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The Enlightenment has been seen as the intellectual honey pot from which the origins of the modern world were to be sought. As Dorinda Outram has noted in her *The Enlightenment* (1995), philosophers and political commentators have interpreted the Enlightenment in ‘the hope of defining the meaning and future of the modern world. The Enlightenment is probably unique ... in its attracting such interest and in the extent to which such philosophical interpretations have influenced the thinking of professional historians.’¹ For decades, the connection between the Enlightenment and modernity has been viewed as unproblematic. In his review of European Enlightenment studies *Per una storia illuministica* (1973), for example, Furio Diaz uncritically noted that the years c. 1955–70 had been ones in which hope for economic, political and cultural reform and improvement had been dominant. It was ‘natural’, therefore, that historians searched in history for ‘times and processes’ which reflected their own objectives of progress – and they found them in the philosophes.²

As the discussions in this book have illustrated, attempting to understand, define or justify the present through an examination of the past is an activity fraught with danger. Boucher has gone as far as stating that “[t]o impose present historical modes of enquiry upon past texts is, by definition, an anachronism”,³ and it is difficult to deny the essence of his assessment. Given that we write historical accounts primarily by subjecting historical texts to our own intellectual analysis, objective historical accounts are more of an ideal than a possibility. Historical accounts are, therefore, by definition, interpretations: to write history we must interpret texts. So, in the
practice of historiography, rather than throw our hands up in horror at a long-recognized dilemma, we have little choice but to live with the problem of anachronism and try to remain aware of its dangers. One of the most important elements in the attempt to reduce the anachronistic in historical analysis is of course to set the subject of historical study as firmly as possible in its own historical context. Unfortunately, in terms of intellectual history, this simple injunction is at times a very tall order indeed. As regards historical texts, on the most general level, the output of past thinkers reflects certain elements of the nature and current phase of their own society. The rank or milieu to which authors belong or gravitate towards, and the broader struggles, challenges and changes occurring around them, are often less detectable in the historical record than we might wish. Of course, texts also reflect moments and phases of the writer’s own more personal experiences, education and beliefs, yet those moments and phases too often remain insufficiently known to posterity.

Thus, even when historians feel they have ‘well-documented’ studies of individual thinkers, the full reconstruction of the interaction of the historical subject with his/her society and immediate surroundings remains an ideal rather than a practical proposition. So, in pursuing the context of a historical figure, a realization of the frequent practical limitations of research is necessary. Most importantly, for this present discussion, past writers rarely inform us of or acknowledge all of the influences acting upon them. After all, why should they have done so, when the demands of their present task – rather than intellectual confessions for the sake of posterity – were of course paramount. In any case, writers often take current common-or-garden attitudes, principles or trends as given, while others are considered as of no importance or deemed irrelevant and thus never appear in their writings. What was obvious to contemporary writers and readers, therefore, may not seem obvious at all to future generations. As Henry Guerlac has noted, ‘written history can only be highly selective’, partly because of the sheer mass of data available, but also because of the choice exercised by contemporaries in recording events. Thus we can know only what ‘the participants in events or those who came soon after ... determined that we should know. They placed in the intentional record ... those men and events which appeared to them as exceptional, striking and wholly outside the ordinary dull routine of private existence.’

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As we have seen, perhaps the most ‘self-evident’ and therefore tempting moment when searching for the influences which acted upon a writer is identifying a concept or argument in his or her work which had apparently been articulated by a previous thinker. The first point to make is that, on the subject of the Enlightenment, we ought to be very surprised indeed if pre-Enlightenment thinkers had not touched upon many issues dear to the enlightened. Why? Because many of the aspirations, political dilemmas, perceived social evils and controversies of the eighteenth century were still similar to those of previous centuries. So, in eighteenth-century works, ideas that at first sight may seem like ‘borrowings’ from the past may well have had their origin in the eighteenth century, but – and this is the crucial point – might still be justified via the citation of past authorities. For a philosophe to cite, for instance, Machiavelli in a discussion on political philosophy may or may not indicate the influence of Machiavelli. Polemicians of most ages and on diverse subjects have brought illustrious past thinkers to their aid, irrespective of whether their thought commenced with or was significantly influenced by that past thinker or not. The tradition of seeing the philosophes as greatly influenced by a reading of the classics is a case in point. The ‘influence’ of the classics is certainly not definable as influence in the simple causal sense or is at least not provable. However, searching in the classics for justification of their views and hopes for the future was a sensible tactic for enlightened propagandists. Associating themselves with the classics helped bolster their views against their potential detractors, simply because classical writers were still held in high intellectual and aesthetic regard, and were usually considered more politically ‘neutral’ than recent or contemporary writers. Thus what was normal literary/ academic practice and political prudence becomes, in the hands of historians, defined as definite influence. The same can be said of the supposed influence of Renaissance writers. As Boucher, for example, has commented, ‘to say that Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau all saw a role for a civic religion in order to secure adherence to a common morality and maintain obedience to the laws, is not to say that they all meant the same thing. What it does mean is that they all believe that a dual obligation within a realm or state is inimical to good order.’

Another problem with interpreting historical texts is posed by the tactics sometimes used by eighteenth-century writers to disguise
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authorial identity, primary intentions or influences in order to avoid the undue attention of the censor. But, of course, such tactics not only pose a problem for modern historians, they constituted a circumstance which early modern readers habitually had to negotiate. In principle, then, ‘mistaken’ or alternative analyses of texts may enter the historical record relatively soon after the publication of the text in question and may lay undetected for generations. This is partly because modern historians sometimes consider eighteenth-century assessments of texts automatically to have more historical credibility than later interpretations. Thus, Enlightenment writers, willingly or unwittingly, could consider a Christian text critical of certain proofs of Christianity – such as the Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* – as therefore antichristian, written from a radical Christian perspective only in order to avoid censure. This was a bold fiction of the philosophes, but one which has been repeated by a series of writers into the mid twentieth century. We know that all the evidence – and there is a lot of it – firmly indicates that Bayle remained a Calvinist. The view of him as a sceptic or philosophe has persisted (amongst some even into the present) because it also neatly coincided with the desire to see the Enlightenment as the duel between reason and faith, and thus the first key steps to modernity. Bayle was a Calvinist, yet at the same time we know that he advocated a more thoroughgoing religious toleration than many philosophes. This fact alone should cause historians to wonder about the role and nature of broader intellectual tendencies – in this case Protestant – which flowed into and helped form the Enlightenment.

The ‘public sphere’ and the top-down model of intellectual change

The recognition of public opinion as a crucial force within the development of the Enlightenment has been hampered by two factors: the influence of the concept of public opinion as drawn from the writings of philosophes themselves, and the dominance of the traditional top-down approach to intellectual change.

Chartier, for instance, has noted that the French philosophes themselves distinguished between the opinion of the uninformed, capricious and noisy multitude and that of ‘enlightened’ public opinion.6 It is very important for our understanding of the Enlight-
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 Enlightenment that we realize that protagonists of the Enlightenment often thought in this manner. It does not, however, oblige historians to use the reasoning of the philosophes as a predicate to their own research on the question of public opinion in religious change. The distinction of the philosophes between the rude masses and the enlightened again implicitly raises the question of whether historians can locate any fruitful dividing line between the enlightened and non-enlightened. As we have seen, finding such a dividing line is very problematic indeed, simply because we now know that the Enlightenment was a much broader affair than research into the various little elite coteries of philosophes across Europe has traditionally suggested. Sifting through the works of the philosophes for definitions of the people or public opinion will not, therefore, necessarily inform us about the reality of the relationship between popular or public opinion and religious change. I wish to argue that, in practice, the search for a clear distinction between popular or public opinion is a misleading avenue of research.

Even though Baker has indicated that the concept of public opinion as a political force in France was first raised in about 1750 in discussion on the controversy over the refusal of the sacraments to Jansenists,7 the formulation of that idea does not mean that public opinion as a political force had just arrived. As we have seen, the politico-religious events in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England (for instance the Sacheverell affair) and the furore surrounding the oppression of Jansenists in France in the decades before 1750 are ample proof of the earlier existence of public opinion as a political force. It can just as convincingly be argued, therefore, that the imputed birth of the concept of public opinion indicated that in a pressing politico-religious situation there was need to express a familiar socio-political power in new terms. It has been argued that the arrival of public opinion in the 1750s as a political force engendered a ‘new political culture, recognised as a novelty by contemporaries’.8 It is certainly the case that the Jansenist controversy was inextricably political and brought about a new broad political circumstance in so far as the King and his government were often on the defensive and quite unable to solve the problem of widespread and stubborn resistance to their politico-religious aims. The force that brought about that change of Bourbon governmental fortunes, however, was the traditional one of politico-religious struggle. It is true that printed matter was utilized to promote resist-
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ance to the King’s aims, but this too was nothing qualitatively new in itself. In any case, the most influential and enduring publication in that struggle was the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, hardly the embodiment of a new socio-political force, but clear in its understanding of public opinion as tribunal. As the editors of the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* wrote in January 1732, ‘[t]he public is a judge that they [King and government] have been unable to corrupt’.9

As we have seen, in the struggle against *Unigenitus*, the political balance between ruler and ruled had been perceptibly shifting since 1715. The situation in the 1750s could be described by contemporaries as a novelty because that decade marked the high point of that struggle in which the King’s authority had been defied, often with relative impunity. That defiance, often led by the *Parlement* of Paris, was grounded on the knowledge that broad support for defiance existed amongst the masses. Thus any attempt to separate supposedly lowbrow popular opinion from ‘educated’ public opinion in this context would be to misunderstand the very nature of resistance to the King’s will. Such an attempt would also be to underestimate the ‘sociological complexity’ of eighteenth-century urban culture.10 Evidence for the emergence of the new force of public opinion in the late Enlightenment, therefore, is not entirely consonant with historical circumstances. As I have illustrated in the final section of Chapter 2, it is much more convincing to argue that public opinion as a political force was nothing new to Europe, but that the nature and appearance of public opinion changed according to context. As one commentator has put it, ‘common sense suggests that there has always been some kind of collective opinion, as well as an array of different forms of public “interface” between the state and the people it governs’.11 As Campbell has argued, if public opinion as an unofficial ‘tribunal’ did not exist prior to mid-eighteenth-century France, then how can we explain the function of provincial *parlements*, or taxation edicts appealing to notions of ‘the public’.12

There were those, of course, who had an interest in talking-up the birth of public opinion as a new social force. As we know, the philosophes and other interested parties chose to write on what was new in the eighteenth century and tended to exaggerate their role in events or developments if they were deemed to realize or encourage enlightenment. More importantly, however, we know that most philosophes viewed the process of enlightenment in class terms. As
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Voltaire put it, the ‘rabble … are not worthy of being enlightened’. Given that this view was common, can we really expect the philosophes to be frank about the important role of the lower orders in the formation and expression of public opinion? As we have seen, however, the evidence demonstrates quite clearly that, in the struggle against the oppression of the Jansenists, the most crucial factor in turning the balance of opinion against the King was the unity of the lower orders and elements of the higher (especially in the form of the members of the Parlement of Paris).

The writings of the philosophes, therefore, cannot be relied on as a guide to the nature of public opinion in the eighteenth century. In this sense, important facets of the bottom-up process of intellectual change have been repeatedly ignored or suppressed. Historians in search of the roots of modernity have also contributed to muddying the waters. On the subject of public opinion, they too have wished to find in the writings of the philosophes evidence for palpably modern or proto-modern developments and have ignored telling evidence that there was no ‘birth’ of public opinion as such, but rather a relatively slow evolution of its traditional form, dependent on time, place and to a degree on the circulation of printed matter. Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) has been very influential in arguing for the emergence of a ‘public sphere’ in late Enlightenment France. According to Habermas, this ‘public sphere’ is to be identified with only one social grouping, the bourgeoisie, and in a set of institutions including salons, academies and Masonic lodges. For Habermas the Enlightenment public sphere was also a fundamentally secular phenomenon, and he attributed little or no importance to religion and politico-religious struggle. As one writer has commented, Habermas has been so influential because his analysis seemed to offer a potential solution to the problem of the relationship between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and his description of the intellectual life of late-eighteenth-century France is to some degree now accepted by many historians. As we have already noted, however, there is also a growing consensus that the Enlightenment was a broader phenomenon than has been traditionally understood – as illustrated so well in Munck’s *The Enlightenment* – and cannot be said to have been a phenomenon composed only of the wealthy elite. Rather the Enlightenment shaded sideways and downwards from the bourgeoisie into the lower orders.
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The idea, then, of a new public sphere inhabited only by the bourgeois frequenters of the salons and such like is problematic. Acceptance of Habermas’s view would serve to mask the reality of a more dynamic and interactive flow of ideas, in which the various orders had a reciprocal intellectual relationship, even if well-to-do contemporaries did not wish to acknowledge it.

It is incontestable that the public sphere grew in the eighteenth century, but it grew as public opinion – aided but not caused by an expansion of print culture and rising literacy levels15 – began to assert itself against the intolerant religious policies of confessional states, particularly in early-eighteenth-century France and late-seventeenth-century England. In the Italian peninsula the political situation was quite different and the nature of politico-religious struggle did not result in the same degree of widening of the public sphere as in England and France. In the Italian statelets the threat of Roman religious intervention tended to bind those critical of the Roman Curia to their immediate sovereign as protector of their ‘national religious liberties’. These sovereigns thus endured significantly less of a public politico-religious challenge than did the monarchies of England and France, with the result that the peninsula’s public sphere remained relatively restricted until the arrival of the French revolutionary army in 1796.16

We have seen how the 1670s and 1680s saw a widening and deepening of the public sphere in England as a crisis-ridden monarchy was unable to repress the broad surge of public outrage at its perceived Catholic-absolutist aims. After the ejection of Catholic James II, the new King was obliged to concede the Toleration Act and he and his government proved increasingly unable to restrain the press. Large numbers of the publications of this widening public sphere were politico-religious in content, and their authors were not deists or philosophes, but Dissenters and other discontents within and without the Anglican Church. Decades later, first-hand observance of this public sphere was of course the origin of the praise of English freedom in Voltaire’s Letters Concerning the English Nation (1733).17 In 1680s France, by contrast, the monarchy felt strong enough to openly pursue its confessional and absolutist desires by violently suppressing the Huguenots. The Bourbon project of eradicating Jansenism, however, was to prove a very costly disaster, serving only to deepen broad public outrage against perceived absolutist excesses, generate unexpected allies and, in the process,
considerably widen the public sphere after 1715. The dynamo of that widening public sphere of opinion was, as we have seen, a cross-class alliance of advocates, low-level clerics, and broad literate and semi-literate echelons of Paris and other cities. The post-1715 public sphere in France, like its earlier manifestation in England, was brought into being by politico-religious struggle.18 In both countries that sphere quickly broadened, stretching beyond the nascent bourgeoisie and its salons to those who read newspapers, frequented coffee houses and became interested in current religious, social and political issues. Most importantly, it was a climate in which ‘social and religious traditions seemed readily to have co-existed with newer forms of rationality and enlightened pragmatism’,19 so rendering the search for a dividing line between the enlightened and non-enlightened very difficult.

Nevertheless, most texts on the Enlightenment implicitly or explicitly portray the intellectual elite as cutting the path of intellectual progress, illuminating the route for the intellectually inert or docile lower orders. Given the educational advantages of the eighteenth-century elite (and those few from the lower orders who effectively joined their ranks), the top-down approach to intellectual change might seem simple common sense. The dominance of the elite in the historical record, however, has been widely construed as evidence of the only significant locus of intellectual change. This, as we have seen, is in good part because many historians have been concerned – consciously or unconsciously – to demonstrate that our present can be traced back to the writings of the philosophes, rather than to more fundamental events and trends amongst a much broader stratum of the populace. As Darnton has put it in his study of ‘Grub Street hacks’, ‘perhaps the Enlightenment was a more down-to-earth affair than the rarefied climate of opinion described by textbook writers, and we should question the overly highbrow, overly metaphysical view of intellectual life in the eighteenth century’.20

In principle, the issue of how far enlightened thinkers were constrained or aided in their intellectual endeavours by the prejudices, predilections and conceptual awareness of the broad masses can hardly be considered irrelevant to historians of intellectual change. If we should doubt the potential importance of the attitudes of the lower orders in the early modern period, then we should remind ourselves that the fear of a return to the chaos of the Civil War
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period haunted the elite in England for decades. Indeed, a similar statement can be made about the French elite and the fear of a return to the events of the French Revolution. As the preceding chapters have illustrated, the influence of the broad population on political and intellectual trends is indubitable as long as historians do not, a priori, rule it out from their research endeavours. So, regardless of the best efforts of the likes of Voltaire to keep the Enlightenment an elite phenomenon, there were social, political and religious changes occurring which laid fundamental challenges to the old regime. Voltaire and other philosophes were part of those changes, part of the process, while at the same time also a reflection of it.

Given the gamut of evidence available, we can confidently designate late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European society as one experiencing intellectual crisis or at least ferment. This notion of intellectual crisis was the type of approach taken by one of the seminal texts in Enlightenment studies, Paul Hazard’s *The Crisis of European Consciousness* (1935). The politico-religious struggles in France and England above all demonstrate that the increasingly broad and more complex intellectual world of that time could no longer easily be contained in the political, economic, religious and social corset of the confessional state. It is very difficult, therefore, to view the debates between Huguenots, Catholics, Anglicans and English Dissenters in post-1685 France, post-Civil War England and later in the Italian peninsula as simply an activity of the elite unconnected with and uninfluenced by the opinions, hopes and fears of society’s lower echelons. Few historians doubt that these conflicts were important, even central, in the development and expression of large sections of public opinion. Historians are, however, far less convinced, often dismissive, on the question of the relationship of those struggles to the development and nature of the Enlightenment. The task, then, is to identify the nature of the interaction between mass opinion and the output of the elite writers of the period. It is very difficult, for example, to see how we can understand changes in the polemic of English Dissenters in post-Restoration England and its adoption by more radical thinkers without examining the state–Church arrangement and the institutional disadvantaging of the careers of well-educated Dissenters. Similarly, antipathy to the Bourbon dynasty cannot be understood in any rounded sense without attempting to take into consideration, for
instance, the ‘desacralization’ of the French monarchy by its own clerics who in the second half of the century published telling moral evaluations of kings.21

Similar considerations must be brought to bear when considering the public sphere, for, as we have seen, it is not as ‘transparent’ as some historians have imagined. Surveys of the eighteenth-century press such as Censer’s *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (1994), while undoubtedly well researched, tend to miss the point. Censer certainly illustrates the growth of the public forum and the variety of its forms, yet unfortunately his research fits only too well the traditional drive to map the origins of modernity at the expense of more piercing research questions. It remains the case that the growth in the numbers of publications and in the size and nature of audiences for them provides us with only a very limited window upon events and intellectual change. The press is not a phenomenon which can be understood – in any historically meaningful sense of the word – on its own terms. The importance of the press for intellectual history lies in its relationship to general or particular attitudes, trends and changes. What periodicals printed is easy to determine, yet what was thought about their contents is much more important and is very difficult indeed to assess. Given, however, Censer’s concentration on the press as a growing phenomenon, rather than as a means of intellectual interaction and even galvanizer to action, it is perhaps unsurprising that he devotes just a few lines to the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*. We know, of course, that the evidence points to the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* having a prominent role in fomenting and supporting major resistance to royal authority amongst the masses as well as the elite. Yet, frustratingly – and without reference to the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* itself – Censer also feels constrained to refer to the *parlements*’ struggle with the monarchy: ‘From the *parlements* … emerged a critique of absolutism and both the suggestion and practice of a local government designed to provide for the individual…. [T]he Jansenists, with a long-term hostility to repression, developed a thorough-going critique of hierarchy.’22

It is by now an academic commonplace that the written word is open to misinterpretation or a variety of interpretations. That warnings about this fundamental difficulty are still needed should therefore be understood as a measure of how the significance of this elementary problem has nevertheless been underestimated. What is
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less frequently discussed or indeed recognized is the importance of the general problem of audience: as much attention must be given to the nature of the audience as the text itself if we are to understand its reception and impact. Even where this consideration has been raised, it has rarely been in the context of Enlightenment studies. Nevertheless, in 1985 Boucher, for instance, reminded us that texts ‘will appear differently in different company, and the essence of the problem of interpretation … is identifying the appropriate company in terms of which the text should be comprehended’. A text may appear to be fully articulated by an author, or authors, and although ‘the sequence of words remains the same, its capacity for evoking different meanings is incalculable’. The question of audience, then, remains crucial in our endeavours to understand eighteenth-century intellectual life. The direction of the discussion on Bayle encountered in this book so far has been that of the poor Calvinist Bayle falling foul of the wrong audience. Or did he? Should we be so presumptuous, indeed arrogant, as to allow the assumption that, because he was so infamously ‘misread’ by a few elite radical thinkers, he was generally ‘misread’? Did his Christian thought have no impact on the vast majority of his readership who were of course not sceptics or deists, but Christians (and principally Protestants)? From this point of view, much work on the place of Bayle in the dynamic of eighteenth-century intellectual development remains to be completed.

Boucher’s use of the term ‘incalculable’ may well be theoretically appropriate when discussing the inherent capacity of texts for multiple readings. In practice, however, the nature of the misinterpretations of any text will to an extent be circumscribed by the nature of the period in which the text is read, that is to say the context of its reception. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious oppression and dissent were still very much live issues and radical Christian critiques of religion and the Church were still hot property. As we have seen, in that circumstance we should expect to find some interested ‘parties’ declaring – in order to frighten off increasing disaffection – such radical Christian critiques as antichristian, that is to say deistic or atheistic. Many anti-Church or anti-religious thinkers also welcomed certain elements of embittered religious polemic between or within Churches as proof of priestcraft and the bankruptcy of contemporary theology. Yet the issue of narrative cannot be restricted to texts broadly within the
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humanities field, for narrative possesses the same inherent qualities regardless of the field or discipline of endeavour. Thus, even with scientific writings, the potential for a ‘misreading’ of a text was considerable, for science in this period – especially prior to 1750 – was also understood by many as one of various means of confirming or denying the presence and nature of divinity in the cosmos. Thus, for some, Newtonian science was a proof of the exquisitely complex divine ordering of nature, yet for others it was proof that God had only a remote or non-existent relationship to his creation.

If Voltaire and others wilfully misread Bayle (and it seems undeniable that some did), we could say it was a travesty. But on another level, utilizing aspects of a discussion for ends never envisaged by the author was part of the polemical spirit of that age (and remains so even now). From this perspective, such ‘misreadings’ and borrowings form an important part of the Enlightenment itself. Such borrowings and distortions give us a partial insight into an otherwise obscure component of the process of intellectual change and influence in Enlightenment Europe, serving to remind us that intellectual change is rarely a simple linear process. Recognition of this crucial yet often elusive aspect of the life of texts should prompt historians to attach much greater importance to understanding the various audiences for a work. It should also prompt us to consider carefully how elements of long-established political or religious traditions and polemics have been appropriated for ends not originally envisaged by their authors. One such example is the work of the eminent Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon.

In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–81), considered to be one of the Enlightenment’s seminal historical texts, Gibbon’s immersion in Protestant anti-Catholic culture is, nevertheless, evident. In his account of the medieval Church, he borrowed very heavily from Protestant historiography, although historians have traditionally not wanted to recognize it. Peter Gay, for instance, claimed that the contribution of Christianity to Gibbon’s historiography was ‘modest and subterranean’ and that he was ‘usually unaware of it’. Aside from the obviously impossible task of determining if Gibbon was actually ‘unaware of it’, the influence of Protestant historiography in Gibbon’s account of the medieval Church was certainly not modest. Indeed, his account of the medieval Church is so similar to the traditional Protestant view that his analysis – aside from his famous style – could be ascribed to any one
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of a number of preceding Protestant writers. Gibbon drew upon pervasive anti-Catholic historical caricatures deeply imbued in the psyche of most English Protestants, so much so that his caricature of the medieval Church was drawn upon by English Protestants, even moderate Anglican clerics. Was Gibbon aware of the extent of that influence? It is most likely that his estimation of the medieval Church seemed to him a self-evident historical truth which he duly articulated. This is, however, not at all the same as denying or ruling out general influence. The sketch of Church history with which Gibbon and the majority of the rest of the population of England were familiar was that of Catholic medieval priestcraft ‘exposed’ in thousands of different publications since the Reformation. So, the influence of the sea of broad attitudes in which Enlightenment thinkers thought and wrote can at times be at least illustrated with some degree of common-sense certainty. There is, therefore, even in this celebrated case, every reason to significantly qualify any notion of an exclusively top-down model of intellectual change.

We know that the development and popular dissemination of sophisticated anticlerical theories directed against Roman Catholicism and the Anglican Church were a pervasive feature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dissenting polemic. Even if it is a process difficult to measure, there is little doubt that this polemic fed, in various ways, into the thought of more radical Christians and sceptics. Elements of this broad process of influence are now recognized by some few historians; yet the search for ‘pivotal’ texts which set Europe intellectually ablaze and supposedly produced Enlightenment anticlericalism is still a feature of Enlightenment studies. The paucity of such texts and lack of evidence for their influence has, however, never seemed to present any deterrent to such endeavours, which brings us back to the issue of readership. The fears generated by the appearance or reports of atheistic or deistic texts in early modern Europe may well at times have been out of proportion to their number for very good reasons. As we have seen, we may include amongst those reasons the scaremongering tactics of apologists, the enjoyment of scandal and the titillation of the forbidden, but also the undoubted and vexing existence of anticlericalism and religious heterodoxy within oral culture. As Hunter has warned, with respect to late-seventeenth-century England:
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it is important that we do not retrospectively overestimate the
significance of opinions which have come down to us in printed
form, since there was clearly a more anonymous, oral dimension
to heterodoxy which caused great concern at the time and which
can be easily undervalued. In fact, this fashionable, commonsensical scepticism stands a better claim to being the true alternative
to the new science as the high road to modernity than Jacob’s
putative tradition of subversive radicalism. 28

Anachronism and toleration

The search for radical triggers of intellectual change is closely linked
to the question of the role of the individual on the historical plane.
The core of the causal model by which studies on Enlightenment
Europe operate has usually been one in which the individual writer/
thinker or at least very small groups of like-minded individuals per-
form the primary, if not exclusive role in intellectual change. This
model of intellectual change may seem a self-evident one to many,
perhaps especially to those who have been reared on the ‘great man
theory’ of historical change, that is to say the deeds and thoughts of
powerful, fortuitous or especially gifted individuals. Clearly, in the
history of Europe, the role of many individuals appears to have
been central to intellectual change. One need only note such names
as Machiavelli, Luther, Calvin, Hobbes, Newton, Locke, Descartes,
Rousseau and others. How would the history of ideas have devel-
oped without the input of those particular individuals? On the sub-
ject of the Reformation, for instance, we could say that an
expanding and changing Europe was ripe for religious change, and
that if not Luther, Calvin and King Henry VIII, then some other
individuals would have performed a similar role in breaking the
hegemony of Rome. Such speculative history is of very limited use
to historians, but it can undoubtedly serve to focus and restimulate
debate on persistently difficult questions. What can we say, then,
about the role of the individual with regard to the longer-term
impact of seventeenth-century religious, political and social
stresses?

This may seem an impossibly grand question, but it is in fact
connected to a discussion which has threaded its way throughout
this book. The issue of whether the Enlightenment should be seen as
a development external to Christianity is pivotal to the question of
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the role of the individual in historical development. The belief that the ideas of elite individuals such as the philosophes should be seen as a development external to Christianity has predisposed researchers towards an exclusively top-down approach to intellectual change: for only the elite and a very few others put such radical ideas indelibly into the historical record. But few, if any, have sought to enquire – aside from its strong common-sense overtones – what ‘external influence’ might mean. Individuals in all societies undergo socialization at an early age, and this cultural conditioning continues into adulthood. Consequently, we experience life within sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit systems of ideas or ideological frameworks. In eighteenth-century Europe, this framework was almost exclusively Christian in origin and orientation. Christian ethics underpinned most of the laws, mores and cultural practices of day-to-day life. The nature of the various organs of cultural transmission – including, for example, the family, the Church, education and the state – meant that the social force of cultural transmission was very difficult indeed to escape completely. But it was not, of course, a closed, hermetically sealed system, in which change never took place, otherwise one could not account for intellectual change on the macro or micro level. Nevertheless, the influence of Christianity was very difficult, if not impossible, to avoid, even by those few who professed to have left Christianity behind them and entered upon their own personal avenue of life.

It is not surprising, then, despite often exhibiting the most trenchant anticlericalism, that many radicals and deists continued to subscribe to some sort of Christianity or religion exemplified by elements found in the Old or New Testament. Very, very few indeed of the enlightened professed to having no god at all – as Porter has commented, there were few atheists amongst the philosophers. Unfortunately, this wide range of religious thought, and its marked degrees of adherence to Christianity or Christian concepts, has still not been adequately acknowledged by many historians who persist in viewing the Enlightenment simplistically as a box containing radical things of interest to them and their readers. Yet, the term deist itself, precisely because of the complexity of the religious scene, is of almost no use at all in explaining religious thought: some so-called deists believed in the revelation of Jesus, some in the precepts of the New Testament, others only in the Creation, most in the social necessity of a public Church (even if
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they themselves did not believe in the efficacy of prayer) and so on.

The very same cultural inertia which prevented the rise of any mass deist movement also ensured that the enlightened were often not the solid campaigners for the unsullied ‘modern’ principle of toleration as they have been traditionally described. It is time to cease the attempt to impose the modern concept of toleration on the Enlightenment, if only because it means that otherwise the Enlightenment will never live up to expectations. How, for instance, can the modern concept of toleration be reconciled with that of slavery, which was supported or at least not condemned by most philosophes? Voltaire, like many others, was never a champion of unrestricted religious freedom, and it seems – parallel with his views on the Huguenots – he approved of the English bar on Dissenters from public office. Indeed, as Marisa Linton has noted, not all of the philosophes supported the restoration of the public right of the Huguenots to exist even as an ‘acknowledged community’, though they promoted themselves as champions of toleration. Indeed, Voltaire showed almost no interest at all in the situation of his Protestant fellow countrymen until 1762 and the Calas case. The reason, as Adams explains, was that he was unable to forgive the Huguenots for the Camisard Revolt against the Sun King, seeing it as indicative of the politically subversive and fanatical record of French Calvinism. As a consequence, Voltaire had supported the measures which had been taken by the French state against the Huguenots and was, perhaps unsurprisingly, accused of resorting to cheap anti-Huguenot sensationalism in order ‘simply to increase sales’ of his writings. Indeed, if we approach the Enlightenment with an expectation of finding selfless radical intellectuals fighting for the liberty of all, we will never properly understand what we have termed the Enlightenment.

Without a greater understanding of the complex interaction of politics, religion, social class and the multi-dimensionality of the historical record and its limitations, too many students of the Enlightenment will remain perplexed even at the writings of its heroes. It is still a challenge, for instance, for us to understand how Voltaire’s Traité sur la tolérance could defend the injustice perpetrated against Calas, but still argue that the Huguenots were inherently republican, thus tending to justify the French government’s continuing denial of their most basic rights. Facing criticism on this
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point, ‘Voltaire replied that he had never said “that the Huguenots are in principle enemies of kings” but, he added, he was convinced that there was a good deal of truth in this view’.36 So much for Voltaire’s thoroughgoing toleration! Similarly, Rousseau stubbornly refused to become involved in defending the Huguenots. Although he put the case for Huguenot freedom of conscience, only in one work (Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont, 1763) did he explicitly put the case for Huguenot relief. As Adams has put it, ‘[l]ike most of his contemporaries ... he was not a religious pluralist’, but rather thought atheism and sceptics should be fought by citizens bringing ‘their public professions of belief into harmony with the established cult of the society in which they lived’ (my italics).37

In the early 1760s the tide of fortune did, quasi-officially, turn for the Huguenots. From those years Versailles effectively changed its Protestant policy, physical repression of the Huguenots all but stopped and, increasingly, key figures in the administration expressed sympathy for the Huguenots.38 As we have seen, however, this was not a victory for the philosophes. Rather it was a victory for an already de facto toleration, and the realization that religious division – as graphically demonstrated by the startling victories of political Jansenism – could immensely damage the monarchy. Clearly this is not the Enlightenment traditionally presented to readers, and presents us with a rather more complex situation than has usually been acknowledged.

Efforts to broaden Enlightenment studies out from the few canonical texts which have traditionally formed its core are still limited. Although a few scholars have reminded us that some of the enlightened saw the Enlightenment ‘as a process, not a completed project’,39 this has not generally translated into a closer examination of the process of becoming enlightened. Thomas Munck’s The Enlightenment (2000) is one of the few recent studies that attempt to do just that. Munck examines various strata of eighteenth-century society, and sees the Enlightenment as a process of ‘becoming’ in which the precise dividing lines between the enlightened and the supposedly ‘non-enlightened’ are very often unclear. The problem, however, is that studies such as Munck’s are still insufficient in number and range. As a consequence, the elements of context provided in the above discussions on England, France and Italy have rarely been recounted or contrasted with an understanding of the canonical thinkers of the Enlightenment. This has been at the cost
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of distortions within Enlightenment studies and the perpetuation of myths about the origins of modernity.

Notes

11. Ibid., p. 15.
15. On the Enlightenment literacy and education see, for instance, Munck, *The Enlightenment*, ch. 3 ‘Broadening the Horizon: Ways and Means’; on print culture see especially chs 4 and 5.
17. Published in French as part of his *Lettres philosophiques* in 1734.
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26 On the distortions of history propagated by Protestant scholars and polemists see my ‘Where was your Church before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of Protestantism Examined’, Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture, 68: 1 (1999).


28 M. Hunter, Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy. Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), p. 9. Here he is commenting upon the work of Margaret Jacob, who has promoted the idea of a radical, subversive English Enlightenment; see for instance her The Radical Enlightenment. Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).


33 G. Adams, The Huguenots and French Opinion 1685–1787. The Enlighten-
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36 Voltaire, quoted in ibid., p. 218.
37 Ibid., pp. 147, 156–60.
38 Ibid., p. 201.