

# “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”

## *Christian Reactions to the Enlightenment*

By David Golding

In response to the French Revolution, Francisco Goya published in 1799 a series of nightmarish etchings entitled *Caprichos*. Arguably the most famous piece of the *Caprichos* is one depicting a sleeping intellectual from the Enlightenment period straddling a table. The dreamer is beset by bat-like owls while a strange bobcat looks on in the background. The piece, “*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*,” was one of many counter-Enlightenment works criticizing the modern intellectualism of the eighteenth century in Europe. Goya, an ardent Catholic from Spain, apparently sided with the religious camp during the Enlightenment and was a notable critic of the French Revolution. His monsters which haunted the visions of enlightened thinkers became an icon of postmodern romanticism and has endured to the present as one of the seminal works of gothic art.

On the other hand, scores of influential players in the Enlightenment period portrayed religion in similar terms. Voltaire, the famous polemicist, made a concerted attack on Catholic dogma and other French institutions of his day. Like many other key figures of the Enlightenment, he considered himself a deist and placed reason above faith in his personal belief system. A noted satirist, Voltaire mocked traditional conceptions of God. He once wrote, “I always made one prayer to God, a very short one. Here it is: ‘O Lord, make our enemies quite ridiculous!’ God granted it.”<sup>1</sup> His *Dictionnaire philosophique* articulated more blatant anti-Catholic sentiments and contained a systematic

theology for dismissing the Bible and other Christian institutions as detrimental to society and tolerance. The ideal religion for Voltaire was one of high morals, not doctrines, a thought espoused by many during the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Historians have classically interpreted these types of attitudes during the Enlightenment as being indicative of a rivalry between reason and religion. In fact, many postmodern atheists reference arguments posited during the Enlightenment in insisting that modern religion still hurts society.<sup>3</sup> This view unfortunately misrepresents many of the intellectuals of the time. Enlightenment scholar Michael Buckley wrote that “anticlericalism has long been integral to our idea of the Enlightenment. This used to encourage an heroic mythology of secularisation [sic], in which reason did battle with religion, free-thought with bigotry. Few historians today would endorse so Manichaeian a picture.”<sup>4</sup> While many, if not most, enlightened thinkers actively criticized institutions which stood in the way of free-thinking (including religious institutions), they certainly did not categorically seek the demise of religion as a whole. Most likely the Enlightenment was less an attack on the belief in God, in whom almost all philosophes and their supporters continued to believe in one form or another, and more a challenge to the Church.<sup>5</sup>

The tensions between growing intellectualism and secularization in eighteenth century Europe and a long tradition of Christian belief do suggest the probability that religion declined during the Enlightenment. However, religion itself was at the heart of many of the philosophes’ inquiries. One historian noted,

the attacks by intellectuals on revealed religion and the search for a more rational form of belief, the presence of a fashionable atheism in the *salons* of Paris, the exciting advancement of science offering the possibility of an alternative world view, and a general willingness of leading thinkers to engage with religious issues, all point to the conclusion that the Enlightenment took religion with the utmost seriousness.<sup>6</sup>

Viewing the Enlightenment as a period of blanket rejections of religion through reason is erroneous, according to scholar M. Goldie. “It would be false to tax the Enlightenment with indifference to religion,” he wrote. “It would be more discerning to say that it was obsessed with it.”<sup>7</sup>

Though anti-clerics invested intense effort in constructing a new cosmology built on reason and science and largely remained believers in a god, they nevertheless perceived a rivalry between themselves and contemporary religionists. Ultimately, this rivalry proved to be more cosmopolitan than actual and has only endured in the twentieth century models of postmodern historians. Thanks to this perceived rivalry, however, Christianity itself enjoyed a resurgence in its theological articulations. A series of influential theologians emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment and Christians themselves sought to quell with more vigor any controversial side-effects of rational inquiry into traditional dogma or the Bible. These two effects brought on in response to the Enlightenment strengthened the postmodern expansion of Christianity (especially in the New World) and provided a basis for several exceptionally popular religious movements which still dominate the evangelical Christian landscape today.

### **Enlightenment Disputes and Christian Reactions**

Disputes within Christianity were not new features brought about by the Enlightenment. The largest controversy within the religion was undoubtedly the Reformation itself which permanently fractured Christianity. Europeans had the new introduction of intellectualism within the dominant religious tradition and, for the first time in their history, Christians now had present in their collective psyche the possibility of questioning the institution. Christian belief was proved to be more flexible than a fixed body of doctrine and now included many widely distant beliefs. During the eighteenth century, more direct attacks on the fundamental structure of Christianity placed the nature of the religion up for grabs—intellectuals not only debated a few key doctrines, but the whole fabric of the Christian faith was now rationalized. Was Christianity simply loyalty to the Pope? Or must one belong to a particular church? The most extreme question of the time was perhaps the very efficacy of Christianity itself: Was it just a very big mistake?<sup>8</sup>

As the intellectual climate within and without Christianity heightened, major disputes rocked the religion. The Synod of Dort of 1618 and 1619 had established Arminianism as a heresy for Dutch Reformed Christians. Later, English Parliament issued the Westminster Confession which adopted the



views of the Synod of Dort and applied them to the Anglican Church. Such policies moved these two institutions toward a more Calvinistic belief; Arminianism stressed the individual's free will in choosing God's grace which directly opposes John Calvin's theology that all souls were predestined to eternal life or hell without regard to personal agency. As non-Calvinistic ideas surfaced in Europe as a result of some Enlightenment thinkers' reformulations of Christian doctrine, disputes arose as well. Christianity, especially Catholicism, was forced to deal with new ideas which toyed with the contentions between Calvinism and Arminianism.<sup>9</sup>

The most controversial of the Enlightenment was the Jansenist movement within Catholicism. In a sense, Jansenism emphasized Calvinist doctrines which directly opposed Catholic tradition. For a time Jansenism was acceptable notwithstanding some heated disputes between itself and Jesuits. For over 100 years, Jansenism persisted in Catholicism but eventually was declared a heresy.<sup>10</sup>

The liberal belief that Jesus Christ was not a divine being but rather a commissioned messenger from God sent to show mankind the path of righteousness also developed during the Enlightenment in response to Deism. Socinianism, as it is called, began to be preached in Anglican congregations, though the Church of England characteristically held to the infallibility of the Bible and the Immaculate Conception doctrine. This new belief brought with it a lesser view of Christ's ministry as well. Archbishop of Canterbury John Tillotson taught that Christianity was simply a moral code by which to live. This interpretation of the Bible remains a controversy within twenty-first century Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

During the latter part of the eighteenth century, Christianity attempted to stamp out dissent and forge a more conformed religious community, but the depth of the issues which presented themselves guaranteed that theological debate would remain within the religion.<sup>12</sup> In discussing Christian leaders' reactions to these disputes, historian James Byrne noted,

the limitations of the Bible as the source of historical accuracy and scientific knowledge were increasingly evident, and it was inevitable that as knowledge of the natural world grew it became ever more difficult for the religious authorities to hold together the particular synthesis of

science and religion which had been so characteristic of mediaeval thought.<sup>13</sup>

### **A More Articulated Christianity**

First the Reformation and now the Enlightenment introduced debate into Christianity in ways which were more on a grassroots level than before. In the early church and in the Middle Ages disputes were settled by councils convened by prominent church leaders or political rulers. By the eighteenth century, however, disputes were ongoing and prevalent within every layer of society. Many articulate theologians and philosophers emerged as a result and Christianity thus emerged from the Enlightenment with more succinct explications of its doctrine and philosophy. While dozens of influential thinkers could be cited to illustrate this development within the Enlightenment and Christianity, given the constraints of this paper I will mention only a few.

The principal philosopher to affect both Christianity and secular philosophy was René Descartes. In the seventeenth century, Descartes set out to redefine the universe around him and consequently introduced the practice of “radical doubt” to modern philosophy. Interestingly, Descartes immediately addressed the problem of the existence of God. To prove rationally the existence of God, he began with a categorical dismissal of everything he previously knew, presupposing that it all could be the machinations of an insane mind. Then, after discovering *cogito ergo sum*, he proceeded to analyze the nature of his ideas. The very idea of God was an effect, not a cause, therefore something outside of himself must have brought about the cause of such an idea. In short, because of man’s imperfections, the conception of a perfect God could only have been first instantiated by God himself.<sup>14</sup>

The Cartesian method for analyzing the rationality of God’s existence was revolutionary. Though many philosophers have noted logical inconsistencies in his argument, Descartes’ main procedure permanently affected how theologians both thought of the existence of God and responded to objections. No longer could one assume that scriptural proof was valid by itself—radical doubters could easily dismiss the whole worldview of the Christians in one fell swoop. A host of critics on both sides would continue to base their principal arguments on Descartes’ methodology and reasoning, and Christians would

even reference the Cartesian proofs in further explaining the basis for God's existence.

Perhaps the most intense revival for Christian theology in response to the Enlightenment happened in part in England and in large measure in the New World. The Great Awakening of the early 1700s involved the efforts of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Their written tracts as well as public preaching gained such popularity in Europe and America that converts in droves flocked to Christianity. Out of the Great Awakening came the modern phenomenon of Evangelicalism which today claims over 100 million followers.<sup>15</sup> Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon directly collided with the philosophes' inquiries of religion—to debate God's power only put you further on the path to hell. Blaise Pascal's "Wager" was undoubtedly already known among Edwards' listeners and probably ran through some of their minds when they heard his fiery rebuke of sinners and the inevitable judgment of a rightfully furious God. The "Wager" argues that in terms of probable outcomes, it is best for man to accept God rather than to be atheist and possibly incur God's wrath and punishment.<sup>16</sup> Together with other Enlightenment arguments, Great Awakening preachers like Edwards and Whitefield introduced a more sophisticated atmosphere of religious inquiry which forever altered the fundamental Christian experience as well as the intellectual problems from which the philosophes mused.

In England during the early Enlightenment, a group of Cambridge scholars sought to reconcile prevailing theology with theoretical philosophy. Known as the "Cambridge Platonists," these university teachers turned from the way in which religious problems had been conceived and debated and believed that preoccupation with abstruse doctrines did more harm than good. Reason reinforced faith, and the Cambridge Platonists found philosophy to be an ally of theology. Drawing on some Cartesian methods but also strictly adhering to traditional Christian thought, they endeavored in an academic setting to articulate *what* God is more than attempting to prove *that* God is. They saw themselves as an instrument to show the world a rational but still faithful rendition of God.<sup>17</sup> Enlightenment thinkers as a consequence had a well-defined theology with which to grapple and Christians at the same time were served with more conservative yet persuasive treatises on understanding their theology.

Disputes continued in Christianity and certainly remained in the intellectual society of the Enlightenment period. However, the Enlightenment with its refined methods of inquiry introduced new ways of dealing with religion. While many more voices were heard in opposition to traditional religious ideas and beliefs than before, more talented theologians also appeared. Not only did they better explain their own beliefs but they further extended the reach of Christianity to hitherto hostile intellectual forums. The fact that disputes and more articulate theologians arose during the Enlightenment demonstrates that religion, indeed, was an obsession for philosophes and Christians alike. While many religionists would claim that reason only leads to monstrosity, they however made full use of this new tool to advance the cause of Christianity. Their most enduring reaction to the Enlightenment turned out to be enlightened theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, letter to Étienne Noël Damilaville, May 16, 1767.

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary* (London: W. Dugdale, 1843).

<sup>3</sup> One example includes Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Boston: Yale University Press, 1987), 37.

<sup>5</sup> S. J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>6</sup> James Byrne, *Glory, Jest and Riddle: Religious Thought in the Enlightenment* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1996), 31.

<sup>7</sup> M. Goldie, "Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism," *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, N. Phillipson, et al., eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209.

<sup>8</sup> Byrne, 13–14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason: 1648–1789* (New York: Anthenum, 1961), 26–30.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> René Descartes, "Meditation III," *Discourse on Method*, 1637.

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<sup>15</sup> David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Missiometrics 2006: Goals, Resources, Doctrines of the 350 Christian World Communions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30 (January 2006), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Hacking, "The Logic of Pascal's Wager," *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, William Lane Craig, ed. (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 60.

<sup>17</sup> Cragg, 67–68.