

Enlightenment and Tradition
Some Introductory and Critical Observations
For Symposium of the
World Evangelical Fellowship
considering
Scripture and Tradition.
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1. Introduction :

In an article of this size, for a symposium of this kind, it is not possible to comprehensively deal with this subject because, in fact, this involves basic problems for developing a critical appraisal of our modern intellectual traditions. This is the topic which Dooyeweerd broached in his schematic outline of *the twilight of western thought*.¹

Enlightenment is certainly "in" today. Whether it is the historical analysis of the mid-to-late 18th century, or the philosophical examination of the leading ideas of the *philosophes*, or in some other more immediate sense, earnest debate about the meaning of Enlightenment is taking place across the globe with an intensity that often leaves young under-graduates breathless and confused.

What is Enlightenment? This was the question which the great idealistic philosopher Immanuel Kant asked as he sought to lay a new foundation for philosophy, reason and science. *Sapere aude* - "Dare to Know" was his motto. This is also the question which many are asking today as they seek to come to terms with our "post-modern condition". In science and scholarship, in popular culture, literature, the arts, mass media, political life and among all sectors and groups, the search goes on for a renewed explanation of our human dilemma. And that dilemma in our time concerns the question of Enlightenment. For modern people this involves a search to discover the means of enlightenment and often this will prompt serious students to re-consider the meaning of the Enlightenment. The fervent promises of previous generations - whether atheist, materialist, liberal, individualist, libertarian or conservative - have become hollow rhetoric. For many the human condition

¹. Herman Dooyeweerd **In The Twilight of Western Thought - Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought** Nutley NJ 1972.

seems to be an onward march into deterioration, an inevitable slide into anarchy, a dark nihilism and despair.

In a critical observation about Australian spirituality, the historian Manning Clark observed that the Roman Catholics and Protestants depleted themselves as cultural formers by their life-and-death struggle with each other. Meanwhile, he writes, the "Sons of Enlightenment" wrested control of the well-springs of Australian culture by advocating political and other policies which appealed to a basic hedonism, materialism and pragmatism of the white Australian colonists. This, he says, is the historical account of how Australia, as a modern society, embraced modernity, and why today they are faced with, what he termed, "The Kingdom of Nothingness".²

So what is this world changing power called Enlightenment? And why should we consider it in a symposium devoted to "Scripture and Tradition"? In this context we seek insight, by comparison and contrast, about the differing views of Scripture and Tradition in and among the various *Christian traditions*. We could also have given ourselves the topic : "Enlightenment and the Bible", because there are indeed ongoing Enlightenment-based traditions of biblical interpretation.³

But we should not limit our discussion to Christian traditions. Why? Because as we struggle to develop a *Biblical* understanding of the nature, structure and power of tradition, as such, it is well to remember that we do so in a social and cultural context in which many traditions, with differing spiritual orientations, are at work. Moreover, the intellectual tradition which has flowered from the root of the Enlightenment, has been very important in determining current understandings of tradition in a general sense.

To be Christian in the Biblical sense means more than merely facing up to, and living in terms of, traditions which claim to derive their power from the Bible. We need to deepen

². Manning Clark **Occasional Writings and Speeches** Fontana/Collins 1980:79-80. Manning Clark (1915-1991) was the foremost Australian historian who attempted to combine rigorous empirical techniques with literary and imaginative intuition. His contribution has sparked controversy, possibly because his form of history-writing is viewed as unfashionable. See also his writings C M H Clark **A History of Australia** 6 volumes. Melbourne University Press 1965-1991; **A Short History of Australia**. Penguin 1987; **A Discovery of Australia** ABC 1975. Two biographical pieces **The Puzzles of Childhood** (1989) and **The Quest for Grace** (1990) which reveal his spiritual vision were published shortly before his death in 1991.

³. The recent contributions of such scholars as Barbara Thiering **Jesus the Man : A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls** Doubleday. Sydney 1992 and Bishop Spong (JS Spong) **Born of a Woman : A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus** Harper. San Francisco 1992 need to be carefully analysed in this light. A

our insight and strengthen our discernment about the spiritual forces inherent in non-Christian traditions. In particular, we need to deepen our spiritual awareness of the major spiritual tradition within which we, in the late twentieth century must now live our lives ... this is the tradition of Enlightenment, the religion of humanity.

Christian churches, the world over, struggle to make a good profession, against the myriad spiritual forces arrayed against Christ and His kingly rule. We take this to mean that our war is not a "civilised Christian struggle" against "Barbaric Paganism" as if the "enemy" can be solely identified with indigenous spiritual traditions of the lands where the Gospel has hitherto not been proclaimed; missionaries also struggle with the cultural baggage that they inevitably take with them. The "cultural baggage" which Christians from the West carry into a missionary situation includes their response to the dominant spiritual powers at work in their own "civilised" homelands.

But not only in the missionary situation is this spiritual struggle forced upon us. Efforts to develop a Christian life-style, and to build Christian organisations, must always come to terms with local conditions and their attendant spiritual direction. If local conditions and traditions are ignored then any Christian contribution risks impoverishment and irrelevance.

Christians in North-American and European settings cannot understand their own (Christian) traditions in isolation. Traditions are in tension with each other as expressions of an underlying spiritual competition for our allegiance in all areas of social and cultural endeavour.

2. Enlightenment Today :

It may be hard to face, but the major spiritual force which has dominated Western European and North American society in the last two hundred years has not been Christian. This same spirit, a religious impulse which offers to take all of social life with it, has in this century dominated the other regions of the globe as well. With an intensity for renewal that seems to be ever increasingly, the spirit of Enlightenment truly rides forth to conquer.

Now, when our time is widely referred to as a "post-modern" age, some are saying that we have come to the end of Enlightenment - we are told that we have entered a New Age. This kind of popular philosophy is driven by strong commercial and a consumerist interests and

utterly fails to understand the **depth** with which the Enlightenment religion engages in criticism and self-criticism, also of its most treasured achievements. Enlightenment claims to give enlightenment about enlightenment. That is its claim. The New Age movement gains its momentum from contemporary criticism of Enlightenment thinking, and in its claim to have finally overcome Reason carries on aspects of the same tradition. In so doing it shows that its claims are made in an uncritical fashion.

Just as the academic disciplines of philosophy, economics and sociology⁴ have been attempts to define and structure scientific thought based on an *enlightened* view of Reason, so also the various spheres of socio-cultural life - education, music, art and literature, politics, commerce, health care, etc. - have also come under the spell of its leading ideas. Marriage and family life have not been exempt from the attempts to re-construct human life on the basis of our supposed autonomy.

The kind of "rights talk" which uses the notion of individual right as a trump card in all political dispute finds its origin in the Enlightenment *individualistic* ideology.⁵ But so does the social democratic concern for social justice and a social system based on enlightenment self-interest. Moreover, the various liberation movements, that compete for recognition in public life are heavily influenced by ideas that gain their leverage and anchorage in the Enlightenment view of the supremacy of Reason and Rationality. Trade Unionism, Corporatism, Feminism, Gay Liberation, Animal Liberation, not to forget national liberation movements around the globe, are all indicative of the power of Enlightenment as a religious world-view. Competing Enlightenment ideologies can be found at work in political parties, welfare programmes, government bureaucracies, schools and hospitals.

3. The Origins of Enlightenment :

i. Historical When we refer to the Enlightenment, as an historical event, we are referring in the first instance to a period of time in the history of modern philosophy in which the idea of human self determination, the religious drive of the dogma of human autonomy, came to its most powerful modern expression. As Peter Gay puts it :

Narrative. Yale University Press. London. 1980.

⁴. An important attempt to trace this with respect to sociology has been Geoffrey Hawthorne **Enlightenment and Despair -A History of Sociology** Cambridge University Press 1976. A revised edition appeared in 1987.

⁵. Jean Bethke Elshtain **Power Trips and Other Journeys : Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse** The University of Wisconsin Press. Madison. 1990. pp.92-5.

*The Enlightenment, then, was a single army with a single banner, with a large central corps, a right and a left wing, daring scouts, and lame stragglers. And it enlisted soldiers who did not call themselves philosophes but who were their teachers, intimates, or disciples ... The Enlightenment was a volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science, the philosophes, in a phrase, were modern pagans.*⁶

The *tradition* of Enlightenment, enunciated by its leading proponents, includes the plays of Diderot, the stories of Voltaire, the jurisprudence of Montesquieu, the theory of knowledge and the radical scepticism of Hume, the polemics of Lessing and the critiques of Kant. It had French, Italian, German, English, Scottish and North American manifestations. It finds itself in historiography, economic theory, sociology, literature and later on in psychology. It is multi-faceted, cosmopolitan and revolutionary. It progressed as much by criticising itself, and its previous achievements, as it did by conquering new fields in ethics, law, metaphysics, and practical politics.

The Enlightenment is usually identified by the hundred year span beginning with the English Revolution and ending with the French Revolution : 1689-1789. As such it constitutes a potent historical nodal point for us as we try to appreciate the ebbs and flows, the waves and troughs, of modern history - modern history is the history of the world that followed in its wake. It includes the American Revolution, the birth of modern Europe, the gigantic economic shift from an agrarian to an industrial society. It now includes the so-called Third World. The "little dragons" of Asia are simply the most recent national entrants to join "the party of humanity".⁷

The Enlightenment, built upon foundations laid by Bacon, Locke and Newton, included an appeal to pagan antiquity, whilst claiming the entire globe for itself. It may have gained leverage from deistic ideas of a "skied deity"⁸ from earlier times, but it represented a

⁶. Peter Gay **The Enlightenment - An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism** New York. Alfred A Knopf. 1966 p.6.

⁷. This is a term used by Peter Gay, and the title of an earlier book entitled **The Party of Humanity**.

⁸. Basil Willey in his standard work **The Seventeenth Century Background** 1986/1934 refers to the process in scientific discourse whereby religion, or more particularly God Himself, was "skied". "Religious truth, then, must be `skied', elevated far out of reach, nor in order that it may be more devoutly approached, but in order to keep it out of mischief. But having secured his main object, namely, to clear the universe for science, Bacon can afford to be quite orthodox ..." (p.34) When this approach to science is compared with some of the more scholastically influenced passages of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which refer to the `great distance' between God and His creation, it becomes clearer why orthodox Christians could contribute to a further secularisation of science. Though they were theistic in theology they adopted an implicit deism for the other sciences, and hence provided a basis, albeit an unstable one, upon which the further secularisation of science would necessarily take place. This point has been commented upon by Keith C Sewell. For related

determined move toward an unambiguous assertion of human autonomy. In that sense the history of the Enlightenment is still very much alive.

ii. Religious Origins of Enlightenment: As much as we can discuss the "historical" origins of the Enlightenment by locating it in the 18th century we still must remember it gained coherence through its leading ideas - its religious commitments and its comprehensive humanist *Weltanschauung*. Therefore it is important not to speak of origins solely in terms of **when** such beliefs became current and powerful; but also in terms of **what** these beliefs were, **how** they were understood, and **where** they led.

Clearly, the Enlightenment is a religious movement. It is based in the religious confession that humankind is autonomous. People should make the laws that govern their own lives. There should be no law to which humans are subject that humans cannot control themselves. That is Enlightenment in a nutshell.

This confession does not mean that Enlightenment has been already attained throughout society and throughout the world. The affirmation of Reason in **theory**, should not be equated with the establishment of Reason in **practice**. It means, in the words of Kant, that this age is to be an age of enlightenment. Among other things, it was to be an age when the passive and docile pupil would be replaced by the active and critical student. In the modern age Enlightenment has been viewed as a function of education, an enlightened education system.

The core thinkers of the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung*, the leaders who set the agenda, were daring and audacious. They stood apart from their contemporaries not only because they wished to free themselves from Christian traditions, but they wanted to cast a new light - the light of Reason - upon these traditions and re-work them into a new Enlightened understanding of why the world was like it was. They sought to re-new Reason; to build a new tradition of Reason.

The modern world was a project, the absolute necessity of which forced itself upon their Enlightened consciousness. Light here should be uncovered to shine in the darkness there. The first Enlightenment thinkers took a new and critical approach to classical learning. They turned to it to argue that Reason - and not any ancient superstition - was supreme.

arguments see his **A High Challenge for Tough Times** Research Press. Melbourne 1992 and **That Was Then; This Is Now** Research Press. Melbourne 1993.

The rule of "Stupidity, Christianity and Ignorance", according to Hume, was at an end when there was Enlightenment.

In brief then the Enlightenment religious vision, which has dominated the western world now for 200 years, is an assertion of human autonomy, established by an assertion of intellectual independence from State and Church, and aims for an unfettered Reason which must be allowed to conquer all spheres in a sustained cosmopolitan crusade. This is not to say that within the Enlightenment tradition there has not been disputation and "denominational" conflicts. Consider the artistic battles between different *avant-garde* schools, in music, art and literature. Witness the intense, and often bloody rivalry between political ideologies of left and right. Individualism and socialism both find themselves in terms of the Enlightenment proclamation of human autonomy. Consider the battle between idealist and positivist, and the realist who claims to combine both. Witness the barely concealed *animus* between proponents of methodological nihilism - the so-called *deconstructionists*, and those who claim tradition to be on the side of a *hermeneutic* philosophy. And then there are those who seek to incorporate all warring parties into their **system**.

Moreover, the ongoing critique manifests itself in relation to ethnicity, gender, age. It is breathed into the body of pressure groups, it finds expression in alternative policies to reshape the market economy and the welfare state. In the terms identified by Groen van Prinsterer the Enlightenment signals the coming together of the religion of unbelief and the demand for revolution.⁹ The Enlightenment is a sect whose aim is a comprehensive, radical and total reconstruction of all of life.

Now when Peter Gay names this movement as "the rise of modern paganism" he adds that this should **not** be read as if Enlightenment is a retreat to a golden age in Greek Antiquity.¹⁰ Rather it is a concerted attempt to appeal to the ancient Greeks, and their Roman successors, to justify their pursuit of modernity and the rejection of Christianity. To put it in genealogical terms, the line of Reason does not come through Christianity. The *philosophes* believed that Reason has to be won in the present, and to do this the ancient

⁹. In 1848 G Groen van Prinsterer wrote a major tract **Ongeloof en Revolutie** that helped change the course of Dutch political history. It has been translated in full as **Groen Van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution** (Harry van Dyke ed and trans) Wedge, Jordan Station, Ontario 1989.

¹⁰. Peter Gay **The Enlightenment** 1966 p.8ff.

philosophers are systematically re-worked to become precursors and even advocates of modernity.

4. Enlightenment and Tradition :

And so the examination of Tradition, according to Enlightened thinkers, always involves a battle between two contending tendencies : there is Reason arrayed against Ignorance, Light against Darkness. There is Truth and there is Superstition. There were Hebrews (lost in the absurdity of Supernatural Revelation) and there were Hellenes (who searched for truth via the love of wisdom). The world is divided between the life affirmers and the life deniers; those who face up to their humanity and "the narrowers and the straighteners" (Manning Clark's term). Coming to terms with tradition meant a systematic sorting, on the basis of Reason, between and among the traditions within which we live and move and have our being. But the fundamental battle is viewed not in Christian and Biblical terms, as between the City of God and the City of this World, as with Augustine, but as between Reason and Unreason, between the Power of Enlightenment and superstition, between darkness and error.

There is much that is written and argued about Enlightenment and tradition. Let it suffice to say that Enlightenment had a view of tradition and its place in the development of humankind, so much so that we are justified in saying that there is clearly a doctrine of the two ways - the antithesis of a logical contradiction - at the heart of its world-view.

Not only is the Enlightenment a scholarly search to re-interpret the past with an eye to the forward march of Reason in the present; it was also an attempt to reconstruct the picture of the past so as to honour those earlier initiatives which were compatible with Reason's rule over all of life. In time, this would flower into a philosophy of history based on the idea of Progress. As noted above Positivist and Hegelian streams competed with each other, but they did so as alternative forms of the Enlightenment perspective.

Such ideological competition raises the question about the coherence of the Enlightenment tradition itself. Does not the ferocity of its tendency to ruthless self-criticism lead to a situation where the tradition cancels itself out? Does not humanism destroy itself in the name of Reason? Is that not what we have witnessed in the blood baths of the 20th century?

When it comes to the Bible it is clear that the Enlightenment is, at root, antagonistic to the confession that this Book is the "Word of God in the words of men". Christian thinkers

who have accommodated themselves to the Enlightenment in some way may find it difficult to "deconstruct" the Sacred text in the way that more radical hermeneutics is prone to do. But the underlying antagonism should not be underestimated.

There are those Enlightenment thinkers who would consign the Scriptures to the flames, because it simply represents religious authority standing over against, and above, the undoubted authority of Reason. Mythology has to be destroyed. Truth has to be affirmed. This latter is impossible as long as humans hanker after a Divine Norm for their lives. And after all, such hankering, as Karl Marx remarked, is simply indicative of a deep-down structural alienation, a search for an opiate, to escape reality.¹¹ But let us recall that this ultra-worldliness did not always lead to a denial of all divinity, as Marx tried say valiantly to do. Neo-paganism came to expression in various forms. Hegel's philosophy enshrined itself in a pantheistic pretence, Comte's positivism advocated a sociological priesthood, just as the goddess Reason had been proclaimed during the bloody days of the French Revolution.

Deepened insight is required here. Modernity has often been proclaimed as the Age of Science. But to unravel the various scientific traditions, as well as to understand the seemingly inevitable secularisation of science, we need to grasp the fact that science itself searches for its True Divine point of reference. When we see that Science, like all human activity, fulfils its calling out of an inner devotion to the Lord God, or an idol, we begin to unravel the spectacular and tortuous history of the Enlightenment as it has been manifested throughout the entire scientific encyclopaedia.¹²

5. Implications :

I wish to limit my comments to the implications for the discussion among us, as Christian people, concerned with Scripture and tradition. My comments are thus skeletal in character.

The full force of the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung* reminds us that a discussion does not necessarily have a Christian character just because we are attempting to discuss sacred topics like Scripture and Tradition. We can approach this question with a resolute piety and might succeed in giving an externally authenticated Christian gloss to the discussion. But if

¹¹. Karl Marx "Towards the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law : Introduction" in L Easton and K Guddat (eds) **Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society** Doubleday NY 1967 pp.249-251.

¹². The best recent book on this, developing a critique of theoretical reflection from a Christian standpoint is Roy A Clouser **The Myth of Religious Neutrality** University of Notre Dame Press 1991.

we have accommodated to Enlightenment assumptions about human autonomy our piety is merely fraudulent. Hence as we examine the place of tradition in the human condition, and as we examine the details of various traditions, we must do so self-critically recognising the fully religious character of our work.

The Enlightenment religious impulse seeks its own view of the relation between Scripture and Tradition. As much as Enlightenment is a religious impulse which would overthrow Christian profession, it is also an attempt to re-examine Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition. On the basis of Sovereign Reason it will claim that aspects of various Christian interpretations should be respected. But such claims do not negate the fundamental religious antithesis that is at work in the reading, exposition and appropriation of Scripture as well as in the analysis and interpretation of the manifold human traditions that are not Enlightenment generated.

As stated above, the Enlightenment does hold to a view which appears to be a "religious antithesis". It can do so because even if the powers of reason are deified, the character of theoretical thought, based in creaturely structure of logical thinking, is maintained. It is maintained not by Sovereign Reason, not by the will of human thinkers, nor by the Popular Sentiment of the Scientific (or any other) community. The logical aspect is maintained in our experience by the Creator who made us and all things. It is for this reason that we must make sure that our Christian thinking about Scripture and Tradition does not appropriate the Biblical teaching of the *antithesis* as if the distinction between Christ and Belial is merely a logical contradiction. The conflict between Reason and Unreason, between rationality and irrationality, in the Enlightenment Tradition emerges because human rationality is deified as Reason. When Scripture is exegeted in **that** way the Biblical tradition has been theologically overthrown.

6. Conclusion :

This is not a full discussion of the topic. There are aspects which I have not covered. There are twists and turns in the Enlightenment story that I have not covered. There are very important aspects which require further elaboration. For instance both the individualistic view (it is right if it is right for me) and the communalistic view (truth is a negotiated consensus) find their origins in the Enlightenment. The impact of both streams of the Enlightenment tradition can be seen in the way evangelical Christianity in the West, but

also now the world over, fights among itself concerning the assumptions that undergird a Biblical hermeneutic. Such controversy needs to be subjected to a concerted historical investigation.

The Enlightenment tradition is a variegated cultural and intellectual movement. It is cosmopolitan in its focus. It is global in its scale. It is a self-conscious opponent of historic Biblical Christianity. It has claimed many great achievements. It relentlessly moves on to bring all of its achievements into the light of Reason, and where Reason is no longer capable of maintaining its hold, a presumed human autonomy is its leading idea. Both Scripture and tradition come within its purview. That is because it is a religious movement which must give an account of all things. But as a religious movement it is being continually emptied of meaning even as it claims Reason and Human Autonomy as the basis of its endeavours.

A Christian understanding of the dynamic inter-relation between the Word of God written and tradition is one side of our attempt to understand ourselves in relation to the modern world and its dominant world-view. But the underlying conquering zeal of the Enlightenment, plus its manifold devastations, should provoke us to a serious self-criticism of our thought and our action, the traditions within which we seek to serve the Living God who in Jesus Christ has freed us from the debilitations of all idolatry and calls us to serve Him, to trade and build traditions that honour His Rule, in His Vineyard.

Brief Bibliography :

The definitive Christian critique of the Enlightenment philosophy remains Herman Dooyeweerd **A New Critique of Theoretical Thought** (4 vols) 1955-1957.

Also highly recommend is Peter Gay **The Enlightenment - The Rise of Modern Paganism** 1965.