

Enlightenment Thinkers Understood the Need for Religion



by Jeff Minick

In January I resolved to read Will and Ariel Durant's magnum opus *The Story Of Civilization* before the end of the year. It is now early November, and I have finished Volume X of this series, *Rousseau and Revolution*, meaning I should fulfill my self-imposed obligation under deadline.

The Durants devoted the last three of these eleven volumes to the period 1715-1815. A casual observer of *The Story Of Civilization* might wonder why these chroniclers of world civilization spent so much ink and energy on so limited a spectrum of time and place. Were they simply enamored with the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the age of Napoleon?

Not at all.

At the end of *Rousseau and Revolution*, the Durants remark, "So we end our survey, in these last two volumes, of the century whose conflicts and achievements are still active in the life of mankind today." (Despite this farewell, the Durants added a final volume, *The Age of Napoleon*.)

The Durants examined the political, philosophical, and scientific whirl of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and understood the grip of that age on our present-day politics and culture. Its philosophers, statesmen, and scientists—Catherine the Great, Marie Theresa of Austria, Diderot, Burke, Voltaire, Newton, and so many others—may be obscured by the mists of time, but their ghosts haunt our dreams and ideologies.

Of all the transformations wrought by our not-so-distant ancestors—the advances in science, the Industrial Revolution, the growth of nationalism and democracy, and a hundred other phenomena—perhaps the most profound cultural shift was, as the Durants repeatedly suggest, the jettisoning of Christianity. Among the learned of that age, atheism, pantheism, and agnosticism were rampant. (It's amusing to read in Durant how so many French free thinkers received their excellent educations via the Jesuits.). Bombarded by the pamphlets and books of the philosophes, and having lost its temporal powers to the nation-state, the Catholic Church in particular found itself very much playing defense against its secular critics.

Yet here is a curiosity. While philosophes and statesmen might mercilessly mock Christianity, readers of these histories will be struck by how many of these same unbelievers supported religious faith among the common people. They espoused deism, pantheism, or even atheism, but nevertheless believed order, virtue, and morality rested on the tenets of Christianity. Ludvig von Holberg, author of the satire *Subterranean Journey of Niels Klim*, can serve as an example for scores of these thinkers. According to the Durants, “The *Iter subterraneum* contained some satires of Christian dogma, and called for freedom of worship for all sects; but it recommended belief in God, heaven, and hell as necessary supports for a moral code continually battered by the demands of the ego and the flesh.”

At first, this cynical double standard annoyed me. It brought to mind the contempt of today's elites for some of our citizens, those whom Hilary Clinton's famously called “a basket of deplorables.”

As I continued my reading, however, my irritation changed to a grudging respect. Many Enlightenment figures understood they lacked a belief system to replace Christianity and its moral code. They knew that the great majority of people would not substitute philosophy or, more implausibly, reason, for their God – that the farmer and the laborer lacked both the means and the inclination to do so. What, the philosophes asked themselves, would become of morality if they tore down the cross and the cathedral?

We moderns lack such humility. In his recently released *No God, No Civilization: The New Atheism & the Fantasy of Perpetual Progress*, Professor Alberto Piedra notes that among today's intelligentsia, whom Piedra calls Wizards, “the more radical ideas of the Enlightenment are the mistaken notions that people themselves are masters of the universe and that they are capable of establishing paradise on earth.”

The goals of progressivism could hardly be summed up more succinctly.

Which is weird, given the history of the last hundred years. What, after all, were the Communists, Fascists, and Nazis if not utopian in their aims? These governments that murdered more than 100 million human beings, that built gulags and concentration camps, that brought us death and privation from Cambodia to Cuba: were they not all based on a blueprint for creating paradise?

The question raised by the Enlightenment remains unanswered: What moral code will replace the Judeo-Christian faith? Can we truly believe, after so many decades of chaos and bloodshed, that we are on the right path, that we will by some magic formula build a rich culture of humanism?

Given our history, the words of my long-deceased grandmother come to mind: “I wouldn't make book on it.”

Source: <https://theohiostar.com/2018/11/24/commentary-enlightenment-thinkers-understood-the-need-for-religion/>