

**Anton M. Matytsin and Dan Edelstein (eds.), *Let There Be Enlightenment: The Religious and Mystical Sources of Rationality*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2018, 304 p., ISBN: 978-1421426013**

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The edited volume *Let There Be Enlightenment: The Religious and Mystical Sources of Rationality* announces its theoretical ambitions from the outset. It sets itself against the classical paradigm which construes the Enlightenment as a process of secularisation marked by a progressive withdrawal from religion and instead advances an alternative genealogy in which modern rationality arises from internal transformations of Christian theology. The contributors do not merely aim to show, in a conciliatory spirit, that religion and Enlightenment are compatible. Rather, they contend that the very conceptual architecture of Enlightenment reason is constituted through a reconfiguration of the religious traditions of early modern Europe. This rereading begins with a critical revision of the classic historiography of the Enlightenment – above all Paul Hazard and Peter Gay – which imposed a narrative of structural conflict between *les philosophes* and religion. The editors demonstrate that this narrative rested, in large measure, on an uncritical adoption of the self-legitimizing rhetoric of the Enlightenment actors themselves, who fashioned their own historical identity by defining themselves polemically against a religious past.

The volume appeared in 2018, yet it deserves to be taken up anew. The assumption here is that, at the time of its publication, a broadly “progressivist” complicity within academic circles helped to stifle serious engagement with the highly stimulating theses advanced in its pages. To reread this book, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, and to reconsider its theoretical perspective is to retrieve an analytical instrument that has become indispensable in the present conjuncture: an age of so-called “woke religion,” of the algorithmic governance of life through artificial intelligence, and of the contamination of modern political life (in the full throes of Trumpism) by toxic remnants of misread political theology, deployed to legitimate what is now described as the “new obscurantism.” The task is to bring into view the theoretical core of the volume, whose philosophical, religious and political salience is evident.

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Even after seven years, the work has neither been sufficiently disseminated nor adequately studied.

Above all, the volume possesses the indisputable intellectual merit of articulating an alternative genealogy of modernity. Its principal claim is not merely that reason is not opposed to faith, but that it must be understood as one of faith's secularised forms. A further thesis, which arguably warrants still deeper exploration, is that the Enlightenment rests upon religious and mystical sources traceable in the writings of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals who have remained comparatively underresearched. Historical scholarship over recent decades – from the classic studies of Robert Roswell Palmer<sup>1</sup> and Alan Charles Kors<sup>2</sup> to the more recent work of Jonathan Sheehan,<sup>3</sup> David Sorkin,<sup>4</sup> William Bulman<sup>5</sup> and Ulrich

<sup>1</sup> Robert Roswell Palmer (1909–2002) was an American historian of eighteenth-century France and the Atlantic Revolutions. His classic study *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* sympathetically portrayed Catholic attempts to accommodate Enlightenment thought whilst drawing the line on core questions of sin and salvation.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Charles Kors is a professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, specialising in early modern intellectual history. His landmark trilogy – *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*, *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (1990), *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650–1729* (2016), and related volumes – revolutionised the study of Enlightenment unbelief by demonstrating that categorical atheism emerged not from underground freethinking but from within orthodox Catholic theological culture.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Sheehan is a professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. He specialises in the cultural and intellectual history of early modern Europe, with particular interests in religion, science, and scholarship. His prize-winning book *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (2005) explored how Protestant biblical scholarship and new techniques of philology transformed the Bible into an object of secular knowledge, paradoxically making it both more accessible and more distant from traditional faith.

<sup>4</sup> David Sorkin is a professor of Jewish History at Yale University. Trained in both European intellectual history and Jewish history, Sorkin has pioneered comparative approaches that integrate Jewish and Christian Enlightenment experiences. His magisterial book *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (2008) argued that the Enlightenment was “not only compatible with religious belief, but even conducive to it,” identifying a trans-confessional “Religious Enlightenment” characterised by the search for reasonable religiosity, natural religion alongside revelation, and commitment to toleration.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Bulman is Associate Professor of History at Lehigh University. His work focuses on early modern religion, politics, and intellectual history, especially the relationship between Enlightenment and secularisation. His major monograph *Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, Religion, and Politics in England and its Empire, 1648–1715* (Cambridge, 2015) reinterpreted the English Enlightenment not as a struggle for freedom against religion, but as a competition among various schemes for civil peace after the trauma of the English Civil Wars and Thirty Years' War. Bulman also co-edited (with Robert G. Ingram) *God in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2016), which synthesised recent historiography to challenge the liberal secularist narrative.

Lehner<sup>6</sup> – has decisively reshaped our understanding of the relationship between the Enlightenment, religion, and the emergence of unbelief. In place of the traditional story, according to which the critique of religion and the rise of atheism were the result of reason's progressive emancipation from theological constraint, these studies show that the learned theological culture of early modern Europe itself furnished the conceptual, argumentative, and institutional resources with which to challenge the excesses of religious institutions.

More precisely, the critique of religion did not arise outside or simply against theology, but from within it. Scholastic debates, the practice of *disputatio*, sophisticated biblical exegesis, and a rich tradition of confessional polemics created an intellectual milieu in which systematic argument, logical analysis, and the testing of doctrinal coherence were basic competences. Within this framework, the denial of central dogmas – such as the existence of God or the immortality of the soul – did not entail the abandonment of theological language; on the contrary, it presupposed its complete mastery. As Alan Charles Kors has shown, even the most radical forms of unbelief in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century France can be understood as the outgrowth of intraCatholic controversies, in which theology generated its own philosophical antitheses.

Similarly, Jonathan Sheehan and David Sorkin demonstrate that many of the ideas associated with the autonomy of reason and the individual reading of sacred texts have their origins in the religious practices of the Reformation and the Protestant culture of scriptural interpretation. The demand that individuals understand, judge, and personally assume religious truth played a decisive role in forming a reflexive subject capable of extending rational exercise beyond the bounds of faith. Enlightenment critical reason thus appears as an extension of internalised religious practices rather than a break with them.

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<sup>6</sup> Ulrich L. Lehner is Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. His groundbreaking work on the Catholic Enlightenment has established him as the leading authority on the subject. His book *Enlightened Monks: The German Benedictines, 1740–1803* (2011) demonstrated that Catholic monasticism actively engaged Enlightenment philosophy and science. His *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford, 2016) argued that Catholic intellectuals used reason and science to reform, rather than reject, Christianity, addressing questions of marriage, toleration, slavery, education, and church-state relations. Lehner's work reveals a diverse, global Catholic Enlightenment that integrated "the newest achievement of philosophy and science" into doctrinal modernisation, showing that Enlightenment rationality had deep Catholic roots.

William Bulman, for his part, has shown that confessional pluralism, religious conflict, and the violence of the Reformation era produced an “elite secularisation”, in which faith came to be perceived as one option among others, without being expelled from the domain of learned culture. This reconfiguration of the status of faith enabled the emergence of a rational critique of religion articulated by actors deeply rooted in theological traditions. Ulrich Lehner complements this picture by demonstrating that, in the Catholic sphere, the Enlightenment did not entail the rejection of religion, but an effort at doctrinal and intellectual modernisation, in which reason and science were mobilised to reform rather than abolish Christianity. From this perspective, the rise of unbelief and of religious critique can no longer be interpreted as the mere effect of a “liberation” from theology; it appears instead as the product of the internal maturation of European theological culture. Modern unbelief emerges as a possibility generated by the very intellectual success of erudite Christianity: a mode of reflection that employs theology’s own instruments to contest its premises and to reshape it from within.

A central claim of the book, developed and systematised on the basis of Alan Charles Kors’s work,<sup>7</sup> is that Enlightenment atheism did not emerge as a clandestine tradition of “freethinking”, but as a mode of reflection forged within scholastic disputations and embedded in the Christian culture of theological argumentation. The denial of God’s existence or of the soul’s immortality already presupposed a thorough command of theology’s language, logic, and conceptual architecture. Modern unbelief is thus presented not as a rupture with late Christian culture, but as its own offspring. This genealogy is then woven into a broader critique of the secularisation thesis understood as a process of the “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*),<sup>8</sup> as formulated by Marcel Gauchet

<sup>7</sup> Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> The expression “disenchantment of the world” translates Max Weber’s German *Entzauberung der Welt*, a concept he crafted principally in *Science as a Vocation* and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to designate the longue durée historical process through which reality ceases to be experienced as suffused with active sacred or magical forces and becomes instead amenable to rational calculation and technical control. Wolfgang Schluchter, in his *Die Entzauberung der Welt: Sechs Studien zu Max Weber* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009; rev. ed. 2025), has advanced a more nuanced reading, contending that disenchantment does not trace a linear path from transcendence to immanence but rather participates in a process of transcendentalisation wherein ultimate values grow increasingly abstract and remote from immediate experience. More recent scholarship – Mario Marotta’s “A Disenchanted World: Max Weber on Magic and Modernity,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 24, no. 3 (2024): 224–42 – has identified two

and Charles Taylor. In this perspective, modernity is defined by the progressive withdrawal of religion from the public, political, and cognitive spheres, concomitant with the assertion of reason's autonomy, the rise of science, and the emancipation of the individual. "Disenchantment" names a protracted historical process through which the world ceases to be perceived as directly ordered by active sacred forces. Social and political order is no longer guaranteed by God but becomes the product of human will and institutional design. Religion does not disappear but is displaced from its role as organising principle of the social whole and relegated to a private option or a source of individual meaning. For Gauchet, secularisation is therefore an irreversible process of social differentiation and autonomisation, in which modernity asserts itself as a posttheological order. Taylor, by contrast, does not define secularisation in terms of a mere decline of religious practice, but as a transformation of the conditions of possibility of belief. Modernity is characterised by the emergence of an "immanent frame", within which the world can be understood and inhabited without necessary reference to transcendence. In Taylor's account, the "disenchantment" of the world consists in the loss of a symbolic universe in which the divine, the sacred, and the supernatural were experienced as active and incontestable presences. In modern societies, religious belief is no longer implicit or obligatory, but one existential option among others, alongside secular humanism, naturalism, and various forms of alternative spirituality.

In his chapter in the present volume,<sup>9</sup> Charly Coleman argues that secularisation does not entail the disappearance of the religious, but an internal transformation of it, whereby religion's ontological legitimating functions are transferred to institutions, concepts, and temporal frameworks. Running parallel to secularisation is a process of "resacralisation", in which notions such as progress, political order, reason, or the nation assume traditional theological roles. This logic explains why the Enlightenment appears not as a monolithic antireligious movement, but as a field of confessional, doctrinal, and political tensions. Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and diverse Reformed traditions are presented as active sites in the production of modern rationality. David Sorkin is

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principal sources of Weber's concept: German Romanticism, epitomised by Schiller, and 17<sup>th</sup> Dutch theology (Balthasar Bekker), while also underscoring that "disenchantment" denotes not the disappearance of magical practices but a transformation in the naïve disposition towards the world, such that reality is no longer perceived as imbued with magical properties.

<sup>9</sup> "Enlightenment in the Shadows: Mysticism, Materialism, and the Dream State in Eighteenth-Century France," 247–68.

invoked to demonstrate the transconfessional character of a “religious Enlightenment”, while Ulrich Lehner’s work reveals the existence of a Catholic Enlightenment – reformist, modernising, and compatible with the values of rationality.

In recent years, a number of kindred studies have appeared, though none matches the conceptual power or originality of the volume edited by Anton M. Matytsin and Dan Edelstein. Scholars writing between 2020 and 2026 have examined the role of religion in the Enlightenment less as a binary conflict than as a dynamic interaction, emphasising toleration, secularisation, and moderate Christian influences. These works likewise contest the myth of total opposition, bringing to light Catholic contributions and the rehabilitation of rational faith, and placing Spinoza and his deism within more nuanced frameworks of liberty and democracy.

In *Rethinking the Enlightenment: Faith in the Age of Reason*,<sup>10</sup> for instance, Joseph T. Stuart contends that the Enlightenment permeated all spheres of life, including religion, without standing in strict opposition to Christianity. The conflicts of the period, he suggests, arose above all from Christianity’s internal abuses (such as Catholic persecutions), which fuelled the antireligious critique of Enlightenment philosophers. Stuart nonetheless advances a vision that remains only partially elaborated, concluding rather generically that faith and reason ought to balance one another. Another contribution in a similar key of conceptual moderation is offered by Jonathan Israel. He continues his series on Spinozist radicalism as the foundation of a radical Enlightenment committed to equality, ethical secularism, and the rejection of the supernatural by means of mathematical reason. In more recent works, Israel distinguishes between a moderate (deist) Enlightenment and a radical one, with Spinoza as the pivotal figure for universal values. Further contributions come from Rainer Forst. In *Toleration in Conflict*,<sup>11</sup> he examines Enlightenment conceptions of toleration, tracing the evolution of religion towards a rational unity, while Bendel analyses Spinozist secularisation, situating Spinoza between deism and atheism. Taken together, these perspectives link the Enlightenment to contemporary debates on religious authority. Yet they remain largely confined to the pluralism of the Enlightenment viewed from within a contemporary secular horizon.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph T. Stuart, *Rethinking the Enlightenment: Faith in the Age of Reason* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present* (Cambridge: University Press, 2013). The original German edition is: *Toleranz im Konflikt: Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

The volume edited by Matytsin and Edelstein, by contrast, has the ambition to address directly the religious and mystical sources of rationality. In *Let There Be Enlightenment*, a bold claim is advanced: scientific rationalism does not negate inner enlightenment but institutionalises and exteriorises it. The Enlightenment can no longer be conceived solely as a process of disenchanting the world; rather, it appears as a reconfiguration of the sacred in the form of universally communicable and perfectible knowledge. It is precisely this continuity that accounts for the symbolic power of the metaphor of light and its persistence in the modern imaginary of truth, progress, and education. Such a perspective has the considerable merit of calling into question a modern ideological tradition (in the sense of a hegemonic *Weltanschauung*) that has dominated cultural and educational discourse until very recently, portraying the Enlightenment as the absolute antithesis of any form of belief and of the “religious obscurantism” presumed to be inherent to Christianity. This binary narrative, now largely superseded by contemporary scholarship, reduces the complexity of the Enlightenment to a myth of radical rupture, occluding theological continuities and subtle processes of reinterpretation. For too long, this secularist *Weltanschauung*, crystallised in the nineteenth century through positivism and Marxism, has imposed a reductive picture of the Enlightenment as the triumph of pure reason over “religious fanaticism”, with Voltaire or Diderot routinely invoked as exemplars of militant atheism. In reality, the Enlightenment does not simply break with Christianity; it reformulates it in gnostic and rational guise, through secular discourses on natural rights and by assimilating Christian soteriological imperatives into an ideology of progress.

The merit of the volume lies in the way its intellectually fertile contributions demonstrate that modern rationality does not arise *ex nihilo* through a radical rupture with the religious imaginary, but through the translation of mystical motifs – illumination, transparency, revelation – into cognitive, pedagogical, and technical registers. The analogy between the transmission of light in optics and the transmission of knowledge in education, as it appears in the work of Jan Amos Comenius and is interpreted in the chapter by Howard Hotson, is not a mere rhetorical device but the expression of a profoundly unified conception of the relation between reality, knowledge, and divine order. In this view, knowledge of reality is not simply the outcome of empirical accumulation or rational abstraction; it is an innate cognitive faculty of theological provenance, inscribed in the very structure of creation. Light is not only that which

renders the object of knowledge visible, but the ontological principle that makes the intelligibility of the world possible.

Light, as the central theme of the book, mediates this passage and retains a theological charge. “Light” as a metaphor for knowledge is not an invention of the Enlightenment but a biblical and patristic inheritance: reason is conceived as a natural light bestowed by God, and knowledge as participation in the order of creation. The contributors show, each with their own arguments, that the Enlightenment does not abandon this metaphor but recasts it by transforming divine light into the light of autonomous reason, without severing the symbolic filiation. This continuity is exemplified by the figure of Francis Bacon, presented as the genealogical “torch” of the *Siècle des Lumières*. Bacon’s use of the prophecy in Daniel 12.4 (“knowledge shall be increased”) and of millenarian imagery reveals that the modern scientific programme arose from a theological expectation of progress and historical salvation. The progress of knowledge is thus rooted in a secularised eschatology. Such a conception allows for a surprisingly harmonious articulation between the theology of inner illumination and emergent scientific rationalism. Far from excluding one another, the two presuppose each other: human reason can know the world precisely because the world is already ordered, transparent, and “illuminated” by a divine Logos. The exploration of nature by means of optical physics or mathematics is therefore not an act of desacralisation, but a deciphering of a pre-existing order, a hermeneutics of creation. Knowledge becomes, in this sense, an act of participation in primordial light rather than a violent conquest of reality. This matrix helps to explain why the early modern passion for technical discovery develops in tandem with an intensification of reflection on education and intellectual formation.

The development of science marks not only the triumph of instrumental reason, but also the materialisation of a metaphysics of light. The metaphor of public illumination in European cities can be read in this vein not merely as functional progress, but as a social transposition of the idea of enlightenment: the ordering of nocturnal space symbolically reflects the ordering of mind and community through knowledge. The lighting of cities, the disciplining of the night, the transparency of urban space are symbolic expressions of a belief in the fundamental intelligibility of the world and in the human capacity to participate in that order. Technique thus becomes a vehicle of meaning rather than a simple instrument of domination.

*Let There Be Enlightenment: The Religious and Mystical Sources of Rationality* demonstrates that the classic opposition between

Enlightenment and mysticism proves, to a large extent, artificial. The religious and mystical sources of modern rationality are not mere residues of a bygone age, but conditions of possibility for the emergence of modern reason itself. The Enlightenment is defined less by a declared war on religion as such than by an internal struggle to redefine truth. The polemic does not concern the existence of a transcendent order, but the legitimacy of the authorities that claim a monopoly over its interpretation. The volume edited by Anton M. Matytsin and Dan Edelstein has the considerable merit of reintroducing into the philosophical and cultural agora the major idea that the Enlightenment must be rethought not as an era of total secularisation, but as one of reconfiguration of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Reason does not abolish the sacred; it redistributes it, moving it from the space of institutional revelation into that of nature, mind, and history. It is precisely this shift that explains the persistence of religious tensions within the Enlightenment and its deeply ambivalent character – at once emancipatory and normative, critical and dogmatic. Such a reinterpretation does not relativise the real conflict between certain forms of religiosity and Enlightenment thought; rather, it situates that conflict within a more complex genealogy in which rupture is secondary to continuity. The Enlightenment is not the negation of religion, but one of its historical metamorphoses – a metamorphosis that continues, often unconsciously, to structure the modern way of thinking about truth, progress, and knowledge.

The volume does not confine itself to assembling a series of historical case studies; it constitutes a coherent programmatic intervention, articulated from one of the principal American centres of intellectual power, aimed at fundamentally reconfiguring our understanding of the Enlightenment. The collective project advanced by the editors seeks to recode the Enlightenment not as a moment of secular rupture from the religious tradition, but as a masked theological event in which the metaphysical structures of Christianity are translated and rearticulated in the language of modern rationality. The intellectual composition of the volume confirms this synthetic ambition. The presence of authors such as Jessica Riskin, with her work on mechanism and vitalism; Jonathan Sheehan, known for his analyses of the political theology of modernity; Paula Findlen, a leading scholar of the relationship between science and religion; or Thomas Wallnig, recognised for his studies on Catholic Enlightenment, clearly signals a project that exceeds conventional disciplinary demarcations. The book operates at the intersection of intellectual history, religious history, and the history of science, integrating

these perspectives within an interpretative framework that entails – often implicitly – a political-theoretical reflection on Western modernity. Out of this convergence emerges a central thesis of remarkable theoretical consistency: what is traditionally designated as “Enlightenment rationality” appears less as a negation or abandonment of religion than as the last great metamorphosis of Christian metaphysics into modern epistemology.