Why the Enlightenment still matters today
Transcript

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Why the Enlightenment Still Matters Today

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Modern states are without religious ambitions or obligations. Procedurally secular they combine the governance of religion in the public square with the protection of private convictions. This settlement is a legacy of Enlightenment minds who confronted two problems - the commitment of individuals to religious worldviews, and the demands of freethinkers to challenge those beliefs. Revealed religions claim to speak God's truth, and in doing so, to set comprehensive conditions and standards for human conduct. Enlightened thinking recognised that all individuals sought transcendence through an internal sense of conscience – yet they argued that the public dimensions of this human condition required civic management, rather than being left to the devices of churchmen.

The problem with religion - it claims a distinctive source of authority from civil society - was primarily associated with Christianity in the eighteenth century. In the twenty-first century, the state confronts the same challenge from a range of religions: the dominant resolution is a just measure of Enlightened legal secularism, flavoured with the free broadcast of scepticism.

It has been commonplace, amongst the sociologists of religion and the historians of secularisation, to challenge the significance of Enlightenment legacies. Neither did God die, nor did faith whither. This perspective assumes that the current revival of religion is evidence of a persistence of faith rather than a revision of traditions according to new circumstances. The renewed visibility of religious expression in the public square, irrespective of its confessional identity, poses a challenge to post-Enlightenment accounts of the necessarily private domain of conscience.

The enlightenment moment freed religious expression from persecution by constraining the space for its authentic performance: it also subjected the claims of all religion to fundamental scrutiny. The return of religions which claim a more conspicuous and public role in shaping legislation or determining social and political values, poses renewed challenges. As the French state has struggled with debates around the implementation of the 1905 laws of laïcité amongst new Muslim communities, so has the wall of separation between Church and State in the US been subjected to repeated and ongoing legal challenge.

Let's go back to the future.

Thomas Jefferson, the Virginian Voltaire, was a powerful embodiment of Enlightenment values. Still controversial as a sceptical figure (he was only recently removed from the historical curriculum in the State of Texas), the Second President of the United States, was hostile to the socially corrosive consequences of ‘sectarian dogmas’, manipulated by the ‘genus irritabile vatum’.

Indeed, his private belief was ‘that this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it’. Despising churchmen of all hues, Jefferson believed in the possibility of innate human moral virtue, which if combined with rational education and reflection on the philanthropy of Christ, could achieve something he called ‘true religion’. Belief should be autonomous and rational: contrary to the clerical claims, comprehension must precede assent – individuals must understand what they believed, bowing the knee to tradition or the authority of another’s reason was improper. Freedom from organised religion was the foundation of a free republic.

These principles were enshrined in legislation. While Jefferson has some reputation as co-author of the colonial Declaration of Independence, which exposed the ‘facts’ of Royal tyranny, and promoted politics for ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. His persisting significance is as architect of one of a turning point in the history of religious freedom - the so-called Virginia statute for religious freedom, drafted by him in the late 1770s and eventually confirmed as law in 1786. In contrast to John Locke's Letter on toleration which aimed to preserve a civic space for the (mainly Christian) tender conscience, this statute marked a high point of enlightenment liberty because, as Madison commented, it extinguished, ‘forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind’.

The principles still resonate.

The statute asserts that, ‘God hath created the mind free’, and it is, ‘the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical’ all ‘fallible and uninspired men’ to have assumed dominion over the faith of others. In doing so they set up their own opinions as ‘true and infallible’. The establishment of any public religion, imposing doctrine and demanding tithe was ‘sinful and tyrannical’. Jefferson was unambiguous: ‘our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry’. This was not an abdication of the public square to moral relativism, but a recognition that the ‘natural weapons [of] free argument and debate’ would correct error: sceptical doubt was part of the bargain for religious liberty.

This account of mental freedom was, ‘that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or
goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief’. Free profession of any opinion should, ‘in no wise diminish enlarge, or affect their civil capacities’. Any violation of this principle was contrary to the natural right of mankind. Infallibility and coercion did not bring uniformity: ‘Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned: yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity’. A radical relativism, and a view of the limits and purpose of civil government, underpinned this belief.

Legal coercion was improper for ‘operations of the mind’, since civil authority was only legitimate by consensual transfer of ‘such natural rights only as we have submitted to them’. Jefferson was clear – and these words still ring out powerfully today, ‘The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others’. His concluding remark is a convenient summary of enlightenment liberty of thought, and indeed it was one that attracted considerable hostility in his own days, but also might be the subject of furious debate today: ‘But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg’. Heretical offence was no cause for censorship.

Coercion, deployed to defend error, bred fools and hypocrites. Differences in opinion enabled fallible men to polish and improve their own views. Jefferson acknowledged that there was a global diversity of religion: there were ‘probably a thousand different systems of religion. That ours is but one of that thousand. That if there be but one right, and ours that one, we should wish to see the 999 wandering sects gathered into the fold of truth. But against such a majority we cannot effect this by force. Reason and persuasion are the only practicable instruments. To make way for these, free enquiry must be indulged’. Truth was the result of the free exercise of reason.

Jefferson’s principles created a so-called ‘wall’ between religion and politics in the new Republic, a powerful secular model for how modern states could deal with the issue of governing communities with diverse and potentially conflicting religious values.

This enlightened tradition, which underpins the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, dealt with three persisting issues:

First, the political problem of managing the social and political consequences of multiple claims to religious truth within a civil community, a more complex problem due to the baleful influence of clerical institutions who claimed exceptional and divine authorisation for their confessions.

Second, was the problem of the regulation of public expression about religious belief and doctrine: Jefferson’s claim that no injury might be sustained as the result of anti- or non-religious expression is a fundamental part of the argument for liberty. Doubt and freedom were conjoined.

The third legacy concerns the question of ethical relativism: it was, and is still, a claim that only religion provides a transcendent ethical system for human society. A godless secularism, solely built on mutable human reason, is an insufficient platform for moral conduct. It was, and is, the claim of many religions that revelation is the only uncontestable source of ethics.

Jefferson embodies enlightenment belief both in religious freedom, and the deeper civic issue of the tension between tolerance and free expression.

Today we live with the problems prompted by both the radical metaphysical diversity of our civic communities and the global revival of religion. Whether it is of the Christian Evangelical Right in the USA, Salafists in the Middle-East, or the Haredi in Israel, there has been a flowering of groups claiming that God is on their side, delivering them privileged authority to determine morality. As the various Pew reports have explored: ‘God is winning’. Controversies around contested reproductive rights, gender equality and sexuality have inspired repeated acts of religious violence around the globe. Whether it is the Pussy Riot Girls or Jesus Christ Superstar being condemned as blasphemous in Russia, or Texan Qu’ran burners provoking communities to murderous rage, or hoteliers refusing hospitality to Gay couples, religious commitments drive civil conflict.

The role of religion in education prompts considerable debate: in the USA, ‘the classroom has become one of the most important battlegrounds in the broader conflict over religion’s role in public life’. In France, the ongoing battle over the application of statutory legislation in schools and universities is unresolved. Even in Britain, it seems that one third of all publicly funded schools are ‘Faith schools’, and thus exempt from equalities legislation for admissions and employment. Roman Catholic schools have been implicated in organising anti-gay petitions amongst school children. It is the stated ambition of government proposals that 200 new schools would ‘work towards every child and young person having a life-enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ’. Many faith schools fail to address issues of equality and social cohesion. The recent shooting of Malala Yousafzai in the Swat Valley by Taliban underscores the contested nature of a secular education elsewhere in the world.

Examining Enlightenment perspectives on these issues may offer some insights.

First some necessary ground clearing. What do I mean by ‘Enlightenment’? Often the word has been lazy
shorthand for a vague set of secular values: progress, science, modernity. Much commonplace usage is
teleological, celebrating the triumphant empire of reason. ‘The Enlightenment’ invented modernity and the rise of
modern paganism. More recently this largely Whig narrative has been fragmented first into national contexts,
and then a full-blown autopsy of the limits and failures in terms of empire, race, and class. At the risk of
perpetrating a poor pun, since the 1980s there has been a profound loss of faith in the enlightenment project.

Jonathan Israel has recently provided a bold apologia in his three bulky volumes: unashamedly ‘modern’, Israel’s
enlightenment achieved a coherent programme of philosophical materialism, democratic politics, and
egalitarianism. Israel outlined the tension between Radical, moderate and contested Enlightenments.

Now there is no time to review the detail here: but I want to explore one dimension of the radical enlightenment
in a handful of images and texts:

Diderot’s Encyclopédie epitomises the dominant mode of Enlightenment progress:

Arguably one of the greatest cultural and intellectual achievements of the Enlightenment, the publication
comprised some 30+ volumes published between 1751 and 1772. Twenty million words in eighteen thousand
pages.

The book was an attempt to produce – in ink and paper - a blueprint for the creation of a rational, improving and
cultivated society. The driving and dynamic commitment behind its conception was both the possibility and
necessity of a critique of accepted values: and a search for the beauty and truth of science and reason against
the darkness of authority and superstition.

Some 230 people produced 72,000 articles – some only a short paragraph, others running to monographic
length. The very diversity of subject matter meant people from different stations in life were involved – some
subjects were controversial (say – religion or the soul) others were exceptionally technical (how to pile cannon
balls or the construction of harps). Some were atheists, some were devout Catholics.

Charles Nicholas Cochin’s frontispiece captures this ambition. Commissioned in 1763 and exhibited in the Louvre
two years later, the composition of numerous allegorical figures contrived to distil the argument into one
instructive image. Drawing on, and twisting, Christian iconography which commonly saw a divine light emanating
from God to illuminate spiritual truth – Cochin’s drawing suggests Truth is a natural phenomena exposed by
reason, banishing the darkness of ignorance and religion.

We see, in Diderot’s words, ‘Truth wrapped in a veil, radiant with a light that parts the clouds and disperses
them’. On the right of Truth, Reason and Philosophy are engaged the one in lifting the veil from truth, the other
in pulling it away’.

Underneath this dominant tableau – are arrayed two sets of figures representing the arts and sciences. On the
right immediately underneath memory, history (ancient and modern) and time - are muses representing
Geometry (holding a proof of what appears to be Pythagoras’ theorem), Astronomy (with a crown of stars),
Physics (with a barometer), Optics, Chemistry (with alembic), Botany (holding a rather dishevelled cactus) – on
the left there is a cascade of figures representing the literary and imaginative arts – poetry (epic dramatic,
pastoral and satiric), music, sculpture painting and architecture. Importantly each of these figures faces are
illuminated by the radiant light of truth suggesting all of these forms of knowledge – artistic, literary, scientific
and analytical are a coherent whole.

At the bottom, supporting Diderot’s ambition that the work should transmit knowledge of the practical skills and
mechanical arts as much as matters of epistemology and metaphysics – still catching the glint of irradiating
reason are men making things – fine metal work, clockmakers, carpentry – and most self-referentially in the left
hand corner the printing press being inked ready to go.

This presentation of Truth transformed standard Christian imagery. Theology is kneeling, subordinate to Truth
reason and philosophy. The Encyclopédie was consistently hostile to revelation, priests and religious delusion –
the purpose of the work was to free society from such superstition – as Diderot explained ‘in countries
enlightened by the light of reason and philosophy ... the priest never forgets that he is man, subject and citizen’.

The second work -The Religious Ceremonies of the World - is much less well known than the Encyclopedie, but
was arguably a book that changed the attitude of Europeans to religion in a profound way.

Between 1723 and 1737, two men – Bernard Picart, responsible for most of the engravings, and Jacques
Bernard, compiler and author of the text – produced seven illustrated folio volumes which explored the
ceremonies, rituals, doctrines, dress and customs of all the religions of the ‘various nations of the known world’. Both men were intimate with the cosmopolitan community of radical minds which produced some of the most materialist and heterodox works between the 1680s and 1730s.

Published in French, Dutch, English and German, the work - despite its size - was a bestseller into the nineteenth
century. From ancient pagan to contemporary Christian, from China to metropolitan freemasonry, and from
Peru to Japan, the volumes combined commentary and illustration to present a comprehensive account of
religious culture across geographical and historical space. Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Quakers,
Confucians, Native Indians, Persians, Egyptians, Mexicans, Muslims were all allocated space in the volumes: the intellectual consequences of this were profound. There are two worth particular note.

Traditional study of ‘other’ religions had drawn a distinction between the ‘true’ and the corrupt or idolatrous – the divine revelation of Christianity was contrasted with the false delusions of the Jews, the Muslims and pagan. Erudite studies of ‘other’ religions, by men like Gerard Vossius or Edward Herbert, had tried to treat, especially non-European religion, in an anthropological way. Identifying common practices and the natural foundations of religious culture, such work was commonly pious in intent. This work, however, relativised the claims of all religion: whether monotheistic or polytheistic, these volumes argued that all were fundamentally the same (all managed the ritual moments of birth, marriage and death), but shaped by geographical and historical circumstances.

There was nothing special or privileged about Christianity: indeed its many variations and sects were subject to as rigorous a scrutiny, as were the more remote and unfamiliar forms of worship from the East Indies and Africa.

The full force of this religious diversity, can be seen in the frontispiece ‘Le Tableau des principales religions du Monde’.

Today this may look like a benign and ecumenical image.

The Roman Catholic tradition represented by a Pope – proffering the sacraments and an olive branch (partially covering shackles and chains), trampling on both the Roman Empire (with the help of ‘superstition’ and Judaism (represented by a Rabbi protecting the Pentaeuch) is prominent; he's ably assisted by a variety of monks – a Franciscan trying to shut the Bible in place of the Councils and Tradition; a Jesuit demanding conformity and a Dominican holding the Standard of the Inquisition).

The Reformation – pruning the tree of Christianity of its rotten boughs, and pointing to a polyglot scripture – is also represented by a lineage of pious reformers – Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Zwingli, Bucer, but also by more sectarian figures Arminius, Quakers and an adult-baptising Mennonite.

At the bottom foreground, the ‘Mahometan’ religion, and its presence amongst ‘diverse’ peoples – the Turk, Algerians, Moors, Tartars, Arabs and Persians are described. Ali, successor to Mahomet, ‘explains the Qu’ran’. On the right, a Persian Muslim in Safavid dress, holds a Table with the fundamental articles of Islam (the unity of God, the prophet, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, prayer and purification). Rather incongruously a camel lurks in the background (a symbol of a tradition of sacrifice, drawn from an account of a visit to Iran in Jean Chardin’s Journey to Persia). In the middle and far distance, the frontispiece captures representations of the temples, pagodas and idols of the Indies and Japanese traditions.

It would be possible to explore in much more detail, the intellectual components of this combination of ethnography, history and theology. Bernard harvested materials from existing erudition, travel literature and theological manuals: often the text is a bricolage of original sources and commentaries. Picart produced engravings that were original portrayals of rituals he had observed ‘from life’ (especially from the Dutch Jewish community), as well as re-using other early engravings and imaginative creations. Visualising, and explaining, the diversity of global religious practices relativised the unique claims of Christianity. For an eighteenth century viewer the inclusiveness of the image was a challenge to the dominant conception of public religion.

How did one accommodate and explain diversity?

The problem of religion was not simply that of regulating the competing truth claims of each confession within one community: establishing the sort of religious liberty Jefferson promoted, might have addressed that. Human nature and the evidence of history confirmed that different cultural conceptions and expressions of religious truth were inescapable.

What the authors also recognised, was that such diversity was rendered dangerous to civil peace when priests manipulated religious allegiance for their own benefit. The problem was not with religious belief, not with confessional pluralism, but with the self-interested corruption of priests, churchmen and leaders who used religious worship to advance their authority and empire. Bad religion was the result, not of a human propensity, nor the agency of demons, but the labour of those ‘worthless creatures’ the priests who made themselves masters of nations.

Ensuring that priestcraft – or bad religion - did not contaminate civil society was a central plank of radical enlightened polemic. It is still a pressing concern.

By making a comparative critical scrutiny of the diversity of religious cultures, the work promoted the legitimacy of equal expression and religious liberty, but did not explicitly advance a programme for exposing the religious damage caused by corrupt priests.

If the human condition explained the fundamental grounds of religious diversity, and the cruelty of a clerical elite was behind civil conflict between religions, what was to be done?
The third text offered the most radical criticism of all organised religion in the eighteenth century: whereas the Encyclopedie and the Religious Ceremonies where substantial printed enterprises – best-sellers, despite the unwanted attentions of censors and police inspectors – this work – known as either de tribus impostoribus or Le traité des trois imposteurs, was initially circulated as a clandestine manuscript (in Latin and French) amongst a community of English, French and Dutch freethinkers, and eventually to be republished by the ‘Atheistical’ salonist, Baron d’Holbach in 1768, and many subsequent printed editions in French, English and other modern languages: it’s still being published today.

Rumours of an atheistic work which condemned the founders of all organised religion and its rituals, doctrines and revelations had persisted from medieval times. By the mid-seventeenth century speculation about the putative existence and authorship of a work under the title de tribus impostoribus received serious attentions from the learned and the heterodox alike: irreverent thinkers and executed heretics like Vanini and Bruno were claimed as having a hand in the title. Later, Hobbes, Spinoza and men of their ilk were accused. By the end of the century the the parlour game of attribution and speculation was discussed in the literary journals, with claims and counter-claims for the work’s existence or not.

What is now known of the genesis of the two works known as – the three impostors – is complicated, and the circle of people involved, convoluted.

The Latin text – de tribus impostoribus – a shorter, more learned work, was the result of an academic disputatio held in the University of Keil in late 1688 – more than likely it was a student forgery designed either to entertain or dupe the professorial tutor. In any case, when the academic’s library was sold in 1712, the manuscript was purchased on behalf of Prince Eugen of Savoy – a man with an heterodox reputation and library to match.

The Latin work betrayed its intellectual background in the world of university disputation: it was after all written in baroque Latin prose, and overwhelmingly concerned with the technically complex epistemological issues of the status of testimony and witnesses for the different religious truths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. ‘If the Bible was good evidence for Christ, then why was the Qu’ran not equivalently persuasive for Islam?’, the author asked. No doubt its scepticism was profound, and dangerous, but its form ensured its audience was elite and erudite. Nevertheless, many copies of the work were eventually made from Eugene’s library in Vienna – and subsequently copies from those copies, so that by the mid-eighteenth century the work was widely known, eventually reaching print.

The French language work was much more demotic, and deliberately so.

Although there is still considerable debate regarding its precise origins, there is substantial evidence to place it firmly in the cosmopolitan circle of freethinking writers who met in Rotterdam, London and Vienna. The best evidence records a copy being made of the treatise in the Rotterdam study of renegade Quaker – Benjamin Furley in 1711. The work seems to have been penned by a young Dutch diplomat Jan Vroesen from conversations and notes made by men like John Toland, Jean Aymon and Charles Levier. Such was the perceived danger of the contents, that quite wisely authorship was kept secret. Although there was a suppressed printed edition made in 1719, circulation of the work in clandestine form was European wide. Some 300+ copies still exist today. Later in the eighteenth century, alongside French printed editions, English translations were made – men like Edward Gibbon and Thomas Jefferson owned copies.

Despite its notoriety, the work is almost unknown to the general public today. Indeed, to those familiar with the unfettered polemic against modern religion of the so-called ‘New Atheists’, often regarded as breaking new ground in the ferocity of their arguments, the heterodox irreligion of this work may be surprising.

The ‘Three impostors’ was infamous because of the simplicity of its headline claim: that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were political impostures invented by clever and deceitful men. Combined with the charges of imposture, the work also denies the existence of God, any sense of providential care, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of heaven and hell.

The work is brief, its prose and structure, is straightforward and succinct.

It combines brief historical studies of the three impostors exploring their techniques of delusion and fraud, with chapters addressing key theological concepts (God, spirit, hell, demons). Underpinning the work is a materialist account of religion (derived from Epicurus, Hobbes and Spinoza) which suggests there are deep rooted psychological grounds for why individuals believe in a divinity who controls events and preserves their lives. Fear of the future, and of the unknown, creates a world of ‘invisible powers’: in effect religion and God are made by the human imagination – the ‘Chimerical dread of Invisible powers, is it which has been the seed productive of these multifarious Religions which each individual has fashioned answerably to his own Fancy’. The representations of God in scripture reflect human characteristics. Final causes, and providence, are ‘human fictions’, rather than a rational understanding of nature.

The text also dismissed revelation as ridiculous fable and ‘childish stories’ – as ‘a bundle of fragments and incoherencies tack’d together at different times, by several persons’. It was as disordered as the Qu’ran. Artful and devious priests built religious doctrine and law upon these fictional and absurd foundations for their own advantage and to serve their tyrannical masters. The groundwork of false religion was ignorance and fear:
Dismissing all religion as imposture was controversial. While Christian readers would have been comfortable with dismissing Islam as political imposture, applying the same analysis to the sacred history of the Judaeo-Christian tradition was unacceptable.

Moses was a ‘deep politician’ who used trickery and political craft to establish his power, claiming intimacy with God and deploying natural knowledge to dupe the people with miracles. Jesus Christ, despite his intimacy with the deceitful arts of the Egyptians, was less successful since he failed to resort to military force to support his imposture. Although clever at manipulating Jewish messianic expectation, Jesus was incapable of successful capitalising on it because of the other worldliness of his theology.

A short chapter, which may have inspired Jefferson’s editing project, devoted to the ‘morals of Jesus Christ’, claimed that the New Testament was simply a bad abridgement of the ethical writings of antiquity. The short account of the rise of Islam stressed the legislators skill at blending prowess in arms with designing a religion that accommodated itself to the populace: of the three impostors the last was by far the most successful.

The treatise challenged its readers’ prejudice and ignorance, as it might well do ours today: these religions far from being true ‘are the greatest impostures which anyone has been able to hatch’ and had subjected ‘a great part of the universe’. The application of reason would confirm a set of ‘rational and evident truths’, the primary one being that ‘no man in his senses can believe either in God, or Hell, or Spirit, or Devils in the manner they are commonly spoken of. All these big words have been forged only to dazzle or intimidate the vulgar’.

The treatise compiled powerful heterodox arguments from a canon of thinkers – ancient and modern – it made the materialism of Lucretius and Hobbes usable for contemporary times; it abridged Spinoza’s metaphysics into a comprehensible form. Most powerfully it pointed out two significant aspects of modern religious practice: first, that religious culture was conventional rather than God given. Second, it advocated a profound anticlericalism that demanded reform of traditional religious institutions which were corrupt and self-interested rather than promoters of virtue and civil peace.

Many contemporaries – even Voltaire – found the tone and arguments of the treatise unacceptable. Although agreeing that the fanaticism of the priests brought misery to civil society, Voltaire was horrified by the denial of God. Enlightenment for the latter, meant philosophy informing moral conduct: ‘there will be less dogma with more virtue’. Indeed such was the commitment to a divine being that Voltaire insisted, ‘If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him’. Railing against the pernicious consequences of priestcraft did not mean dispensing with God.

The treatise argued for a more radical reform than simply the establishment of a tolerance of diversity. It combined a refutation of clerical imposture with a more materialist reading of public religion as the manifestation of human convention: it expressed a much more deliberante hostility to the traditional religious institutions in the name of reason and nature.

The practical ambition of the text was not to defend diversity of belief, but to correct false delusion: the denial of any form of revelation, or of supernatural communication with a transcendent divinity through spirit or tradition, left reason and the state with the task of supplying public morality.

There is little doubt that the treatises on imposture were profoundly heterodox accounts of the nature of public religion. Far from calling for toleration of religious belief, the texts demand the decontamination of public space from the fictions of faith: mankind made God, so it could dispense with him too.

Does any of this help us today?

For many contemporaries, and for many now, the expression of such a visceral opposition to religion is unacceptable: it breaches the boundaries of tolerance, and invokes a form of Godless secularism commonly associated, rhetorically, with the violence of the French Revolution and the systematic campaign of the early Soviet State against the Church and Faith.

Nevertheless, the thought gathered and wide disseminated in these treatises remains a powerful position, and one that marked a fracture with the dominant Christian worldview. It was an act of intellectual bravery, which confronted, ridiculed and offended all devout (and in Voltaire’s case not so devout) minds.

It has been dismissed as a work of infidel libertinism, calculated as wicked mischief and deliberate insult: nevertheless, it evaded censorship and the authors, copiers, owners and readers put their lives on the line to promote and defend it. As an act of defiance, of speaking truth to power, it captures one important dimension of Enlightenment. The conviction that religious deserves criticism, is a freethinking value that underpins the polemic of voices like Aayan Hirsi Ali – who dares to say what she believes.

While many today are comfortable with the legacy of Jeffersonian religious liberty, they are less happy with this more radical form of criticism. Arguably the transition from a conformist system of public religion to an enlightened state moved from uniformity to the toleration of diversity to one that actively embraced pluralistic freedom. This marked a shift from the reluctant tolerance of false belief, to a state where no one opinion can
The languages of toleration, indifference and liberty which underpinned enlightened arguments drew from a distinctive account of religious belief which emphasised, not the experience of God’s operation in the world, but the acquisition of an individual opinion. This intellectualised religious experience, in contrast to the dominant pentecostal account of religious truth, which embedded it in a communal experience of salvation. In modern times this legacy underpins legislation which protects religious matters from interference by either the state or others: and the majority applaud it: often occluded is the recognition that such law also preserves the free expression of belief from the scrutiny of churchmen and inquisitions.

Enlightened ideas about public religion created two powerful traditions: one widely regarded as proper, what Olivier Roy has labelled ‘legal laïcité’- or a Jeffersonian commitment to regulating, by legislation, against the penetration of religion into public institutions. This tradition balances a liberty of individual private religious conviction with the neutrality of the state; it also manages the extent to which such convictions can condemn those that do not share their values.

The second project – an ‘ideological laïcité’ – or what some have called ‘Enlightenment fundamentalism’, rejects all religion as an insult to human intelligence, aims to either deploy the jurisprudential authority of the state against religion, or at the least enable the expression of free criticism against religion. This is a much less regarded legacy.

Contemporary anxieties around the tension between freedom of expression, and preserving religious values from violation, replay the distinctions between these traditions. In the twenty-first century awareness of a globalised religious culture suggests a capacious pluralism. Yet despite the necessary relativism of truth claims amongst such plural perspectives, the dominant religious traditions remain confessionally exclusive –they believe they are right, and their beliefs true. The challenge between an account of religious conviction based on choice, and the conviction in the certainly of ‘faith’ is profound. Reason is still pitted against truth.

After the eighteenth century, understanding religious belief as one set of opinions amongst many, rather than an expression of a divine incarnation, became mainstream. Politics was desacralised in the sense that the state no longer had duties to promote collective salvation, but simply to arbitrate between diverse communities. In the UK, post-Rushdie debates around the need for legislative protection of religious value have underscored this tension: the consequences of anti-religious criticism, manifest in hurt and offence, has become a threat to public order.

Much of the debate around the recent legislation against Racial and Religious Hatred (2006) focused on how far offence might affect the civil liberties of religious believers: the Act stipulates that words, behaviour or written material is illegal and threatening, if it has the intent to ‘stir up’ religious hatred. The distinction between the freedom of expression, and the freedom to insult, has led to a call for ‘an appropriate canon for the public discussion of belief’ by Rowan Williams.

Such limitations (another word would be censorship) fail to recognise the incommensurable claims amongst and between worldviews that claim to speak for God, and those that do not. Much special pleading on behalf of religious belief, suggests it deserves protection from the scrutiny of critical enquiry, both because of the claims of civility of exchange, and ultimately because a desacralised world is one ‘in which there can be no ultimate agreement about the worth of human or other beings’. Given the evidence of the global history of religious violence, the assertion that post-religious morality is ‘dangerously impoverished’ is both offensive, and ignorant. It’s hardly a step beyond the routine assertion of early modern churchmen, that ‘If there be no God, there be no Law’.

Arguably then, and here I am drawing to a close, the range of enlightenment values which combined both Jeffersonian liberty, with the forms of radical ‘doubt’ about religion expressed in the treatises on imposture, have a renewed pertinence today.

Evidence of global pluralism in enlightenment comparative histories placed domestic religious traditions in a broad perspective: recognition of diversity authorised the public coexistence of faiths which underpins contemporary social policy. At the same time, there were few limits to radical forms of Enlightenment doubt: sapere aude was the rallying cry that defended the intellectual bravery of challenging the dominant Christian power of the times. The defence of the expression of such ‘doubt’ today is equally urgent.

One of the most powerful ways in which doubt can be explored today – perhaps in a civil and polite manner - is by the application of historical criticism to the claims of religious authority. The principle of scrutiny and critical assessment of evidence and testimony embodies one powerful legacy of enlightened method. Enabling a robust public understanding of the religious past is one of the duties historians must grasp. Rehearsing, explaining, reflecting upon and challenging the coherence of Enlightenment traditions of thinking about religion, will do good service to the debates underway about the relationship between politics and faith.

A pertinent example which illustrates this challenge, is the recent controversy prompted by Tom Holland’s excellent history of the origins of Islam. The published book - In the Shadow of the Sword (2012) - is a good example of public history which makes accessible the complex academic scholarship to a broad audience. It is
history, not a polemical critique: In the shadow of the sword is no treatise of the three impostors. Some from within and without the academy, have argued that the subject matter and historical analysis is both too sensitive and too subtle to be suitable for public digestion. The scholarship is dismissed as cavalier, provocative, ‘irresponsible and unreliable’.

Holland has vigorously defended the book, and the subsequent television programme (which itself attracted considerable hostility). Acknowledging the challenge of translating ‘very rich and complex arguments and ... detailed academic scholarship’ into public media, he correctly claims the right of legitimate historical enquiry for the subject itself. The ensuing debate conducted in newspaper columns, journals and blogs, in turn defended and accused, focused on ‘scholarship’, in particular that Holland lacked the linguistic competence to understand the original sources. The slippage of debate from the question of whether the origins of Islam were a legitimate subject of critical enquiry, to an assessment of the evidential method and skills of the writer – establishes how the post-enlightenment valorisation of evidence now dominates public discourse – even about religion. Although it may be uncomfortable to those who prioritise the truth claims of revealed faith, today no subject matter can claim the privilege of protection from robust historical enquiry. As Gibbon wrote on Christianity, so Holland may write on Islam.

Historians of the Enlightenment know much about how brave minds subjected religious history, the revealed word, and clerical institutions to bold historical scrutiny. Too often this scholarship gets represented as simply elevating the claims of reason and science above that of faith: the reality was far more subtle and engaging. Many of the arguments and evidences, for example against the commonplace belief in the inspired inerrancy of the New Testament, or the evolution of fundamental doctrinal articles, are still very pertinent today. While the contemporary world has embraced principles defending religious conscience, it seems much more reluctant to valorise unconstrained critical engagement with all religious shibboleths irrespective of identity.

Let me leave you with a thought.

Like many enlightened gentleman, Jefferson was sceptical about the integrity of divine revelation. Writing to his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, he counselled the use of reason: ‘read the Bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus’. Examine the evidence dismiss spurious claims to inspiration and miracle: most of all read without fear or prejudice. ‘Question with boldness’, he insisted, ‘even the existence of God’. Robust and fearless inquiry into the history and life ‘of a personage called Jesus’ might bring belief in God, it might not. Reason not authority was the only ground for belief, ‘and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision’. Jesus’ ethical message had been obscured by devious priests.

To discern this kernel of ethics over the course of two evenings in 1804, Jefferson, with the deft use of a razorblade, made a ‘wee-little book ... which I call the Philosophy of Jesus’. A mere 46 octavo pages long, Jefferson pasted into a blank book the verse by verse snippets of Jesus’ ethical statements: indeed he considered interpolating fragments of Epicurus’ moral philosophy.

Years later he undertook a more sophisticated abridgement The life and morals of Jesus of Nazareth (which survives in the Smithsonian Institute today): this compilation despite including parallel columns of Greek, Latin, French and English still only ran to just over 80 pages. This patchwork excluded all reports of miracles, prophetic mission and divine inspiration: as Jefferson put it to John Adams, Jesus’ moral sayings were as easily distinguished as were ‘diamonds in a dunghill’. All of the absurd corruptions of priests were abandoned – no angels, demons, supernatural voices, nor transubstantiations or Old Testament prophetic pedigrees. Jefferson’s Jesus is a man who spoke wisely, not a prophet or Godhead who delivered truth. His wisdom was practical, reasoned and sociable – valuable because of its practicability, not due to its divine origins. To contemporaries who regarded scripture as the inerrant and inspired word of God – this fragmentation, re-ordering and excision was blasphemous sacrilege.

Jefferson’s project – reading scripture, as one would any other text, to derive moral teachings – was a classic Enlightenment move. Denying divinity, and re-shaping Jesus into a teacher for modern times who exposed the natural principles of human sociability in a critical and reasonable method, underpinned Jefferson’s account of the proper relationship between religion and politics: theology should be shaped to civic purpose. This might be an excellent model for how ethical insights from ‘religious’ voices can be made audible in the public sphere without privileging their ‘revealed’ status: Jefferson’s method is a possibility, but a contentious one.