

Children of the Light

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The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. Vol. 1. *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, by Peter Gay, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966. xviii + 555pp. \$8.95.

IMMANUEL KANT seems to have been first to apply the term *Aufklärung*, or Enlightenment, to that extraordinary ferment of ideas at work in his own and many other European minds during the hundred odd years between the Whig Revolution in England and the much more catastrophic Revolution in France. Kant had been deeply perturbed but nevertheless greatly impressed by the skeptical Scotsman David Hume who held that the human reason is incapable of wrestling with the idea of God. On this basis Kant constructed his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*, which gave so much scandal to orthodox Protestants. "They say," he complained to the man-servant, who was also his intimate friend and confidant, "that I have taken God away from the universe." "Don't worry, Herr Professor," said the servant. "Just write another book and put Him back." Out of this advice came the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which asserts that though we cannot know or experience God because

he is "transcendent," He is nevertheless necessary to the moral universe, for Kant was nothing if not a moralist. This was not essentially different from Voltaire's famous dictum in his argument with Holbach, that if God did not exist we should be obliged to invent Him.

This seems to be what many of the other priests of the Enlightenment did: they took away the familiar immanent God of the scriptures and of Christian tradition and then put Him back reshaped according to their own predilections. Others, Diderot, for example, also an indefatigable moralist, deemed the restoration unnecessary or undesirable, presumably because He could not be reconciled in any shape to the fashionable empiricism of the time. Most of the original impetus in this direction had come from England with the speculations of the various British deists and skeptics, so strongly fortified in their opinions by the mechanistic astronomy of Newton and the sensationalist psychology of Locke; but it was in France that the "denaturing of deity and the deification of nature," as Professor Becker so neatly put it, was most industriously and enthusiastically carried on. There the influence of the Enlightenment was not confined as in England to a small

group of thinkers and polemicists but spread at second or third hand rapidly through the whole nation with ultimately tremendous consequences for the world.

Why was this? Professor Gay seems to believe it was because England had already had a revolution in which the doctrines of the earlier Enlightenment had played some part. The late Louis Madelin ascribed it in part to the infatuation of his Cartesianized countrymen with abstract ideas at work in a situation of "prodigal anarchy."¹ Talleyrand in later life observed that no one who could not remember France as it was before 1789 would ever know "the sweetnesses of life" but M. Madelin found that the pre-revolutionary mood was one of universal discontent, and that the members of every class, even the most favored, felt themselves oppressed. He follows Tocqueville in asserting that Frenchmen, who for five or six generations had been denied any right to participate in public affairs, were almost totally ignorant of the practical realities of politics, and the *philosophes* most ignorant of all.

It would have been useless to tell them so! They would have served you up Athens, Sparta and Rome! For centuries Plutarch with his sham Greeks and sham Romans had been bemusing us, and all these men—philosophers and their disciples—were so intoxicated with classicism that the Revolution was to be accomplished in the names, repeated and acclaimed a thousand times, of Harmodius, Leonidas, Gracchus, Brutus and Cato.

This infatuation with antiquity, though he seems far less disapproving of it, is part of what Professor Gay means by paganism.

An English contemporary of the French Revolution, much concerned in the politics of his own country, who had viewed the transition of Enlightenment from the field of political propaganda to political action, drew a scornful comparison. "I admit," wrote Burke,

that we, too, have had writers of that description, who made some noise in their day. At present they repose in lasting oblivion. Who, born within the last forty years, has read one word of Collins, and Toland, and Tindal, and Chubb, and Morgan, and that whole race who called themselves Free-thinkers? Who now reads Bolingbroke? Who *ever* read him through? But whatever they were, and are, with us they were and are wholly unconnected individuals. . . . They never acted in a corps, nor were known as a faction in the state, nor presumed to influence in that name or character, or for the purposes of such a faction, on any of our public concerns. . . .²

Mr. Gay acknowledges that when this "contemptuous epitaph" was written the influence of the English deists had long since ended, but he considers their views important as a stage toward skepticism, as skepticism itself was a stage toward the total repudiation of Christianity and the re-establishment of a pagan ethos and a pagan society. One might perhaps quibble at his use of the term, for *paganus* (the English equivalent is "heathen," i. e., a man of the heath or moor) signified a rustic or dweller in some remote place who clung to his ancient gods or genii, and was used pejoratively after Christianity had triumphed in the cities and important towns of the Roman Empire. The *philosophes*,³ like the earlier Christians, were urban by habit and choice and cosmopolitan by outlook. When one of them "retired to the country . . . he took the city with him: he invited likeminded men of letters to share his solitude, he escaped rural boredom by producing plays, he lined his walls with books, and he kept up with literary gossip through his correspondents in town." Rousseau with his real or professed love of solitude and unspoilt nature was perhaps an exception, but Professor Gay asks what Rousseau would have been without Geneva, though the fact is that he spent most of his life away from it. However, the paganism

to which the professor refers was that of the classical writers and poets, especially Cicero, Livy, Horace, Juvenal, and above all, Lucretius among Latin authors and Plutarch and Lucian among the Greeks. Plato they distrusted, and Aristotle they despised, mainly because of his authority for the medieval schoolmen, hence "a pagan who had trafficked with the enemy." What delighted the philosophes about their favorite ancients is that they found, or thought they found, in them the same disdain for antique religion and superstition they themselves felt for Christianity.

And yet the philosophes, virtually without exception, were products of Christian education. Voltaire and Condorcet were prize pupils of the Jesuits, Diderot of the Oratorians, d'Alembert of the Jansenists. The question is not so much why they repudiated their teachers as of how much of the teaching they unconsciously retained. Carl Becker in his famous lectures maintained that it was a great deal, and that if they set about to demolish "the Heavenly City of St. Augustine" it was "only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials," after transferring the site from the other world to the future of this one. Their real differences with the theologians, he insisted, were mainly of vocabulary in that they had substituted "nature" for God, "science," as it was then understood, for revelation, "virtue" for grace, and so on.

They scorned metaphysics, but were proud to be called philosophers. . . . They denied that miracles ever happened, but believed in the perfectibility of the human race. . . . In spite of their rationalism and humane sympathies . . . their aversion to hocus-pocus and enthusiasm and dim perspectives, in spite of their eager skepticism, their engaging cynicism, their brave youthful blasphemies and talk of hanging the last king in the entrails of the last priest—in spite of all of it, there is more Christian philosophy in the writings of the *philosophes* than has yet been dreamt of in our histories.⁴

Professor Gay sees in this an example of "the fallacy of spurious persistence," by which he seems to mean that the ideas of one generation are not necessarily or always affected by those of the preceding generations. "Changes in rhetorical styles sometimes mask the survival of an idea, but that survival must be demonstrated, not assumed. . . . [And] even if [the historian] can show that a secular idea has been substituted for a religious idea there is nothing 'mere' about this substitution, since its consequences may be of great historical import." The point that the professor seems to be laboring throughout this book is that Enlightenment represents not just an alteration of the *Weltanschauung*, but a radical breach with the past, comparable to that which occurred after the victory of Christianity in the reign of the Emperor Constantine. It marks the end of "the Christian millenium"; the age of the Enlightenment rather than the age of the Reformation and Renaissance is the true beginning of modern times. The French Revolutionists had something of the same conception, for they began the first year of their calendar with the establishment of their Republic.

Professor Gay describes what he conceives to have been the attitude of the philosophes toward the Christian religion in a passage drawn, it might appear, from the famous fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon.

In its early history, its very origins there was something unsavory about Christianity. Significantly, it flourished in an age of decadence and among the lower orders, among men and women sunk in ignorance, vice, and despair. . . . It hammered out its doctrine, its discipline and organization among undignified wranglings, inane debates in endless assemblies, angry conflicts over trivial matters, mutual slanders and persecutions. Christianity claimed to bring light, hope and truth, but its central myth [meaning, evidently, the Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection] was incredible, its dogma a conflation of rus-

tic superstitions, its sacred book an incoherent collection of primitive tales, its church a cohort of servile fanatics as long as they were out of power and of despotic fanatics once they had seized control. With its triumph in the fourth century, Christianity secured the victory of infantile credulity; one by one, the lamps of learning were put out, and for centuries darkness covered the earth.

For the philosophes then the age of Christianity was an age of superstition, credulity, priestcraft, and persecution, and their rage against it, as Mr. Gay admits, blinded them to its variety, beauty, and learning. He might well have added that their enthusiasm for classical civilization inclined them to overlook, for all their love of liberty and humanity, the evil base of human slavery on which it was sustained. But on one point, he insists, the philosophes were right: that "the Middle Ages were different in vital essence from the ages that preceded and followed them. And they were different, above all, because they introduced—or rather, reinstated—religious myth as the deepest motive power and final purpose of civilization." Accordingly our professor calls his chapter on the medieval climate and culture "The Retreat from Reason," for in his eyes, too, it would seem, the people of those times were never so unreasonable as when they sang "*Païen unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit!*"⁵

The Rise of Modern Paganism is a work of almost overwhelming erudition. The author appears to have read not only all the vast literature of the epoch and to have examined all the innumerable commentaries on it, but to have studied all the idolized classical writers, and much else besides, including a bit of Freudian and Jungian psychology. The "bibliographical essays" at the end, in which he discusses this welter of books, cover 129 pages or slightly less than a fifth of the whole. He has little to say about the revolution, presumably he intends to deal with it in a subsequent volume called *The Pursuit of Modernity*,

wherein he promises to show "how the philosophes won their freedom" and "what they did with it." One gathers from the present volume, however, that considering their subversive audacities, they enjoyed a very high degree of freedom. Frenchmen, observed Tocqueville sardonically, "had saved one right from the general wreck—that was the right of philosophizing freely on the origin of society, on the natural principles of government, and the primitive rights of man."⁶ The philosophes had innumerable admirers and protectors in high places, among them Malesherbes who held for a time the strategic post of censor and later served as minister to Louis XVI. In old age he emerged from retirement to aid in the defense of the King before the Convention; fifteen months after the regicide Malesherbes and his son-in-law, daughter, and grandchildren followed Louis to the guillotine.

By the time of the revolution most of the important French champions of the Enlightenment were dead. How, with their much professed love of humanity and hatred of barbarism, they would have reacted to the systematized violence and terror pursued by some of their disciples, no one can say. A notable survivor, however, was the Marquis de Condorcet, the ingenious mathematician who believed that the laws of mathematics are applicable to government of states.⁷ He was called upon twice to preside over the National Assembly, but his last days were spent hiding in quarries and hedgerows and he died in a Jacobin prison, whether of old age and fatigue or of poison no one is sure. It may be said of him, though, that he kept to the end the faith of the Enlightenment, as his last testament to the inevitability of progress and the ultimate perfection of mankind has shown.

One cannot read much of the history of eighteenth-century France without being astonished by the degree of clerical participation in both the Enlightenment (e.g. Condillac, Malby, Morellet) and the revolution (e.g. Siéyès, Fauchet, Grégoire,

etc.) or at the eagerness of so many clerical members of the Constituent Assembly to "render unto Caesar a good deal more than Caesar's due"⁷ in the surrender of ecclesiastical liberties. But even those whose orthodoxy is beyond question were unconscious victims of the time-spirit and played their part in the triumph of the rationalist over the "mythopoeic" mind; at any rate Professor Gay assures us that

by the eighteenth century unbelievers and believers alike had lost the key to the symbolic language of mediaeval Christendom. It was not the philosophes alone who despised the Gothic cathedrals; pious monks rebuilt their monasteries, and cathedral chapters their churches in the Italian style, and in their rage for modernity, ripped up mediaeval tombs, and demolished mediaeval statuary. At Angiers the canons of the Cathedral of St. Maurice tore down fifteenth century statues, the old choir screen, and priceless inscriptions. They covered over wall paintings and auctioned off most of the magnificent tapestries. . . . Even the Benedictines of St. Maur, steeped in mediaeval manuscripts and historians to the bone, were unable to read the language of cathedral sculpture. The learned Montfaucon faced such sculptures with more piety than, say, his contemporary Montesquieu, but with no more comprehension. . . . And it was priests like these who taught the young philosophes in the schools. . . . The only rational policy the church found it possible to adopt was to turn modern, and it turned modern with a vengeance. Sermons and educational tracts continued to treat the traditional subjects, but they treated them in a new way, almost as though a philosophe were looking over their author's shoulder. . . . In consequence the confrontations of Christians and philosophes often have the unreal aspect of a contest decided in advance. . . .

It was then, if we can trust the profes-

sor's interpretation, a kind of unavowed *aggiornamento*, and he describes it in the words of Julien Benda as "the treason of the clerks." Whether or not there is a lesson here for the clerics of the late twentieth century, one may leave the reader to decide.

⁷Louis Madelin, *The French Revolution* (translation). New York, 1916.

⁸"Reflections on the Revolution in France"; *The Works of Edmund Burke*, Vol. III (fifth edition). Boston, 1877.

⁹Mr. Gay employs this term, without italics, for the various exponents of the several stages of the Enlightenment, whether French or foreign. Only a few, such as Hume, Kant, and possibly Rousseau, can properly be called philosophers. Most were literary men like Voltaire.

¹⁰*The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*. New Haven, 1932.

¹¹*La Chanson de Roland*, lxxix.

¹²*L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*.

¹³"A good law should be good for all men, even as a proposition is true for all men." The capital error of the whole Revolution lies in the dogma thus proclaimed by Condorcet.—Madelin, *op. cit.*

On Culture and Survival

The Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs: American Educational and Cultural Policy Abroad, by Charles Frankel, *Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1966. 156 pp. \$5.00.*

Must the West Decline? by David Ormsby-Gore, Lord Harlech, *New York: Columbia University Press, 1966. \$3.50.*

THE BROOKINGS Institution with the support of the Hazen Foundation and the services, as author, of Charles Frankel, professor of philosophy at Columbia University, are responsible for this first book under review, a serious, professional study of the educational and cultural exchange programs of the United States government. The main objectives of the study are to re-examine the purposes of these programs, describe the institutional arrangements