# Enlightenment and Religion: Rupture or Continuity?

## İluminismo e religião: ruptura ou continuidade?

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## ABSTRACT

This article, through a review of a portion of the relevant literature, problematizes the way in which the connection between the Enlightenment and religion has traditionally been explained, principally by a historiography excessively focused on the 18th century French experience. Alternatively, this article argues that "continuity," rather than "rupture," more adequately describes this relationship. However, continuity, as understood here, excludes neither tension nor transformation. If, on the one hand, the Enlightenment is much more akin to religion than has been previously recognized, on the other hand, it has to a great extent shaped modern understanding of religion. This revision of the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion suggests the need to rethink the very identity of the Enlightenment and the issue of secularization. The article uses as a guide the German debate surrounding the question, "What is the Enlightenment?" It concludes with an analysis of Kant's famous contribution to this debate.

## KEYWORDS

Enlightenment; Religion; Secularization

## RESUMO

A partir de uma revisão de parte da literatura recente sobre o tema, este artigo busca problematizar a maneira pela qual Iluminismo e religião foram tradicionalmente articulados, sobretudo por uma historiografia excessivamente focada na experiência do século XVIII francês. Em contraposição, este artigo argumenta que "continuidade" é um termo que expressa de forma mais adequada essa relação do que o termo "ruptura". No entanto, continuidade, como se defende, não exclui tensões nem tampouco transformações. Se, de um lado, o Iluminismo é muito mais próximo da religião do que se reconhece; de outro, ele modelou em larga medida o entendimento moderno da religião. A revisão da relação entre Iluminismo e religião implica também repensar a própria identidade do Iluminismo e a questão da secularização. O artigo toma o debate alemão em torno da questão "o que é Iluminismo?" como fio condutor do comentário, que se encerra com uma análise da famosa contribuição de Kant a esse debate.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Iluminismo; Religião; Secularização

Raised for the first time at the end of the 18th century, the question, "What is the Enlightenment?" has never lost its relevance. To a great extent, the sustained interest granted to this question is a result of the centrality that the Enlightenment has assumed since the French Revolution in a narrative of the emergence of modernity as a radical rupture with a fanatical, tyrannical past. According to this view, the Enlightenment is usually conceived as a secular, rational, egalitarian, and democratic program for human liberation. Today, when the revolutionary horizon has given way to a grimmer outlook, a growing skepticism has arisen about technological progress, religion has reasserted itself in public life, and populist authoritarian leaders use digital media to threaten democratic institutions, the Enlightenment and its legacy are receiving renewed attention. But which Enlightenment? While the philosophical, secular, and liberal understanding of the Enlightenment dominates the general public view and still finds its defenders in specialized scholarship, this interpretation has also been vigorously critiqued and challenged by the latter since at least the 1980s.

This article is not intended to heap either praise or reproach upon a supposed "Enlightenment project."[1] Nor is it an overview of the "state of the field" of research on the Enlightenment — which would probably be impossible anyway, considering the vast sprawl of empirical and thematic studies produced in recent years. It does, however, engage with a significant portion of recent literature to critically discuss some recent developments in the study of the Enlightenment, with the following question in mind: How can historical research contribute to an effective understanding of the Enlightenment as a useful past, without falling prey to what Michel Foucault called the "blackmail of the Enlightenment"? (1984, p. 43-44). Although there exists a variety of prominent debates in the current discussion of the Enlightenment, I will limit myself to addressing one that I believe deserves more thorough attention: the question of its relationship with religion. To be sure, "religion has returned to the Enlightenment," as Jonathan

*1 - This expression, usually attributed to Alasdair MacIntyre, expresses a widespread understanding of the Enlightenment as a coherent philosophical project that gave rise to modernity and has continued until the present. My approach here will be more historiographic, focusing on the assorted arguments, institutions, and cultural practices of the 17th and 18th centuries to which the name "Enlightenment" has been credibly applied.*

Sheehan has pointed out (2003, p. 1062). Insofar as, more than any other period, the 18th century is understood as the cradle of secular modernity, the reintroduction of religion to the Enlightenment should force us to rethink not only the concept of "Enlightenment," but also the conceptual pair "religion/secularism," thereby questioning comfortable narratives about the process of "secularization." According to a good deal of the recent literature, "continuity," rather than "rupture," is a better term to express the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion. However, I argue that continuity excludes neither tension nor transformation. In fact, the very concept of "religion" (as opposed to the "secular"), which remains current in both academic and every-day discourse, is in large measure a complex product of the Enlightenment. Starting from the presupposition that the opinions of its contemporary observers and participants are a useful guide to this discussion, I will take the late 18th-century German debate on the subject as my point of departure.

## Religious Enlightenment

In December 1783, the Prussian journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published a response, written by the Protestant pastor and theologian Johann Friedrich Zöllner, to an article it had published several months before by an official in the Prussian state bureaucracy, Johann Erich Biester, who questioned the need for marriages to be performed by clergy. Biester claimed that a good portion of the population saw the presence of priests at weddings as "ridiculous," and that converting them into a purely civil ceremony would serve the cause of "enlightenment" (*Aufklärung*). Zöllner saw this argument as a sign of confusion, dangerous for public morality, that was being promoted "in the name of enlightenment," leading him to the question, in a footnote, "What is enlightenment? This question, which is almost as important as what is truth, should indeed be answered before one begins to enlighten! And still I have never found it answered?" (ZÖLLNER *apud* SCHMIDT 2011, p. 44)[2].

*2 - For more on this debate, see Schmidt, 1996.*

One possible interpretation of this episode—which sparked a wide-ranging public discussion that spread to other newspapers, lasted over a decade, and included the participation of illustrious names like Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant—would be to take Zöllner's reply as a reaction against the Enlightenment, a manifestation of what later became known as "Counter Enlightenment" (*Gegenaufklärung*), in large measure thanks to the homonymous essay by Isaiah Berlin (1980 [1955])[3]. However, as James Schmidt (1996) has shown, what was at stake in this exchange and the debate it unleashed was not a conflict between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, but rather one within the Enlightenment concerning its meaning, goals, and limits. Far from being an unambiguous and homogeneous question, to which the only possible responses would be acceptance or rejection, "enlightenment," for its immediate observers and participants, was a topic of debate— just like it is today. And, in this debate, clerics and theologians like Zöllner played a key role.

It is important to point out that, in spite of his objections to the restriction of the role of the Church in wedding ceremonies, Zöllner was hardly a reactionary fanatic or an enemy of the Enlightenment. In fact, he was directly involved in activities that were seen as "enlightened" and in the institutions of sociability and publication that made up the new "public sphere" in the 18th century, as demonstrated by his role in sparking this debate about the meaning of the Enlightenment. Zöllner was a pedagogical reformer, author of a popular manual for divulging philosophical-scientific ideas. Moreover, he was also a Freemason, and, along with Biester, a member of the influential "Wednesday Society" (*Mittwochgesellschaft*), a secret society composed of self-proclaimed "friends of enlightenment," closely tied to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.[4] In his role as member of the clergy, Zöllner belonged to a group of theologians and pastors known as "Neologues." Making use of the tools, honed in German universities, of critical learning, the Neologues advocated a reading of Christianity that de-emphasized dogmas and rituals in favour of the moral and practical dimension of

*3 - For critical analyses of "Counter-Enlightenment," see Pocock, 1999 and Schmidt, 2015. For a productive use of this concept, in a study of Catholic opposition to the French philosophes, see McMahon, 2002.*

*4 - On the Wednesday Society, see Birtsch, 1996.*

their teachings.[5] For "enlightened" theologians like Zöllner, "faith" and "reason" were inseparable, since Christian revelation confirmed so-called "natural theology," that is, certain foundational and universal principles of religion and morality that were accessible to human reason. Thus, there was also no incompatibility between Christianity and "enlightenment," since both, when correctly understood, were opposed to both "superstition" and "fanaticism."

Contradicting Paul Hazard (1935) and Peter Gay (1966), who defined the Enlightenment as a quintessentially secular phenomenon—the advent of "modern paganism", as Gay put it, or, as Anthony Pagden still claims, a "profoundly anti-religious movement"—this type of "religious enlightenment," of which Zöllner was a representative, far from being an oxymoron, was widely disseminated in the 18th century, as the literature on the topic has amply demonstrated (HAZARD 2015 [1935]; GAY 1977 [1966]; PAGDEN 2013, loc. 95)[6].

Particularly in majority Protestant regions of Northern Europe, the Enlightenment often was closely tied to heterodox theological currents, like Arminianism, which, in contrast to official dogma sought to promote a tolerant and irenic view of faith. According to Richard Sher (1985), what we call "Scottish enlightenment" was largely built by the "moderate faction" of the Scottish Presbyterian *Kirk*. This influential group of clergy and *literati* included, among others, the professor of rhetoric and *belles-lettres* Hugh Blair, the historian William Robertson and the professor of natural and moral philosophy Adam Ferguson. In England, the early-18th century Whig program of social reform promoted by Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele, had close ties to the religious movement known as latitudinarianism, which developed in the Church of England, in the late-17th and early-18th centuries, as a middle way between Puritanism and radical sectarianism, on the one hand, and the hardline (High Church) wing of Anglicanism that insisted on strict conformity to the Church's established rituals and articles of faith and persecuted dissidents and

*5 - On Neology and its place in the complex intellectual context of Protestant theology, historical-philological scholarship, and Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy that lies at the foundation of the German Enlightenment, see Reill, 1975. See also Sorkin, 2008, p. 115-163.*

*6 - The bibliography on "religious enlightenment" is vast and shows no signs of its growth slowing. The works cited below give some idea of its size.*

non-conformists (DUARTE 2017).[7] In its opposition to the "enthusiasm" of the former and the "superstition" of the latter, latitudinarianism promoted an understanding of Christianity as a type of "civil religion" that emphasized the Christian moral traditions of charity and obedience over both the socially disruptive experience of direct contact with the Holy Spirit and the coerced and authoritarian adherence to "indifferent" rituals and doctrines (*adiaphora*).

This type of enlightenment experience, which frequently took on "clerical, orthodox, and ecclesiastical dimensions" (BULMAN 2016, p. 8), was not confined to Protestantism, or to a single denomination, country, or political arrangement, but spread as far as France, Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, and Catholic Germany and Austria[8]. Like its Protestant counterpart, Catholic enlightenment had its roots in Christian humanism's traditions of biblical exegesis and irenism. In its aspiration to patristic purity, it sought to eradicate the excesses of popular devotion and baroque religiosity, and, in contrast to the Counter-Reformation, reorient the Church toward the spiritual labour of instruction, charity, and administration of the sacraments. Operating beneath the aegis of absolute monarchs, these Catholic movements managed to advance, perhaps more than any other current of the Enlightenment, a broad reformist agenda that included the abolition of the Inquisition, a reduction in the number of regular clergy, the strengthening of "national" Churches at the expense of the papacy, and civil tolerance for Protestants and Jews. (VAN KLEY 2016, p. 291).

According to David Sorkin (2008), in spite of confessional and national differences, these various movements were united by several common characteristics. Among these, the foremost was a conscious search for the middle way of "reasonable" belief, a balance between the two divine "lights" of reason and Revelation. This search usually involved the adoption of the exegetical principle of accommodation, which permitted the relativization of parts of the Scriptures as historically bounded, while maintaining an essential core of universal truth.

*7 - There was also a "dissident Enlightenment" in England, that is, an enlightenment movement that arose among Protestant groups excluded from full participation in the Church of England. On this tradition, see Haakonseen, 1996.*

*8 - On the Catholic Enlightenment, see Rosenblatt, 2006; Lehner, 2011; 2016; Lehner; Printy, 2010.*

It also involved the acceptance of the concept of natural religion, with the goal of transcending confessional disputes through the establishment of a moral consensus that could serve as the foundation for a multi-religious civil constitution. At the same time, these movements articulated more or less broad concepts of religious tolerance, something that, during the 16th and 17th centuries, had been restricted to heterodox sects and advocates of *Raison d'État*.[9] A third common characteristic was the active involvement of its members in the emergent Enlightenment public sphere, where they debated a variety of issues, not exclusively of a religious nature, beyond the restricted circles of clerics and the erudite. Finally, these Enlightenments were characterized by a close relationship with the modern State, which saw in these moderate interpretations of religion a way to overcome religious disputes and strengthen national Churches, thereby promoting political stability and civil-administrative reform projects.

Thus, Colin Kidd, in a review published in the *London Review of Books*, offers a synthesis of the recent change in the field. He claims that the Enlightenment is no longer viewed exclusively as a "secularist fringe," but rather conceived as "a broader movement, encompassing a philosophically sophisticated body of liberal believers," adding that this conception

*9 - On the idea of religious tolerance during this period, see Grell; Porter, 2000; and Marshall, 2006.*

> has become more common over the past thirty years or so, with a growing attention among historians to "the moderate Enlightenment," "the religious Enlightenment," "the Enlightenment Bible," and the role of churches, seminaries, and denominational universities as incubators of enlightened values. The new historiography focuses on the role of moderate clerics in shaping a rational and defensible Christianity purged of both folkloric accretions and the unjustifiable metaphysical excesses which had fed the zealotries of the early modern wars of religion (KIDD 2013, p. 30–31).

According to this new historiography, "continuity" is a better term than "rupture" to characterize the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion. Or, as John Pocock

put it in the introduction to the first volume of his monumental study of Edward Gibbon, "Enlightenment was a product of religious debate and not merely a rebellion against it." (POCOCK 1999, p. 5). Of course, continuity does not preclude tension or change.

The definition of the Enlightenment as "irreligious" owes in great measure to the persistence of what Pocock called the "paradigm of an Enlightenment defined as the activity of *philosophes*" (POCOCK 1999, p. 6-7)—that is, the idea that the Enlightenment was essentially a French movement, or better yet, Parisian, distinguished by the rational militancy of the *gens de lettres* of Paris, engaged in *écrasez l'infâme*, in Voltaire's famous expression. There is no doubt that the Encyclopédiste movement, associated with Diderot, d'Alembert, Voltaire, Helvétius, d'Holbach, Boyer, and La Mettrie, among others, not only dominates our representation of the French Enlightenment, but also bears the greatest responsibility for the invention of the concept of the Enlightenment in the singular (VAN KLEY 2016). In addition to being anti-Catholic, anti-Christian, and even anti-religious, there is also no doubt that this enlightenment was, at least in regards to religion, the best known variant of what became known as "the radical Enlightenment," following the works of Margaret Jacob and Jonathan Israel[10]. However, it can be said that this enlightenment was the exception, not the norm; one determined by the exceptionality of the *philosophes* themselves as a separate group of scholars, with no intrinsic connection to Church, university, or State, and equally antagonistic toward France's two major religious parties, the Jansenists and Jesuits. Either way, even in France, the activity of the Parisian *philosophes* comes nowhere near to accounting for the vast variety of experiences of "enlightenment."

Indeed, the Parisian "High Enlightenment"—whose philosophical assault on Christianity did not translate into political or social radicalism, but rather comfortably integrated itself into the high society of the *Ancien Régime* (*le monde*)—pales (or at least blushes) in comparison with the "low Enlightenment"

*10 - I use the expression here with a more restricted meaning (referring only to the anti-Christian activism of the Encyclopaedists) than that which Jacob and Israel give it. For a critical evaluation of the notion as used by Israel in his recent synthesis of the Enlightenment, centred on the figure of Spinoza, see, for example, La Vopa, 2009; and Lilti, 2009.*

of pornographic slurs directed at the royal family, the court, and the clergy unearthed by Robert Darnton in the "literary underground" of the French *Ancien Régime*[11]. Moreover, there also existed something similar to a "religious Enlightenment" in France, independent of the more famous movement of the Parisian *esprits forts* and, according to Dale Van Kley, even more relevant than it in creating the political divisions that would later be consolidated by the Revolution[12].

In his analysis of the pamphlet war (the debate over the General Assembly of Galician Clergy in 1765) that was the last of a series of mixed religious, ecclesiastical, and political controversies in 18th-century France, Van Kley identified the development of two opposing ideological positions that prefigured the antithesis between "liberals" and "conservatives," which crystallized after the Revolution. Combining elements of Jansenism, Galicianism, secular conciliarism, and parliamentary constitutionalism, the first point of view advocated a democratic ecclesiastical structure that would be open to the participation of the laity and completely subordinate to the civil authority, conceived of as a constitutional monarchy. The opposing perspective combined elements of Molinism, ultramontanism, and episcopalism to argue in favour of an authoritarian, rigidly hierarchical church, led by the Pope, though allied with (but not subordinated to) an absolute monarchy.

Van Kley makes two particularly interesting comments concerning the relationship between these emergent political-ideological divisions and the Enlightenment. He argues that the disputes occurred among Catholics, not between Catholics and unbelievers[13]. As a result, the insistence on the conventional identification between the Enlightenment and "unbelief" implies a significant restriction on the Enlightenment's very participation in the debates that formed the basis of the main ideological divisions in 18th-century and revolutionary France. If, on the other hand, as he suggests, we understand the Enlightenment "more broadly as a set of appeals, whether to reason, nature, sensate experience,

*11 - See, for example, Darnton, 1987. However, Darnton later stated his belief that the Enlightenment itself was the prerogative of "a self-conscious group of intellectuals," namely the* philosophes *(DARNTON 2003, p. 4-6).*

*12 - Van Kley, 2001. See also Van Kley, 1996.*

*13 - "In the debate over the general assembly of 1765 there is moreover across-the-board agreement among all participants that Catholicism should function as the moral and spiritual foundation of the State" (VAN KLEY 2001, p. 298).*

which replaced older ones such as to revelation and traditional precedents" (2001, p. 299), the difficulty becomes amenable to a solution, since these idioms and ideas—which included theories of natural law and the social contract—permeated the controversy across the board.

However—and this is Van Kley's second observation—the use of these ideas and vocabularies that we associate with the Enlightenment was not an exclusive attribute of either side in the dispute. Although one notes a certain elective affinity between the Enlightenment lexicon and the "proto-liberalism" advocated by the Galician-Jansenist-parliamentarian alliance, they were equally utilized by the episcopal-ultramontane camp in its defence of theocratic, anti-constitutionalist socio-political ideas. The point is that "'enlightened' concepts and vocabulary were sufficiently elastic to accommodate themselves to either side of the controversy, not just one, with perhaps a slight tendency for the Enlightenment's empirical side to run in a conservative direction, its natural rights inheritance in a revolutionary one" (2001, p. 299)[14]. If this seems like a paradox, it is only because in the wake of the Revolution, modern liberals appropriated "*the* Enlightenment" as the origin of their movement, even as their conservative adversaries attacked it as inherently revolutionary and "anti-religious"[15]. For Van Kley, however, while "the mixed religious, ecclesiastical, and political controversies generated the fundamental political and ideological directions of eighteenth-century France," it is possible that "the Enlightenment, a broad cultural movement affecting the thought patterns of all literate groups, provided the conceptual apparatus and vocabulary in which either direction progressively expressed itself" (2001, p. 299).

14 - The rather odd corollary to this is that Burke, Lamennais, and De Maistre can just as easily be considered legitimate heirs of the Enlightenment as Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin.

15 - On this point, see also Chartier, 2009.

## The Enlightenment or Enlightenments?

As a noteworthy representative of the recent "religious turn" in scholarship, Van Kley's work raises the pressing issue of the Enlightenment's identity. If indeed, as the works here mentioned—and many others not mentioned—suggest,

religious phenomena are an integral part of the Enlightenment, are we even talking about the Enlightenment anymore? Or, as Jonathan Sheehan puts it, "can a category defined by its opposition to superstition, faith, and revelation survive when this opposition disappears?" (2003, p. 1067). Like a superhero, the Enlightenment seems to depend upon its arch-rival, which bestows meaning through the combative encounter. One cannot exist without the other. Thus, it is not fortuitous that the revision of the Enlightenment's combative relationship with religion has been accompanied by a revision of the unified nature of the Enlightenment.

As John Pocock, one of the main authors responsible for the tendency to split the Enlightenment into national or thematic variants, has recently argued, the "'Enlightenment' is a word or signifier, and not a single or unifiable phenomenon which it consistently signifies" (2008, p. 83)[16]. The target of Pocock's polemical comment is not the name—the ancient metaphor of light, consistently used self-reflexively in the 18th century—but rather its later reifying use as a historical concept[17]. He clarifies that his criticism of the "concept of 'the Enlightenment'":

> …is directed more against the article than against the noun. I have no quarrel with the concept of Enlightenment; I merely contend that it occurred in too many forms to be comprised within a single definition and history, and that we do better to think of a family of Enlightenments, displaying both family resemblances and family quarrels (some of them bitter and even bloody). To insist on bringing them all within a single formula – which excludes those it cannot be made to fit—is, I think, more the expression of one's loyalties than of one's historical insight. Since we are all liberal agnostics, we write whig histories of liberal agnosticism; (1999, p. 9).

It is important to emphasize that this does not constitute a nominalist invective against the use of historical categories. For Pocock, although there did not exist a "single or unifiable phenomenon describable as 'the Enlightenment'," the term—with added qualifiers like "French," "Scottish," "Arminian,"

*16 - Another influential work for the "disaggregation" of the Enlightenment was the volume organized by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich,* The Enlightenment in National Context *(1981).*

*17 - As James Schmidt reminds us, "the designation 'the Enlightenment' is nowhere to be found" in the eighteenth-century (SCHMIDT 2003, p. 430). It is significant that the metaphor of light was originally articulated in religious contexts. See Blumenberg, 1993, p. 30–62; and Matytsin; Edelstein, 2018.*

"Newtonian," etc.—can be used profitably to refer to a series of "connected, but not continuous" events that took place between the mid-18th and early-19th centuries, and that were similar and related, but, however, not identical (and eventually even antagonistic). "It would be possible to generalize about "Enlightenment," without reducing "it" to a unifiable process" (2008, p. 83), Pocock says. Instead, he proposes considering it, from a narrative point of view, as "a family of intellectual and political programs, taking shape in several west European cultures between 1650 and 1700, with the shared but diversified intention of seeing that there should be no recurrence of the Wars of Religion" (1997, p. 8). By seeking to reduce the power of churches and sects to disturb the civil peace and challenge secular authority, these programs launched an attack on certain traditions of political theology that asserted the presence of God exercising his authority in the world through his spiritual agents. In echoing this attack, the Enlightenments also consisted in a series of attempts to develop a "culture of the mind," based upon "commerce and manners," "letters and law, and the critical capacity of reading the texts of European civilisation, which should enable it to function independently of Christian theology and anchor the life of the mind in the life of civil society" (1999, p. 8). These were programs, Pocock adds, that "ecclesiastics of many confessions might and did join," and the rejection of the theology involved with them was, however, "intimately related with the theology it repudiates." "Since Enlightenment cannot be understood apart from theology," Pocock concludes, "it sometimes appears—even in its most viciously anti-Christian expressions—as a tissue of theological statements" (1999, p. 7-8).

Inspired by Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance," Pocock's polythetic understanding of the Enlightenment as a series of partially overlapping phenomena is the product of an attempt to broaden it to incorporate other geographies, actors (particularly Edward Gibbon and Edmund Burke), and practices, including religious ones, which seem to have been central to various events in 17th- and 18th-century Europe that

have been credibly called enlightened. This does not imply simply moving beyond France toward other regions of Western and Central Europe, but also beyond "philosophy" (usually restricted to a narrow propositional discourse) so as to create space within the Enlightenment for other erudite approaches and forms of knowledge—rhetoric, philology, antiquarianism, jurisprudence, biblical exegesis, ecclesiastical history—that, since the Renaissance and, above all, the Reformation, had been reshaping Europe's historical self-consciousness.

Over the last 20 years, a reaction arose to Pocock's challenge to the unitary understanding of the Enlightenment. In response to the threat of fragmentation, there have been many attempts to restore the Enlightenment's uniform nature. At times, these have been a defence of the old liberal interpretation, and, at other ones, more original arguments[18]. It would be impossible to examine all these works here. I would like, however, to briefly touch upon one that deserves attention not only for its remarkable clarity and sophistication, but also for its attempt to re-establish not only the unitary nature of the Enlightenment, but also the centrality of France and *philosophie*.

*18 - Notable examples include Robertson, 2005; Edelstein, 2010; Israel, 2001; 2006; 2011; and Pagden, 2013.*

In *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*, Dan Edelstein conceives of the Enlightenment as "a matrix in which ideas, actions, and events acquired new meaning." In order to take part in the Enlightenment, "it was not enough simply to pen a materialist treatise or frequent a salon: it took the awareness, by oneself or others, that a particular action belonged to a set of practices considered 'enlightened'" (2010, p. 13). According to Edelstein, this specific self-consciousness that characterized the Enlightenment appeared as a historical narrative that was first articulated in the discursive context of the so-called "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns" in the late 17th century between members of the French literary and scientific academies. The importance of this local debate lies in it having forced its participants to reflect on "how the present compared with the distant past," thereby serving as "the catalyst that precipitated the Enlightenment narrative" (2010, p. 45).

Already fully articulated by about 1720 in works like Jean-Baptiste Dubos's *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719), "the narrative of the Enlightenment" took the following form: "the present age *(siècle)* was 'enlightened' *(éclairé)* because the 'philosophical spirit' of the Scientific Revolution had spread to the educated classes, institutions of learning, and even parts of the government," generating "changes in society" (2010, p. 2). Thus, according to Edelstein, this narrative provided the basic model for all the subsequent accounts of the Enlightenment produced first in France and later diffused in the rest of Europe by the writings of the *philosophes*.

With the explicit goal of opposing the tendency to disaggregate the Enlightenment into a variety of national and thematic variants, Edelstein argues that the narrative forged in France between 1680 and 1720 was not simply *an* Enlightenment narrative, but rather "the narrative of 'the Enlightenment,'" which, although it was appropriated and subsequently put to a variety of uses, retained its essential characteristics[19]. In this way, France, and, more specifically, a single secular discursive context (the Quarrel) became the original sources from which by "a process of diffusion," "a singular concept of the Enlightenment was made available to different cultures, which in turn adapted it" (2010, p. 3). Although it is true that a "self-reflexive understanding of the historical importance and specificity of eighteenth-century Europe" (2010, p. 2) appeared at this moment, Edelstein's claim that it took a single form and had a single origin, i.e., that there was only one Enlightenment narrative and consequently one Enlightenment that began in France and spread from there, seems unjustified. It is just as likely that there was a series of different narratives and Enlightenments, some of which agreed and some of which disagreed with one another, that appeared in a variety of contexts[20]. Indeed, several recent works have demonstrated the existence of Enlightenment ideas and narratives in England, the Netherlands, and the Germanic states that not only preceded the spread of the *récit français*

19 - Edelstein repeatedly insists on the "mythological" nature of this narrative in order to emphasize that is it both constructed and incomplete, but also extremely malleable in its capacity to "support a range of variants without losing their core identity" (2010, p. 17, 116, 117).

20 - This point has been made by James Schmidt, Cf. Schmidt, 2011.

studied by Edelstein but also differed from it, as they focused more on religious and political issues than on the social effects of the "Scientific Revolution."[21]

Edelstein's narrative genealogy cannot restore a single unitary account of *The* Enlightenment for the simple reason that there were other narratives. However, there is no reason to fear the dissolution of the Enlightenment or a loss of the category's consistency and, consequently, its analytic usefulness. Nor do I believe that we must choose between a restrictive and exclusionary definition of the Enlightenment on the one hand and the infinite fragmentation of idiosyncratic Enlightenments. As William Bulman has put it, "like it or not, the Enlightenment is here to stay," and will continue to play an important role in historical and other disciplinary research, as well as in broader debates about issues such as the future of democracy, the social effects of technology or the status of religion in contemporary life. However, Bulman continues, "While there is no getting rid of the Enlightenment, the current historical and historiographical moment does provide an opportunity to establish a fundamentally different understanding of it" (2016, p. 21). Thus, Dale Van Kley, for example, using an analogy based on optics, sees the Enlightenment as a spectrum of light rather than a single "irrefrangible" light. One consequence of this refraction of the singular Enlightenment into a spectrum of multiple lights—"some of which display a far more positive relation to aspects of the Christian religion than did Diderot's French encyclopaedic one"—is precisely the fracturing of "the reified opposition between 'Enlightenment' and "religion'" (2016, p. 280).

Whether or not we accept Van Kley's spectral model for the Enlightenment, I believe that the point of Pocock's critique of the concept is not whether we refer to it in the singular or the plural, but, above all, a reminder that "the keyword 'Enlightenment' is ours to use and should not master us" (2008, p. 83). We do not need to abandon the category, but rather use it more critically and self-consciously, aware that it is an umbrella term

*21 - See, for example, Hunter, 2006; Jacob, 1981; Israel, 2001; Pocock, 1985.*

that covers a vast diversity of particular, distinct, and even antagonistic phenomena. By abandoning the essentialist project of finding "the" definition of the Enlightenment, Pocock *uses* the category as an analytic tool to examine a series of related but varied phenomena that, consciously or unconsciously, contributed to the general tendency between the mid-17th and early-19th centuries "of diminishing spiritual authority, or reconciling it with that of civil society, by the conversion of theology into history" (POCOCK 1999, p. 306 *apud* SHEEHAN 2003, p. 1068).

## Secularization

However, behind the fragmentation of the Enlightenment into enlightenments that are more open to religion, there lies, implied in Pocock's account (and somehow maintaining the various fragments linked in an uncontradictory way), a linear, albeit ironic, narrative of "secularization." This serves to remind us that the reintroduction of religion into the Enlightenment demands that we also rethink this slippery category in a way that does not turn it simply into a "shorthand for the inevitable (intentional or not, serious or ironic) slide of the pre-modern religious past into the modern secular future" (SHEEHAN 2003, p. 1076). For Pocock, secularization cannot be understood as only as the linear growth of "paganism," "unbelief," or "irreligiosity," but rather as a complex political-theological process of the substitution of spiritual authority with civil authority as European civilization's dominant institution, a process that involved not only radical *philosophes*, but also clerics and theologians. Thus, in the wake of reflections by Hans Blumenberg, Marcel Gauchet, and Charles Taylor, the recent historiography on the Enlightenment has "emphasized the extent to which the origins of secularization should be located within religion itself, rather than in absolute opposition to it" (COLEMAN, 2010, p. 369).

In the introduction to the collection *God in the Enlightenment*, William Bulman defines "secularization" neither as a "declining

religious commitment, nor as a "profound institutional differentiation between ecclesiastical and political spheres," but rather as

> …the increasing emergence of a state of acute awareness among elites that their own religious commitments (or lack thereof) constituted a choice among many available forms of belief (and unbelief), all of which could be held by sane (if erring and partly unreasonable) people, because they were the products of complex historical forces." (BULMAN 2016, p. 18).

Bulman, inspired by Charles Taylor[22], calls this new state of affairs that distinguished the Enlightenment from the Renaissance and Reformation (even as it was dependent on these previous ages) "elite secularity."

According to Bulman, not only did the Reformation give rise to unprecedented religious diversity and conflict, it also mobilized the scholarly practices of the late Renaissance in its confessional disputes to evoke a sophisticated "discourse of religious error, corruption, and imposture" (2016, p. 16). Despite having been forged in the crucible of intra-Christian sectarian disputes, this discourse gradually turned into a universal analytic language that encompassed everything from Antiquity to the New World. This language served as the basis for comparative histories of religion, motivated by the pious goal of identifying a common realm of theological and practical consensus among the various "world religions." At the same time, the incessant scrutiny of the biblical text and dissemination of the discourse of religious corruption generated unbelief and impiety, leading some to reject divine revelation or adopt the notion that the Christian Church was nothing more than a millenarian fraud. These developments shaped "secularity," a new, historicized way of understanding Christian identity itself. This, in turn, influenced the Enlightenment, understood by Bulman as the diverse set of answers offered to the problem of stability, peace, and civil prosperity in the context of religious pluralism.

*22 - For Taylor, "secularity" refers to the specific "conditions of belief" of our "Secular Age," which began in the 18th century and allows belief in God to become "one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (TAYLOR 2007, p. 3).*

In the mid-17th century, after a long period of devastating religious civil wars, "many European elites became convinced that religious and public life finally needed to be ordered in a manner that prevented religious zeal from destroying civil peace". Despite favouring "the useful, the natural, the rational, the civil, the moral, the peaceful, the cosmopolitan, and the human" to the detriment of "the theological, the demonological, the providential, and the revealed" in their discussions, the various proposed answers to the Enlightenment's fundamental concern with order, security, and prosperity could be "intolerant, absolutist, and imperialist just as easily as they could be liberal, egalitarian, or individualist," and in no way did they exclude religious believers and institutions (2016, p. 19)[23]. There is an ironic element in Bulman's narrative of the Enlightenment and secularization, just as in Pocock's, since "despite their novelty, the platforms for stability that did emerge in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries […] were built with the very learned resources that had sustained the confessional conflicts […] of the past" (2016, p. 17).

A similar attention to the role of scholarly practices in the production of secularization characterizes *The Enlightenment Bible*, by Jonathan Sheehan, which seeks to offer "a different vision of secularization, one that focuses less on the disappearance of religion than on its transformation and reconstruction" (Sheehan, 2005, p. xi). Sheehan focuses on the Bible, examining the transformation to which it was subjected in the 18th century. Inspired by Friedrich Kittler's study of media, the Enlightenment is thus redefined as "the new constellation of practices and institutions […] that the eighteenth century used to address the host of religious, historical, and philosophical questions inherited from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution" (2005, p. xi-xii). Among these practices and institutions, Sheehan focuses on translation. He shows how 17th- and 18th-century English and German scholars, mostly magisterial Protestants, wielding the historical-philological weapons of scholarship, produced a series of new translations into the vernacular, commentaries, and scholarly editions of

23 - Indeed, Bulman goes on to add, "more conservative, authoritarian and pious forms of Enlightenment were present from the very beginning."

the Bible in an attempt to fight off a series of assaults on the authority of the Bible coming from Catholics, radical Protestants and deists. Over time, collectively, and unintentionally, these commentaries and scholarly critiques of the Bible led to the emancipation of the text from its theological framework. When no longer seen as the Word of God, the Bible can take on new meanings and functions that are not strictly soteriological and become a historical source, a pedagogical tool for moral instruction, and a literary representation. The Enlightenment thus gave rise to a new "cultural" understanding of the Bible as a text capable of existing independently of theology, thereby becoming "a cornerstone of the literary, poetic, moral, and pedagogical values of Western civilization" (2005, p. 220).

Sheehan insists that his history of the reconfiguration of the Bible as cultural artefact and repository of the historical, moral, and literary "patrimony" of "the West," is not a conventional narrative of secularization, because it involved "an effort not to discard, but to remake religion" (2005, p. 260). In this account, the Enlightenment did not constitute a philosophical assault on religion that led to its decline and abandonment, nor was it directed against the biblical tradition. Rather, the Enlightenment operated within religion and the biblical tradition, taking the shape of a serious and continuous hermeneutical engagement with Scripture that, mediated by the 18th century's assortment of new discursive practices and institutions, eventually transformed its meaning in the modern world. Secularization here means less an erosion of biblical authority than its transformation into new forms, "not a stripping process, but a process of reconstruction, of productive transformation" (2005, p. 260). Antoine Lilti's comment on Pocock's view of secularization applies perfectly to Sheehan's: "The great spring of European secularization is not to be found outside Christian thought, but in its heart. Modernity is not the explosive gesture of radical rupture, but a patient project that tradition carries out against itself" (LILTI 2009, p. 205-6).

Bulman and Sheehan raise an important point, one rarely discussed in the various versions of the secularization thesis[24]. That is, how much was religion itself modified by the Enlightenment? If it did not destroy religion—which is obvious to any observer today—it certainly transformed religion, or, better yet, invented it, because if not for the Enlightenment, it would not even be possible to speak of "religion" in the way we usually do. Perhaps instead of understanding secularization as a linear process by which the religious world of the past was turned into a new secular world, it would be more productive, in keeping with Talal Asad's recent suggestion, to envision the simultaneous birth of "secularism" and "religion," or, as Brent Nongbri puts it, to consider "how we have come to talk about 'secular' versus 'religious' at all" (ASAD 2003; NONGBRI 2013, p. 4-5).

Indeed, since the 18th century, it has become common, both in everyday and specialized language, to refer to "religion" as an universal human phenomenon that exists in one form or another in every culture, or as a type of internal disposition, which involves a concern with salvation and practices in pursuit of that goal. That is, religion is a sphere of life separate from "non-religious" or "secular" spheres (e.g., politics, economics, or science). However, as anthropologists and historians of religion have pointed out, the concept of "religion" thus defined is fundamentally modern, with no equivalent in ancient languages or non-Western cultures prior to contact with European Christians[25]. Religion is not natural or universal, but rather the result of a recent historical process that involved a complex mixture of post-Reformation Christian disputes regarding truth, European colonial exploration, and the formation of modern States (NONGBRI 2013, p. 154).[26] Therefore, it is possible to say that religion was a product of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment invented religion as an autonomous sphere of life, i.e., it led to the unprecedented approach of "conceptualiz[ing] the world as divided between 'religious' and 'secular'" (NONGBRI 2013, p. 5). And in this lies its modernity [27].

*24 - A more than useful guide to this long and intricate intellectual tradition can be found in Monod, 2002.*

*25 - There is a vast literature on the difficult issue of the concept of religion. However, given the impossibility of dealing with it in depth in this article, I have relied on the excellent recent* mise au point *by Brent Nongbri (2013).*

*26 - In addition to the works referenced here, see also Harrison, 1990; Assmann; Savage, 2014; and Stroumsa, 2010.*

*27 - It should be stressed that I am using the shorthand term "Enlightenment" here, following Pocock's cue, to refer to a complex array of intellectual and cultural phenomena taking place in post-Reformation European culture, such as the ones mentioned above. Therefore, in spite of the rather flashy formulation, my claim here is simply that the modern concept of religion was a by-product of a larger cultural transformation that was consolidated in the 18th century.*

# What is Enlightenment?

As a conclusion, I would like to briefly reflect on the most famous of the responses to Zöllner's question at the end of the 18th century: Kant's essay *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* Removed from its original discursive context, this essay, read and reread *ad nauseam*, served as the basis for a series of 20th-century historical-philosophical interpretations of the Enlightenment, from Cassirer to Foucault, by way of Adorno and Horkheimer, Koselleck and Habermas. But in all these interpretations to which this text has been submitted, one aspect that has received less attention is the prominent role of "religion" in Kant's response. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the original framework of the debate as established by Zöllner, places religion at the centre of the problem, where it would remain until the debate wound down a decade later without a definitive solution. According to James Schmidt, "By the close of the eighteenth century, answering the question 'What is Enlightenment' meant exploring the relationship between public discussion, religious faith and political authority" (SCHMIDT 1996, p. 2), and Kant's essay was no exception. It was a variant, albeit a highly original one, of the typical Enlightenment effort to find an equilibrium between the not always compatible demands of liberty and stability, of criticism and order.

Kant sought to accomplish this through his famous, and at the time novel, distinction between the "private" and "public use" of reason. "I understand […] to be the public use of his reason the use which anyone makes of it as a scholar [*Gelehrter*] before the entire public of the reading world. The private use I designate as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain civil post or office which is entrusted to him" (1996, p. 60)[28]. Kant uses the term "private" in keeping with the conventions of Roman civil law to indicate a sphere of contractual relations, while redefining "public" so as to explicitly set it apart from legal conventions. Instead of referring to state authority, "public," in keeping with a new understanding in style at the time, refers

*28 - I have made small changes to the English translation where I believed it necessary, based on comparisons with the original German and the Portuguese translation.*

to the set of private individuals who had the ability, time, and desire to read and critique the publications that sustained the century's growing literary market. The envisioned public was made up of scholars, members of a potential "cosmopolitan society" (*Weltbürgergesellschaft*), or, more simply, "the world." While the private use of reason could, and indeed should, be limited on behalf of enlightenment, the public use, on the other hand, must not be restricted, lest it hinder enlightenment. Thus soldiers, citizens, and clerics, for example, as scholars would have every right to criticize the very orders and formulas that they obeyed privately.

Of Kant's three examples, the last, which involves the responsibilities of the clergy, receives the most attention. While serving a Church, a priest is obligated to teach his catechumens or preach to his congregation in accordance with its creed, even if he has reservations about it, "for he has been accepted on this condition." However, as a scholar he has the freedom, even the "calling," to share his criticisms and proposals for improving ecclesiastical and religious matters. Kant insists that there is no conflict between the restrictions on the private use of reason and the priest's conscience.

> for what he teaches as a consequence of his office as an agent of his church, he presents as something about which he does not have free reign to teach according to his own discretion, but rather is engaged to expound according to another's precept and in another's name. He will say: our church teaches this or that; these are the arguments that it employs. He then draws out all the practical uses for his congregation from rules to which he himself may not subscribe with complete conviction, but to whose exposition he can nevertheless pledge himself, since it is not entirely impossible that truth may lie concealed within them (1996, p. 60).

There is, however, a limit to a priest's ability to maintain separate his Church's teaching and personal convictions: nothing in official doctrine should be contrary to his "inner

religion." Should this become the case, his only option would be the resign his position.

The issue of the legitimacy of the confessions of faith, the creed to which priests were obligated to swear obedience and faithfulness, had become the topic of heated discussion during this period between defenders and critics of the practice, which lay at the root of the consolidation of the territorial Churches between the mid-16th and mid-17th centuries.[29] Kant takes a conciliatory position on this debate, based on a fundamental distinction between "church" and "religion." While church is understood as Locke defined it in his *Letter on Toleration* (1689) as a voluntary association, a human institution that it is possible to join or to leave by one's own will, religion is something else entirely. Although it is universal, it is founded on individual conscience. Thus, it is perfectly legitimate for a church, just like any other type of association, to demand that its members adhere to specific doctrines. It is also perfectly possible for priests to pledge themselves to those doctrines and derive important practical consequences from them for their congregation, even if they are not entirely convinced of their truth, for although it is possible that they contain truth, in the end, there is no way to be absolutely sure of this. After all, for Kant, there can only be theoretical certainty about that which is grounded in experience. Since religion goes beyond experience it remains essentially a domain of practical faith.

Regardless, the freedom to speculate in this domain is sacred. No assembly of clerics or ecclesiastical synod has the right to extend the limitations of the discussion that hold for the restricted private sphere of contractual arrangements to the public sphere, thereby establishing an "unalterable symbol" or "permanent religious constitution" that cannot be questioned. This would constitute an insurmountable obstacle to the advance of enlightenment. It would, Kant says, be "a crime against human nature, whose original destiny consists in this progress". It would not even be legitimate for a monarch, no matter how great his or her

29 - See Schmidt, 1992. p. 96-97.

authority, to impede the free discussion of religious issues. For, "if only he [a monarch] sees to it that all true or alleged improvements are consistent with civil order, he can allow his subjects to do what they find necessary for the salvation of their souls" (1996, p. 61-62).

The reference to the soul's salvation (*Seelenheil*) suggests a connection between enlightenment and that most basic concern of Christianity. Obviously, it is not a direct connection. The end goal of enlightenment is not redemption, but the independent use ("without the guidance of another") of one's own reason. However, it is difficult to ignore, in the way Kant conceives of enlightenment, echoes of the Protestant emphasis on the individual responsibility for salvation. The first reformer's stress on the primacy of individual conscience in the interpretation of divine mystery—that is, the cry that each believer must strive alone, without intermediaries, for saving truth—still resounds in Kant's definition of enlightenment. Enlightenment is "mankind's exit (*Ausgang*) from its self-incurred immaturity" (1996, p. 58). Mankind is guilty not of error, or of entertaining false notions, but rather of the moral lack of "resolution" and of the "courage" to abandon its comfortable condition of intellectual tutelage and commit itself to the search for truth. It is as though between the Reformation and the Enlightenment the emphasis shifted from truth to the diligent search for it. Once this search becomes independent of specific dogmatic content, whether true or not, it is turned into an end in itself, autonomy as an ("enlightened") way of being. However, this way of being, or *ethos*, is not restricted to "religion." Although Kant places "the main point of enlightenment [...] primarily on religious matters (*Religionssachen*)," he clarifies that the concept extends to non-religious or secular domains, such as "the arts," "science," and even "legislation." If, as Sheehan has shown, scholarly hermeneutical engagement with the Bible eventually led to its liberation from theology and its reinvention in the 18th century as a cultural artefact, basis of the 19th-century *Bildungskultur*, a similar process seems to have occurred with the original motivation for that

engagement, i.e., the individual quest for salvation, which, untethered from its other-worldly goal, is reinvented as a quest for self-determination.

This article has argued that, although the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion can, according to the recent literature, be better characterized as one of continuity rather than rupture, this continuity also involved substantial transformations, including in the very way in which religion was conceived. This is evident in the distinctly "modern" way that Kant speaks about "religion" in his essay, treating it as something essentially distinct from any specific church or creed, as more of an internal sense or private consciousness. The very definition of enlightenment, with its insistence on the idea of individual autonomy or self-determination, is not only not contrary to religious matters—indeed, religion is its central point—but also intimately associated with it through their common origin in that central concern of the Christian experience: salvation. Regardless, enlightenment indicates a way of life whose goal is not to transcend the earthly world, but rather to remake and perfect it through constant questioning and self-questioning.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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