastic pyramids of Sade’s orgies and the schematized principles of the early bourgeois freemasonry
reveals an organization of life as a whole which is deprived of any substantial goal.” Viewing the formal,
systematic philosophies elaborated by Kant and comparing them to the – much unrelated – dehumanized
debauchery described in de Sade’s novels, the Frankfurt School’s analysis requires both the oversight of

99 Ibid., 100.

100 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Social Studies Association, Inc.,
1944), 3.

101 Ibid., 88.
dozens of other figures and their famously ambiguous and slippery definitions of “Enlightenment” to appear even slightly consistent

Again, according to the critical theorists, historians and intellectuals alike should see the Enlightenment as an underlying ideological framework through which the West has sought both nature’s domination and the absolute political control born out of fully commodified human beings. As they affirm throughout, “Enlightenment…is the philosophy which equates the truth with scientific systematization.”

Beginning with an account of the Greek hero Odysseus, Horkheimer and Adorno’s Enlightenment looks very different from any of the other works discussed in this inquiry. Not content to limit the scope of their debate to the eighteenth century - or even the seventeenth for that matter - the two argue that the tendencies which manifested themselves in the eighteenth century, and later in the unthinkable atrocities of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, were actually present at the origins of Western culture. As Odysseus sailed the Aegean with his crew of brave Greeks, he was inadvertently doing the bidding of enlightenment according to the two scholars; by seeking the domination of those he encountered, and denouncing figures like the Cyclops Polyphemus as uncivilized and barbaric for their lack of systematized agriculture and organized government, Odysseus was viewed as the quintessential bearer of Western enlightenment.

Interestingly, the critical theorists also address the rise of industrialization and mass society, and its relation to the Enlightenment, in a more direct manner than similar critiques that would appear after their seminal work. Irving Howe of the New York Intellectuals group described mass society as a cultural condition in which “populations grow passive and atomized, coherent publics based on clear interests fall apart, and man tends to shrink to a consumer, mass-produced like the products, diversions, and values he takes in.”

Both in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and later in Max Horkeimer’s own *Eclipse of Reason*, published three years later, the oppressive weight of the modern capitalist West constantly presided in the foreground of the critical theorists’ analyses. This is understandable, particularly in 1947 when *Eclipse of Reason* was published, since the United State alone remained not only undamaged by World War Two, but economically booming beyond imagination; as newly returning GIs could attend college at reduced rates, and the nation was awash in money from the industrial growth caused by wartime manufacturing, middle-class Americans enjoyed material prosperity on a scale of which their parents could not have dreamed only a decade earlier.

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102 Ibid., 85.

The Eclipse of Reason

With the sudden surge of consumer goods and the sprawl of suburbia during the late 1940s and early 1950s, intellectuals like Horkheimer noted with resignation the dangers of mass society: “It seems that even as technical knowledge expands the horizons of man’s thought and activity, his autonomy as an individual, his ability to resist the growing apparatus of mass manipulation, his power of imagination, his independent judgment appear to be reduced.” Horkheimer viewed this perceived robotic existence in postwar America largely as the product of the Enlightenment; Kant’s insistence on morality being based on universal imperatives now manifested itself in the average American’s unreflective adherence to prevailing political and cultural conservatism and the bland uniformity of suburban neighborhoods in the early postwar years. As Adorno and Horkheimer lamented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The dutiful child of modern civilization is possessed by a fear of departing from the facts which, in the very act of perception, the dominant conventions of science, commerce, and politics – cliché-like – have already molded.” According to their pessimistic appraisal, mass society and the apparent dominance of science had taken hold of modern Americans to the point of reducing them to a mere automatons; and as they go to great lengths to prove, this reduced state of existence owned its prevalence to “Enlightenment.”

Perhaps the most astounding accusation the critical theorists brought to bear against the Enlightenment, which for Horkheimer and Adorno was synonymous with the exaltation of instrumental reason over other means, is their claim that it undeniably spawned the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Not only the arbitrary terror the Soviet Union committed against its fear-stricken population, but the culmination of modern evils, the Holocaust, was attributed to the process of enlightenment. Again, for the critical theorists, the end of the eighteenth century’s philosophical movements only reaffirmed ideas about nature and humanity that were present in antiquity. And with the advent of modern weaponry and the ideological conviction of fascist populations like Nazi Germany, Horkheimer and Adorno were led to believe that such an event was next to inevitable given the course of Western history. As Jews were objectified as undesirable objects fit only for extermination in the eyes of Germany’s hardened Nazis, the critical theorists held that this mechanical process of dehumanization and its legions of willing executioners were phenomena whose origins both lay in enlightenment, broadly defined.

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105 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

106 See Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*; long after the end of World War Two, politicians in the Soviet Union continued to send their citizens to the gulag for even minor offenses against the State.
Conservative Enlightenment Comes of Age

While the Frankfurt School opened the attack in the middle of World War Two and immediately after, they were writing on the cusp of the major reinterpretations of the Enlightenment that would emerge only years later. John Hallowell’s *Main Currents of Political Thought* (1954), and Russell Kirk’s *A Program for Conservatives* (1950) and *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (1953) were seminal documents of the New Conservatism, whose interpretations of modernity and the Enlightenment represented significant challenges to the liberal ideals born out of the eighteenth century. And while all three books were concerned with historical trends whose broad scope stretched across centuries, all contain valuable chapters on the Enlightenment. Accordingly, rather than analyzing each work in depth and determining nuanced differences, it is more useful to note both authors’ general accord with regard to the Enlightenment’s role in shaping modernity. Kirk and Hallowell venerated Edmund Burke, hailing him as a careful check to the lofty, untenable goals of the French Revolution, and a useful figure to represent the re-emerging conservatism of the 1950s.

The main themes involved in all three of the books previously mentioned include the bankruptcy of the eighteenth century’s promise of secular liberalism and the fundamental challenge the radical doctrines of the age posed to the “organic” bonds of society. As Hallowell argues in his chapter, “The Age of Enlightenment” in *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought*, “The Christian conscience, freed from the authority of the Church and progressively divorced from revelation, soon degenerated into a mere cult of sentiment, without weight or sanction, and the will of the individual was left without any substantial limitation.”\(^{107}\) Without revelation and God’s will serving as the court of last appeal, Hallowell felt humanity was destined to be left foundering, hopefully lost in that cold, cruel world characterized by both Baron d’Holbach and Carl Becker. Russell Kirk echoed Hallowell’s interpretation in his own, *Program for Conservatives*, published four years later: he claimed “The conservative knows the proclivity of human nature toward sin. For the past two centuries, a variety of amusing endeavors have been undertaken by liberal thinkers to demonstrate that men really are benevolent in impulse, but are corrupted by institutions and environment.” He continues, “Such theories were immensely popular throughout the Enlightenment, and were given literary expression by writers of great talent like Rousseau and Condorcet.”\(^{108}\) These accusations were also contained in his book, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, published shortly before *A Program for Conservatives*. Tracing the American pragmatists’ dangerous prescriptions in the 1930s and 1940s, while indicting liberal values in a broader sense, Kirk contends, “[Dewey commenced with a thoroughgoing naturalism, like Diderot’s and Holbach’s, denying the whole realm of spiritual values: nothing exists but physical sensation, and life has no aims but physical satisfaction.”\(^{109}\) Since pragmatism rejected a

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priori conclusions or appeals to unverifiable evidence, it was, according to Kirk, a dangerous philosophy which could only lead to the despair of those “lost in a withered world that Darwin and Faraday had severed from its roots.” This denunciatory rhetoric was a powerful rallying cry after secular totalitarian regimes had shaken Western culture to the core only a decade earlier, and the New Conservatives found support among radicals and conservatives alike in the increasingly conservative climate of 1950s America.

It is not difficult to see the disdain with which Peter Gay would respond, first in the mid 1950s, and later in the mid 1960s, when reading the outpouring of conservative reinterpretations of the Enlightenment. Kirk and Hallowell both shared the unshakable conviction that American society was indebted to the cautionary tracts of Edmund Burke rather than the universal appeals and abstractions of reason coming from radical French philosophers and their more liberal British admirers. And this posed a fundamental challenge to historians like Peter Gay, Crane Brinton, and Walter Dorn, who all shared the belief that skepticism, liberalism, and the pursuit of earthly happiness were all worth the inherent challenges created by the Enlightenment’s attack on tradition and religion.

Enlightened Dystopia

While radicals from the Frankfurt school assailed the Enlightenment for leading to the Holocaust and the unchecked overreach of technology, and New Conservatives were beginning their reinterpretations as well, political theorists joined the attack. Arguing along similar lines as 1944’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was Eric Voegelin’s *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, a collection of previously unpublished essays written during the mid 1940s and the early 1950s. John Hallowell later compiled these essays into a finished book in 1975, continuing a debate with intensity nearly a decade after Peter Gay’s *Rise of Modern Paganism* attempted to close shut the door on the New Conservatives’ interpretation of the Enlightenment. A political theorist who had was born in Germany but had immigrated to the United States in 1944 to escape the Nazis, Voegelin’s contribution to the debate is a reflection of the crisis which beset intellectual culture in the years immediately following World War II, when the full extent of Nazi and Soviet atrocities was becoming apparent. With regard to its place in the historiography of the Enlightenment, Voegelin’s scathing critique of the work of the eighteenth-century philosophes shares the critical theorists’ disdain for the perceived triumph of reason by proponents of the scientific method, seeing as it only ushered in the Nazi death factories and the age of atomic warfare. Also, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* is more firmly grounded in historical, rather than philosophical sources, yet its author tends to include intellectual discourse born out of eighteenth-century debates in tracing the evolution of reason from its emergence during the Enlightenment to its horrific totalitarian finale in the first half of the twentieth century.

Characterizing the Enlightenment as an eighteenth-century phenomenon whose roots partially lay in the musings of Joachim de Flora, a thirteenth-century Franciscan monk who, according to Voegelin, envisaged
a new – and vaguely defined by Voegelin – “consciousness of epoch” which repudiated the Augustinian notion of time as waiting for the second coming of Christ. Voegelin deems erroneous any claims that the age of enlightenment was the West’s first decisive break with its Christian past, or its first reconsideration of religious conceptions of time or history. As later historians would reaffirm, the author emphasizes the importance of the breakdown of the Christian cosmology of medieval Europe during the early eighteenth century, while arguing that the replacement of religion with secular visions of human perfectibility and the scientific method forever changed Western Europe – detrimentally, in Voegelin’s opinion. Citing the Protestant Reformation as the critical juncture in the path leading to the eventual breakdown of the church’s hold on Western Europe in the beginning of the eighteenth century, Voegelin’s work focuses much of its energy on the tension between the promises of secular liberalism and the existing Christian notions of the inherently corrupt nature of humanity and the attainment of salvation only in death.

This tension, the author argues, was brought to its most dramatic conclusion during the eighteenth century, primarily with the French Revolution and the subsequent retreat of religion into more personal realms. Interestingly, Voegelin traces a direct link from the beliefs of deists like d’Alembert to the atrocities of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Claiming that the French deists’ views represented a return to pre St. Paul Christianity, which reduced Jesus to a mere philosopher, Voegelin warns his readers of the dangers of basing a religion on beliefs not rooted in revelation. He views Robespierre’s reign of terror and his cult of the Supreme Being as dangerous manifestations of the deist impulse, claiming that if revelation were no longer the basis for faith, secular visions of utopia would fill the void, leading to not only the loss of traditional religious morals but the unrestrained fury of secular amorality. Moving from the Terror to the Babouvist collectives of post-Revolutionary France, Voegelin finds here the origins of what would later become Soviet Communism. Stressing the empty promises of secular leaders in their attempts to improve humanity without appeals to the deity, the author’s religious conservatism colors much of his book.

Not content to remain in the eighteenth century, Voegelin finds the crucial link between Enlightenment secularization and twentieth-century totalitarianism in the works of nineteenth century historians and theorists. Focusing a large portion of his book on the positivist Auguste Comte, Voegelin shares the Frankfurt School’s anxieties about the application of the scientific method to all aspects of life. Also, like the critical theorists, Kant’s systematic categorization of reason and its consequent applications in the lives of enlightened individuals comes under direct attack. Cleverly turning the tables on this influential Enlightenment philosopher, Voegelin claims that it is actually “spiritual man” who remains the mature figure of the ages rather than the secular utilitarian or the master of reason. As the author views spirituality as something whose validity exists independently of science or reason, he warns of the dangers of applying Enlightenment worldviews to so sacred a belief. Echoing the Frankfurt School with regard to the

\[110\] Ibid., 365.
depersonalization of humanity through the process of enlightenment, Voegelin claims that in the post-Enlightenment world “man is no longer a spiritual center but a mere link in the chain of generations.”

Exactly what is meant by a spiritual center is never sufficiently elucidated, and much of his book derives sweeping conclusions from similarly vague descriptions of humanity’s “true essence” while dismissing outright many secular alternatives to religious worldviews.

This is not to completely discredit Voegelin’s research into the origins of totalitarianism, as some of the most influential intellectual historians of the West, including Isaiah Berlin, partly share his belief that the promises of a secular utopia were directly related to the entrenched beliefs of philosophes like Condorcet and d’Holbach, whose confidence lay in the triumph of reason and the subsequent betterment of societies whose potentials had been repressed by the traditions of the Christian past. Yet it is difficult to make so bold a claim as Voegelin’s teleology of reason’s misappropriation, which begins with D’Alembert, is popularized by Comte, transformed by Marx, and finally ends in the hands of totalitarian dictators like Lenin and Hitler. In light of the contextual differences between the eighteenth century and the industrialized twentieth, these sweeping conclusions are difficult to support. While figures like Lenin, Stalin and Hitler had undoubtedly been influenced by views whose origins lay in the past, it appears reductionist to propose a linear connection from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust and the Gulag, as Voegelin – and even Isaiah Berlin – does. This would become a point of departure for those like Crane Brinton, Peter Gay, and Sidney Hook, who would argue vehemently against such assertions; for all of these proponents of Enlightenment values (the scientific method, secular politics, liberalism), the eighteenth century actually represented the antithesis of totalitarianism and oppression. For Hook especially, the rise of totalitarianism was in fact due to the renunciation of values born out of the eighteenth century’s partial break with superstitious and a priori assumptions about humanity’s role in the world. Not only would these powerful defenders of the Enlightenment reject any appeals to innate conditions of society or supernatural forces at work in the world, but they would go to great lengths to show that the liberal West was profoundly indebted to the philosophes.

\[112\] Ibid., 95.

\[113\] Ibid., 96.
A Brighter Light

If the Enlightenment and its liberal disposition were cast as the source of the contemporary crisis of the twentieth-century West by authors like Eric Voegelin and the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, Crane Brinton, an intellectual historian of Revolutionary France, held that Americans were profoundly indebted to the work of the philosophes; that the American Revolution was undeniably the physical manifestation of enlightened thought. Also, preceding Peter Gay by a decade and a half, Brinton shares the latter historian’s view that the Enlightenment represented a new cosmology based on earthly happiness and the improvement of humanity through proactive measures of a secular nature. As he states, the eighteenth century ushered in “the belief that all human beings can attain here on this earth a state of perfection hitherto in the West thought to be possible only for Christians in a state of grace, and for them only after death.”

Basing his version of Enlightenment on the revolutionary discoveries of Isaac Newton and the empirical methods of John Locke, Brinton stresses the importance of the philosophical and scientific attacks on faith and non-empirical conclusions. As Descartes had only further inured the educated in the tangles of metaphysics according to Brinton, it was the task of enlightened empiricists to pave the way for clear thinking based on verifiable evidence; rather than adhering to a priori assumptions about the mind or the soul, figures like George Berkeley, John Locke and David Hume demanded sensory data and demonstrable proof before admitting the validity of a given proposition.

Brinton directly addresses the philosophes’ faith in progress in Ideas and Men, and, like Gay and Isaiah Berlin would do later, he emphasizes the relative novelty of this political concept. Carefully reviewing the histories of the Greeks and Romans, and later Medieval Europe, Brinton finds few, if any, cases where the belief that human beings could direct the course of their own destiny in an effective, progressive manner was proposed on a scale similar to that of the Enlightenment. Indeed, Brinton claims that even the Ancient Greeks of the Classical Age, for all their technological advancements over their Pre-Socratic ancestors, did not include in their cosmology the notion of perpetual improvement through human actions on earth; rather, many Greeks viewed their world as a diminished form of the legendary Golden Age of antiquity, where heroes abounded and humanity was in harmonious accord with nature. With relation to the Enlightenment - and of particular interest to the issue of the eighteenth century’s influence on contemporary American thought, – Brinton argues, “Belief in progress, in spite of the two world wars of our generation and the grave economic crisis of the thirties, is still so much a part of the way young Americans are brought up that very few Americans realize


115 Ibid, 376.
how unprecedented that belief is.”\footnote{116} In light of the catastrophes mentioned, this optimism was revolutionary, indeed; World War I shook the faith of those who saw Europe as no longer troubled by national disputes whose outcomes were the devastation wrought by total war; while World War II led to an even more sustained reexamination of the fundamental tenets of Western society in the wake of the Holocaust and the rise of totalitarian regimes.

Cautionary Liberals: Isaiah Berlin and J.L Talmon

Ever present in the foreground of this debate was Isaiah Berlin, a man of many hats, but one particularly known for his contributions to the history of ideas. Berlin was a prominent public intellectual who rose to fame for his work in the British Information Office from 1940-1942, and later in the British embassy in Washington DC during the last years of World War II. It was Berlin’s job to defend Western values and convey the British struggle’s importance to American listeners, and he quickly rose in stature. Yet it was in challenging those historians, philosophers, and intellectuals whose work cast the Enlightenment in too positive a light that he became notable in Enlightenment historiography. As someone who had witnessed firsthand as a child the Russian Revolution of 1917, Berlin was no stranger to totalitarian systems of government; a fact that would influence much of his work on the Enlightenment and its Counter-Enlightenment opponents. As the aim of my inquiry is to focus less on figures of whom historians have traditionally spoken, I will not engage in a lengthy explanation of Berlin’s work on the Enlightenment. As there exists a large body of literature which has taken its point of departure from his influential book, \textit{The Age of Enlightenment: The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers}, I include him as an example of a prominent intellectual who remained committed to the scientific method and secular liberalism. Retaining serious doubts about any claims of utopia, any visions of optimism not grounded in a nuanced and realistic interpretation of humanity, Berlin stood as a check to any overly glib readings of the eighteenth century. With regard to Brinton’s insightful appreciation of the novelty of the philosophes’ faith in progress, Berlin takes issue in his 1953 article “Historical Inevitability,” though speaking to a wider audience and not citing Brinton. Claiming that for Westerners “one of the deepest of human desires is to find a unitary pattern in which the whole of experience, past, present, and future, actual, possible, and unfulfilled, is symmetrically ordered,”\footnote{117} Berlin accuses not only the faithful, but those most closely associated with the scientific method and positivism with adhering to such organizing principles. Citing Montesquieu, Comte, Hegel, Darwin, and Marx, Berlin’s critique of the secular faith in human progress and its deterministic conceptions of how society’s future should unfold in many ways echoes Eric Voegelin’s

\footnote{116} Ibid., 376.  
critique in *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, though the two represented politically, opposite poles of the debate.

Similarly, Berlin’s realization that the Enlightenment laid the foundation for totalitarianism is a theme discussed in J.L. Talmon’s *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy*. Talmon was a Jewish historian who, like many of the figures discussed previously, had fled from Nazi persecution during World War II. Talmon famously debated Berlin at Oxford after the war, and the two came to share many beliefs while still harboring considerably different and nuanced readings of the Enlightenment and liberalism. Yet categorically, the two represent a similar strain of liberal anti-utopianism, broadly defined. Published in 1952, Talmon’s work identifies two types of democracy: liberal and totalitarian. Claiming that their ends are the same (political representation, workers’ security, a stable economy), but their means different, the author makes connections along nearly the same lines as both Voegelin and Berlin with regard to the Jacobin Terror’s extreme measures and the twentieth centuries’ own resurgent brutality.\(^{118}\) While his work is solidly grounded in historical, rather than philosophical analysis – unlike *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example – he tends to choose some of the most extreme cases as typical of eighteenth-century philosophies. For Talmon, Morelly’s *Code of Nature*, which “strove for scientific certainty in social and human affairs,”\(^ {119}\) and, tellingly, which he labels a Communist tract - is representative of most of the philosophes, a view Peter Gay’s later work would render untenable in light of the vastly more complex and divergent opinions held by Enlightenment figures.

**Does America Still Need the Eighteenth Century?**

The previous debates, the rise of the New Conservatism, and the seemingly endless interpretations of the Enlightenment from all corners of the political spectrum and across the disciplines, all led to a serious revaluation of the foundations of American identity. Indeed, as Peter Gay noticed in 1954, “The authors most responsible for perpetuating clichés about the Enlightenment are the so-called “New Conservatives” like John H. Hallowell and Russell Kirk, who are now attempting to construct a conservative worldview by attacking the ideas which they attribute to Enlightenment political thinkers.”\(^ {120}\) While in some regard most of the works previously discussed all at least obliquely touched on this question, while praising either liberalism or conservatism, religion or secularism, nowhere was the question raised more directly than in the annual meeting of the American Society of Learned Scholars in 1956. The conference’s theme that year was “The Present-Day Relevance of Eighteenth-Century Thought,” and among its speakers were Peter Gay, Walter


\(^{119}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{120}\) Peter Gay, “The Enlightenment in the History of Political Theory,” *Political Science Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (Sep., 1954): 375.
Dorn, Ira Wade, Ernest Mossner, and Daniel Boorstin. Each of the scholars had written a major work of intellectual history at the time of the conference’s convening, and each brought his own nuanced reading of the Enlightenment to bear at a panel comprised of experts. The major questions raised included the scope of the Enlightenment; its contributions to art, religion, science, and politics; and, most importantly for the debates surrounding American identity, how indebted was 1950s America to the philosophes?

Directly addressing this issue in his working paper entitled, “Does America still need the Eighteenth Century?” was the eighteenth-century historian Walter Dorn. As we have seen from his previous work from 1940, *Competition for Empire*, Dorn held the opinions and contributions of the eighteenth-century philosophes in high esteem, claiming both the United States’ indebtedness to their liberal values and the pressing need to reincorporate their beliefs into our culture. As he argues, “The great values of the Age of Reason, the belief in the oneness of humanity, the rights of man, its respect for the human personality, its freedom and equality which constitute the matrix of our own democracy, are surely axiomatic in our own day.” Dorn continues, “The eighteenth-century optimism about human nature has of late been the object of much derision, But the ablest and authentic representatives of the Enlightenment took a sober view and were essentially modest in their expectations from human nature.”

This was a view Peter Gay agreed with wholeheartedly; both at the conference and in his *Enlightenment, an Interpretation* series he would bend over backwards to defend the philosophes from accusations of naïveté and boundless optimism.

It is important to note that Peter Gay’s path breaking contribution to Enlightenment historiography, the two-volume *Enlightenment, an Interpretation* series, was indebted to questions raised at this conference and the conservative interpretations coming from Kirk and Hallowell. While Gay never explicitly (to my knowledge) mentioned the gathering in his books, his conclusions in the Volume two, *The Science of Freedom*, were clear reiterations of the beliefs he championed at the conference and the methodological interpretations he favored. The conference was also an important forum in which scholars could debate methodological differences related to historicizing the Enlightenment. Challenging Daniel Boorstin’s suggestion to treat the eighteenth century less as a climate of opinion and more as a collection of figures only loosely connected in their pursuits and beliefs, Gay countered, “Not only did the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers know each other personally – they were friends doctrinally and personally – but they also seem to have shared certain values, certain assumptions, certain ways of analyzing problems.” For Gay, a climate of opinion based on free thinking, tolerance, and a sober conviction that society could indeed be improved through secular education, all characterized the Enlightenment’s tenets. Also, responding directly to the attacks waged only a few years earlier by Kirk, Hallowell, and others, Gay argued, “Much of the attack on the naïveté of the eighteenth century is against a theory of progress imputed to [the philosophes] which they

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never held.” As he concluded, “I hope we can put that particular ghost to rest today.”123 While it is unclear from the brief notes of the meeting whether the diverse group of scholars at the conference actually settled these troubling questions, Peter Gay would spend the next decade of his career steeped in eighteenth-century scholarship, drawing on methodologies discussed at the conference and other scholarly forums, to produce his towering two-volume *The Enlightenment, an Interpretation* series in the mid 1960s.

### Enlightenment Restored

With the New Conservatives’ Enlightenment indirectly challenged in the works of Crane Brinton and directly attacked in the critiques raised during the gathering of scholars at the Conference on the Present Day Relevance of Eighteenth-Century Thought, it would only be later, during the mid 1960s that the most revolutionary reinterpretation would take place. Challenging interpretations of the Enlightenment which had been in use since Carl Becker’s *Heavenly City* in 1932, Peter Gay’s *The Enlightenment, An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* restored the Enlightenment to its prewar status as an epoch of hope, a century whose achievements paved the way for the best aspects of the modern world, despite its imperfections. Indeed, only two years before this conference, Gay masterfully critiqued Becker’s work and its subsequent appropriation by New Conservatives in his article, “Carl Becker’s *Heavenly City,*” published in 1954. Against claims portraying the philosophes as naïve optimists who merely replaced their religious faith with an empty “faith in reason,” Peter Gay argued, “This witty and perverse little book, which has probably prevented more students from thinking about the Enlightenment than any other, does not – despite Becker’s great authority – alter the fact that these estimates are half-truths.”124 For Gay, Becker’s major flaw is his distortion of the philosophes’ conclusions: while a figure like Diderot was indeed cautious about the popular reception of his anti-clericalism and atheism, being as he and most of his contemporary philosophes were still skeptical of the largely ignorant peasant majority of eighteenth-century France, Gay argues that Becker unduly stresses the point. Casting them as possessed unknowingly by the very religious impulses they sought to disavow, Becker’s conclusions were indeed troublesome to Gay. For him, Becker’s claim that the philosophes were proponents of a “faith in reason” as great as their former religious faith only adds to the general confusion surrounding both *The Heavenly City* and subsequent interpretations which borrowed the book’s central thesis. As Gay argues regarding Becker’s ambiguous use of “rationality,” “For Aquinas, reasonable demonstration was deductive and definitional; Voltaire derided such demonstrations as “metaphysics,” as examples of the despised *esprit de système.*”125 That is, though seemingly commensurable terms in common parlance, Becker’s slippery use of the terms, “faith” and “rationality” underscored a fundamentally negative opinion of the

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123 Ibid., 38.

efficacy of the empirical and scientific dispositions. Both, if we take Becker’s word for it, were grounded in human error and had to be hedged in some kind of religious hope since science could not answer ultimate questions.

Winning the National Book Award and establishing Gay as one of the foremost authorities on the Enlightenment, his two-volume crowning achievement emerged a full decade after his appearance at the Conference on the Present-Day Relevance of Eighteenth-Century Thought. The series is both a useful bookend to the debates covered in this thesis, and a much-needed response to the wave of hasty denunciations and tenuous conclusions which plagued previous scholarship. Even the most comprehensive of works before his *Rise of Modern Paganism* and its successor, *The Science of Freedom*, paled in comparison to Gay’s incredible source base, stretching as it did across Italian, French, German, British, and American documents, and incorporating over fifteen years’ worth of research. And it was no disinterested piece of scholarship. Gay himself noted the historiographical battles in which he had been engaged over the past decade, claiming, “I have had my share of…polemics, especially against the Right, and I must confess I that I have enjoyed them. But the time is ready and the demand urgent to move from polemics to synthesis.”

**Modern Pagans to the Rescue**

If Berlin, Voegelin, Hallowell and Kirk were apt to cast the Enlightenment in paler shades of gray, Peter Gay’s work on the eighteenth century stands as one of the most celebratory. Beginning his defense in earnest with 1966’s *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, the first of his two-volume *Enlightenment* series, Gay represents one of the most ardent supporters of the eighteenth-century philosophers - particularly those of France. Celebrating their break with the Catholic Church and their attempted return to the republican paganism of Greek and Roman antiquity, Gay’s first volume, 1966’s *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism*, is of a vastly more positive tone than any of the works reviewed thus far, with the exception of Briton’s *Ideas and Men*. As Gay had undoubtedly been exposed to the outpouring of anti-Enlightenment, anti-liberal literature of the 1940s and 1950s from the likes of Eric Voegelin, Russell Kirk, and the Frankfurt School, his monumental undertaking goes to great lengths to display the progressive, liberating achievements of the philosophes.

For Gay, the Enlightenment project was a vast, international endeavor whose goals included an increase in education, the challenging of entrenched religious dogmas, and the creation of societies based on liberal ideals like tolerance and an appreciation for other cultures. While contemporary scholars often attack Gay’s famous assertion that “there were many philosophes in the eighteenth century, but there was only one

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125 Peter Gay, “Carl Becker’s Heavenly City,” *Political Science Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (Jun., 1957):185.

Enlightenment,” his argument ought not be dismissed outright; considering the degree to which figures as influential as Thomas Jefferson, Baron d’Holbach, and Immanuel Kant shared similar notions of how societies should be governed, the role of religion in politics, and humanity’s capacity to use reason to achieve happiness on earth, Gay has a valid claim in casting the Enlightenment as a pervasive phenomenon of the eighteenth-century West.\(^\text{127}\) This is, of course, not to suggest that d’Holbach’s radical materialism and faith in the perfectibility of humanity though secular education were completely in accord with Jefferson’s independent agrarianism or Kant’s visions of perpetual peace; it is merely to propose that there was a current of Enlightenment thought running though all three, a shared conviction that the future held the promise of a better world.

Also, Gay’s book did not intend to propose a linear teleology leading directly from the ideas of leading eighteenth-century philosophers to the Declaration of Independence or the storming of the Bastille. He merely suggested that both revolutions were based on ideas born out of the climate of the time, and sought to incorporate these newly championed values into their fledgling governments; as he argues, “The American Revolution converted America from an importer of ideas into an exporter. What is exported was, of course, mainly itself, but that was a formidable commodity – the program of enlightenment in practice.”\(^\text{128}\) Citing a range of achievements and programs whose effects are taken for granted today in the modern West (reliable medicine, secular educational options, religious and ethnic tolerance), Peter Gay’s two-volume work attempts to portray the Enlightenment as something fundamentally good, as a phenomenon whose influence paved the way for the fruits of modernity. Covering a broad range of influential figures, Gay’s Enlightenment is both a concerted effort to free Europe – and later the American colonies – from the shackles of superstition and arbitrary traditions based on unscientific claims, and an affirmation of the inherent goodness of humanity. Far from adhering to the grim notions of original sin and the corruptibility of humankind contained in the Christian tradition, Gay’s philosophes are modern pagans who appeal to the Ancient Greeks and Romans to construct their earthly paradise; this dialectic, this combination of the Stoic and Epicurean past with the service ethic of Christianity, is a central theme of the Enlightenment series, and one that would continue to play a role in the works of other influential scholars writing about the eighteenth century.

Similarly, ending his monumental *Enlightenment, an Interpretation* series with the triumph of the American revolutionists over their English oppressors, Gay came under pressure, both during and after his work’s publication, for failing to address what many conservatives and radicals alike viewed as the Enlightenment’s true “finale:”\(^\text{129}\) The French Revolution and its ensuing Jacobin Terror. While it is true that choosing the American Revolution as the capstone of Enlightenment is a convenient way to avoid the potential


\(^{129}\) Gay’s last chapter celebrating the American Revolution and the Federalist Papers is entitled, “Finale.”
dark side of the philosophes’ accomplishments, it is neither clear, nor grounded in absolutely apparent
evidence that the French Revolution or Robespierre’s abuses of power, were products of Enlightenment
discourse. Of course, the apotheosis of Voltaire in the Pantheon and the subsequent secular ceremonies
devoted to Reason were certainly signs that leading philosophes had had a significant impact on
revolutionaries; but it is another thing entirely to suggest, as many historians have done, that all of the
philosophes advocated extreme measures in realizing their visions of human progress. More often than not,
even the most radical of the French critics of religion and tradition, including d’Holbach and Diderot, were
well aware of the dangers of hastily replacing the Old Regime with a new system of government. As Robert
Darnton has shown, many of the philosophes relied on the aristocratic apparatus of the Old Regime to
maintain their positions in France’s preeminent academies and offices, which casts many of their ostensibly
radical critiques in a much less revolutionary light if one accepts his conclusions.130

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As the bitter disputes beginning in the 1930s with Sidney Hook’s defense of the scientific method attest, the Enlightenment was far from a closed issue, both during World War II and in the cold war that followed. From the critiques of the Enlightenment born out of the crisis besetting American intellectual culture during the rise of totalitarian regimes, to the later emergence of cultural conservatism and the new challenges this posed to eighteenth-century values, the debates closely followed contemporary events rather than radically different methodologies or approaches to writing history. As competing visions of the West’s “true nature” were proposed in the literature of the eighteenth century, postwar scholarship remains some of the most polarized historical work to be encountered. Yet as mentioned earlier, we must not forget the origins of the Enlightenment’s historicization before the 1950s if we are to more fully understand both the reiterated interpretations and the questions besetting America’s intellectual community which profoundly affected later portrayals of the eighteenth century.

These debates did not end with Peter Gay’s Enlightenment series; indeed, they often intensified, adopting new forms in the wake of the tumultuous sixties, and later with the rise of postmodernism in the 1980s. Yet most of the major arguments that would continue to assail those who saw in the Enlightenment the West’s greatest intellectual inheritance were proposed in the aftermath of World War II, from radicals and conservatives alike. As critics polarized the debate, casting their opponents in a fashion that reflected the eighteenth century disputes with which they were engaged, they represented that curious persistence of denunciatory rhetoric that Darrin McMahon described in Enemies of the Enlightenment. And as the current plethora of invested Enlightenment scholarship suggests, from John Gray’s Enlightenment’s Wake (1995), to Stephen Eric Bronner’s Reclaiming the Enlightenment (2004), polemical attacks against the values born out of the eighteenth century -and the equally biased rallying cries they engender - continue to find their way into contemporary historical discourse.

Similarly, taking a slight departure from competing visions of the Enlightenment in the literature of the eighteenth century, we ought to include debates whose origins lie in the eighteenth century and whose effects are perhaps more tangible to the general public. As noted in Chapter 3 with the Encyclopedists’ relentless attacks on revealed religion, Diderot and d’Holbach’s methods were often characterized by exaggerated portrayals of their opponents and reactionary solutions to problems requiring sophistication and patience. Again, this is not to disparage their immense contributions to free thought and secular politics, but simply to note that their rhetorical techniques and literary styles were often polemical. And their Catholic opponents were no better in avoiding stereotypical portrayals of the philosophes and secularism; as the very foundation of their faith was threatened by the radical French materialists, they had much at stake.
Interestingly, these disputes are still with us in the twenty-first century, especially in the United States. If one considers for a moment the recent spate of religious books printed in English over just the last three years, it seems apparent that secularization – that all encompassing, ambiguously invoked term – has not been as total as many of its eighteenth-century proponents wished. From the atheistic musings of Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, 2005, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 2006), Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*, 2007), and Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 2006), to the stern rebuttals of religious opponents like Dinesh D’Souza (*What’s so Great about Christianity*, 2007), battles which began in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century – the age of Enlightenment – have continued to rage in the arena of the twenty-first in a polemical, frequently unsophisticated manner.

These debates are neither confined to the academy, nor disengaged from public discourse; in fact, in a nation like America, where over 85 percent of the population claims to be religious, these arguments involving secularization have proven to arouse some of the most passionate responses from the public. And rightfully so; while the United States Constitution provides for a separation of church and state (with secularists often pointing to Jefferson’s *Letter to the Danbury Baptists* when this issue is raised), this concept was neither carefully explained in legal terms nor ever sufficiently interpreted since its drafting nearly two and a half centuries ago. While the focus of this thesis is neither on the legal ramifications of religion in American society, nor the contemporary disputes between evolutionary biologists like Richard Dawkins and those who have pushed for primary schools to teach intelligent design (the notion that evolution is divinely guided), it would be remiss to place its main analysis of postwar debates of American identity outside the context of competing views of religious and secular society in contemporary America. Again, religious debates did not constitute the entirety of intellectual battles waged over the Enlightenment’s legacy, as problems of liberalism and conservatism took on as large a role after the 1960s as any other facet of the dispute. As with Chapter 3’s focus on religious disputes in the eighteenth century, I focus attention only to gain more than a superficial reading of so broad a canvas of criticism; drawing out particular critiques to illuminate broad trends. And, as Nazi totalitarianism thankfully faded from the world scene after World War II, these questions of secular and religious culture and their relationship to America’s intellectual heritage, which rose to the fore during the cold war, are once among the major tenets of the Enlightenment which are assailed, particularly in public discourse.

We cannot forget the challenges the twentieth century posed to the Enlightenment. If we are to ever grasp the complexity of the critiques waged against the eighteenth-century philosophers’ achievements, or the inherently invested nature of scholarship despite historians’ claims to the contrary, we must immerse ourselves.

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132 Unfortunately, Chinese, Soviet, and other brands of totalitarianism would plague the modern world for decades after the Nazi brand had ended after World War II.
in the climate of the times in which these competing interpretations were forged. As historians, political
theorists, philosophers, religious figures, and public intellectuals alike shaped the Enlightenment over decades,
instrumentalizing it for various ends, be they political, religious, or moral, the Age of Reason just as quickly
became the prelude to totalitarianism, the engine of communism, the wellspring of Hitler’s ambitions; the
cradle of modernity’s ills. Yet whatever the merit of these various interpretations, we would do well to
remember the positive achievements of the Enlightenment along with any claims of its bankruptcy or
irrelevance to contemporary debates on American identity. Modern medicine’s cures; liberalism’s hope; ethnic
and religious tolerance; the luxuries created by science; and, perhaps most of all, the conviction that it is not
only within our capacity to seek happiness, but our natural right as human beings, are all products of that
forever contested epoch of history: The Enlightenment.
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