

THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEW THOUGHT

By the middle of the seventeenth century it was evident that the vigor of the Catholic Reformation was spent. Protestants and Catholics had settled for an uneasy truce. The most vital impulse in European thought would no longer originate from within the Christian churches. Europe was ready to follow a different course. A host of European minds, some of them quite alienated from the Church, were busy sketching a new world view that would come to dominate Western civilization and orient Western man in entirely new directions. The thinkers who participated in this movement, known as the Enlightenment, covered the whole field of knowledge that was heretofore considered the exclusive province of the Church and offered a different view of the cosmos, the nature of man, of society, of history, of morals, and of religion. The World picture they created meant a loosening of state and society from ecclesiastical controls and gave rise to a largely secular culture. Their principles were no longer drawn from the Bible or Church authority but were arrived at independently by reason and social experience.

The Catholic Church's reaction to the rise of modernity was largely defensive and negative. It was often unable to meet the free thinkers on their own grounds and frequently resorted simply to condemnation of their ideas and forceful repression. The result was a divorce of secular culture from the Church and the state of siege mentality that characterized modern Catholicism down to our day.

The Enlightenment had its origins in the new cosmology, which originated with Copernicus. Rejecting the idea of the earth as the center of the universe—a position held by all medieval thinkers, who took it from the Greeks, Ptolemy, and Aristotle—Copernicus favored a sun-centered universe, a theory that postulated the fantastic notion that our seemingly static earth was actually spinning around the sun at an incredible rate. A succession of brilliant minds—Kepler, Galileo, and Newton—the most noteworthy—gradually revolutionized our understanding of the physical universe along Copernican lines.

This new cosmology was terribly threatening to the Church. Its ideological and theological substructure, Scholasticism, was based on Aristotle's philosophy which, thanks to Aquinas, was made to dovetail

nicely with the sacred Scriptures. The new cosmology seemed to entail a thoroughgoing rejection of the entire philosophy of Aristotle and hence would shatter the doctrinal framework of the Church. Galileo, it is true, offered the Church a method of reconciling Scripture with the new science he was in the process of founding. In his letter to Castelli he said:

The authority of the Sacred Scriptures has as its sole aim to convince men of those truths which are necessary for their salvation. But that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and understanding should not wish us to use them and should desire to impart to us by another means knowledge which we have it in our power to acquire by their use-this is a thing which I do not think I am bound to believe,"

But his words went unheeded, and the Church condemned his view that the earth moved around the sun. In the thirteenth century, Aquinas had taken a creative approach to Aristotelianism when it was regarded as a threat to the foundations of the Church's doctrine. But the Church of the Counter Reformation refused to recognize in Galileo another Aquinas, suffered a failure of nerve, and henceforth resorted increasingly to condemnations as a means of dealing with intellectual challenges.

Another movement of the Enlightenment that provoked the Church's urge to condemn was critical rationalism. Its founder, Rene Descartes (d. 1650), applied to philosophy the mathematical method already proven so effective in science. He based his whole enterprise on a method of radical doubt that supposedly enabled him to reach a number of absolutely certain truths. It was essentially the same procedure used by seventeenth-century physicists who accepted nothing as true until it was established beyond all possible doubt. Descartes broke radically with all past philosophy and questioned all authorities. He attacked the Aristotelians for their blind reliance on Aristotle. Although he himself did not extend his methodic doubt to truths of the Catholic faith, his principle of doubting everything was soon extended to every aspect of the Christian tradition and even to the very idea of tradition itself. Traditions were regarded as the epitome of inherited prejudices, and critical historical science was to take the place of tradition. As the main stronghold of tradition, the Christian Church was a primary target for the

rationalists, the leader of whom was Pierre Bayle (d. 1706}, who focused his acute critical faculty on matters touching religion and its historical foundations.

One of the founders of biblical criticism, French Oratorian priest Richard Simon, tried to show the Church that criticism did not have to be destructive. In his *Critical History of the Old Testament* (1678), he insisted that the Bible must be studied critically, like any other historical document; he questioned many of the traditional assumptions regarding the authorship and historical character of the Bible, but he wrote as a champion of the Catholic faith hoping to demonstrate the validity of the Catholic understanding of tradition. His Work alarmed Church authorities, however; Bossuet took one look at its Table of Contents and called for the police to suppress it. Another great opportunity was missed to adapt the Church's doctrine to the new ideas. As with Galileo, the problem lay with the rigid understanding of tradition as formulated by Trent. Trent had laid down that Scripture must be interpreted according to tradition, which it defined as the way Scripture was understood by the Fathers of the Church. In practice, this meant that Catholic thought would not be allowed to move beyond the patristic parameters and hence would have increasing difficulty in dealing with the advance of secular thought.

Another major source of conflict between the Enlightenment and the Church was the issue of religious freedom. The medieval idea of the need for unity of religion as the basis of the social order was still strong in both the Catholic and Protestant world. Every country had its established Church. Bodin's idea that religious unity was not necessarily the supreme social good had not yet won acceptance. The individual was not free to worship God as he saw fit. Even in countries where a measure of toleration was granted, there was a strong tendency to revoke such privileges, as in England in 1660 and France in 1685.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment found this state of affairs atrocious and devoted their best energies to the fight for religious freedom. One of their main arguments was based on the very personal nature of a religious commitment since, as they said, religious truths, unlike scientific truths, are not susceptible to objective proof. Therefore coercion is intrinsically evil, since it destroys personal choice, which is the essence of a religious commitment.

As Diderot put it:

The mind can only acquiesce in what it accepts as true. The heart can only love what seems good to it. Violence will turn a man into a hypocrite if he is weak and into a martyr if he is strong. • • • Teaching, persuasion and prayer, these are the only legitimate means of spreading the faith.

Closely connected with their devotion to religious freedom was their belief in personal autonomy. This meant that a person should accept as true only what seemed true to him on the basis of intrinsic rational evidence-never on the basis of authority alone, whether of Scripture, the Church, or some other external agency.

The Churches, needless to say, showed little sympathy with these ideas of religious freedom and autonomy. With notable exceptions the churchmen could not shake off habits of mind ingrained in Church discipline and policy for a thousand years. Because of its high degree of centralization and efficiency, the Church of Rome proved to be more successful than the other Churches in detecting and suppressing heresy, and therefore it was looked on more than the others as a bastion of bigotry and intolerance.

The Christian doctrine of original sin was also the subject of bitter disagreement between the Churches and the philosophers. Original sin was the Christian answer to the age-old problem of human evil and wickedness-why violence, wars, murders, crimes of every sort? Christians traced moral evil back to the primeval apostasy in the garden of Eden-a theory that the enlightened philosophers found most repugnant to common sense and to reason. In their view, man was born naturally good and endowed with powers of reason which-if properly used-would assure him of an adequate measure of natural happiness.

Closely connected with this issue was the question of progress: Are men getting better and happier all the time, and are they heading for a golden age? The "enlightened" said "Yes"; the Christians, "No." The attitude of the enlightened was definitely a change; all previous thinkers located the Golden Age in some idyllic period of the past when man was supposed to have been completely happy and at his best.

One reason for the optimism that was such a characteristic trait of the enlightened was the real material progress registered by the development of scientific technology; roads were obviously better in the eighteenth century than they were in the seventeenth; coaches were more

comfortable; there was greater accumulation of wealth. There was also thanks to Newton-a new confidence in the power of human reason, and the feeling that the evils of superstition, fanaticism, dogmatism, and unreason would be conquered; a growing belief shared by few Christians that by improving education and applying rational principles to social life men would quickly gain the happiness so far denied them by archaic institutions and the conspiracy of vested interests.

The Marquis de Condorcet was one of the most fervent apostles of the new religion of humanity and progress. In his sketch of universal history he painted a vision of worldly redemption, of an earthly paradise equivalent to the heaven of the Christians. He called it the tenth epoch, a time when superstition would be overcome, crime would cease, and war would be banished from society, for all of these evils were due to ignorance and would be cured by the progress of science. With England, France, and the United States in the vanguard, all humanity would ascend to higher and higher planes of physical, intellectual, and moral achievement.

The preachers of the new secular faith raised basic issues and questioned many of the most sacred tenets of the Christian Church regarding the nature of man, the source of evil, the rights of the individual conscience, and the purpose of life. It remained for the Deists to strike at the very heart of the Christian religion by denying the very idea of revelation. Dismissing revelation as superfluous, they advocated a reasonable, "natural" religion-one that was supposed to be simple and sufficient for human needs. The very existence of an orderly universe was for them sufficient demonstration of the existence of a God who planned, built, and set in motion the world machine. Their religion was basically a rational theism, which they combined with a radical criticism of the Bible. The obviously spurious character of its prophecies and miracles proved to their satisfaction that it was unworthy of being considered the vehicle of a special revelation.

Deism began in England with Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who thought natural religion would bring an end to religious strife. A number of English pamphleteers took up the cause.' men like John Toland, author of Christianity Not Mysterious, and Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal, whose Christianity as Old as the Creation was regarded as the Bible of Deism. The books stirred up considerable furor. Deist tendencies found

their way into some of the Churches in the form of Unitarianism and definitely colored the language of the pulpit. Preachers laid great stress on the reasonableness of Christianity and searched diligently for arguments to prove the credibility of prophecies and miracles. The debate was closed by Anglican bishop Joseph Butler, whose *Analogy of Religion* laid bare the simplistic reasoning of the Deists and concluded rather paradoxically that Christianity was just more probable than Deism.

The struggle between the new and the old faith lasted longer and was more bitter in France. The Deist Voltaire (d. 1778), in the name of the Enlightenment, declared war on the Church, on its dogmas, its ethics, its traditions, and its clergy. Nothing escaped his savage attacks: the Trinity, the chastity of the Virgin Mary, the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Mass. The morality of the "Chosen People" he found abhorrent, and the history of the Church nothing but a sanguinary compilation of idiotic wrangling leading to war and mass murder. Voltaire was never dull, and he was often witty. His *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764) was his anti-Christian summa; it was burned in Geneva, the Netherlands, France, and the Holy See. Its pervasive irony is caught in the following passage:

While the style of Kings and Chronicles is divine, still, the actions reported in these histories are perhaps not so divine. David assassinates Uriah; Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth are assassinated; Absalom assassinates Amnon; Joab assassinates Absalom; Solomon assassinates Adonijah, his brother; Baasha assassinates Hadab; Zinni assassinates Elah; Omri assassinates Zimri; Ahab assassinates Naboth; Jehu assassinates Ahab and Joram.... I pass over many other assassinations. It must be admitted that if the Holy Spirit wrote this history, he didn't choose a very edifying subject.

The debate between Voltaireans and Christians in France, between Catholics and unbelievers, covered much ground and raised many issues. It is noteworthy that the French Catholics never produced apologists equal in brilliance to Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and their company. No Bishop Butler appeared to rout their enemies. Nevertheless, they found some worthy spokesmen. The Jesuit monthly *Journal de Trevoux*, for instance, was among the most erudite and objective periodicals of the day. And it was a great calamity for the Church when the Jesuits were suppressed in 1763, since they offered the

best hope of leading the Church to a more positive relationship with the Enlightenment.

The inroads made by skeptical thought into the Church in France were suddenly revealed in the Prades affair, which erupted in France in 1752. The Abbe de Prades presented a thesis for a degree in theology at the Sorbonne that was supposed to be a summary of arguments in defense of the Christian revelation. Further examination, however, showed that it bore remarkable resemblance to the ideas of Diderot, editor of the suspect Encyclopedia; in the guise of an apology it amounted to nothing less than a full-scale attack on fundamental dogmas of the Church. When the news broke that the Sorbonne itself was contaminated by rationalism, a public uproar exploded. The crisis helped to divide France into two camps—more clearly defined than before as it became more and more evident that the Enlightenment was irreconcilably opposed to Christianity.

In the next few decades before the French Revolution, the skeptics made constant progress in spite of the Church's attempt to suppress them. The Encyclopedists found ways of evading the official censors—who in turn often helped by relaxing their vigilance. We must not forget either that the new breed had an easier position to uphold: They were missionaries of a new faith whose dogmas of progress, liberty, reason, and nature seemed more in harmony with the political, social, and cultural trends of the age than traditional Christianity; they also had the advantage that novelty always enjoys, while Catholic apologists by comparison only seemed to be repeating what people had always heard.

Nevertheless, on the eve of the French Revolution, it was still not clear that the Church had lost the battle for the Mind and heart of Europe. The violent and systematic anti-clericalism of Voltaire, for all its brilliance and the enthusiasm it aroused among the educated, still reflected the thought of only a restricted sector of the general public.