



# The Triumph of Humanism

*The Enlightenment and why it still matters*, Anthony Pagden, Oxford, 2013

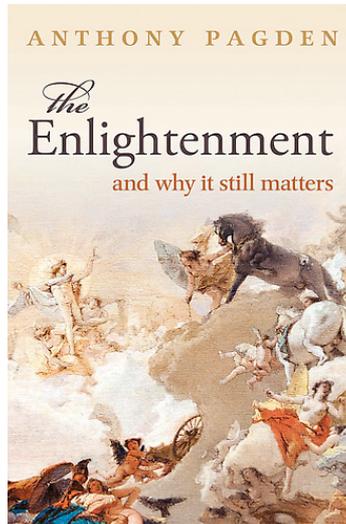
**H**UMANISM for everyone? Sure, it is not yet the case. Self-confessed unbelievers account for only about 11% of the world's population. Yet Humanist values and ideas prevail, at least in the west, and even where they do not, millions aspire to them. We are talking, above all, about freedom, tolerance, autonomy, reason, science, education, universal rights, and peaceful progress. These are Enlightenment ideas, but they also lie at the heart of Humanism, because they are universal secular values which emphasise our common humanity.

As Pagden writes in his stylish new book: "It is still far from clear what will finally shape the twenty-first century. But one thing does seem certain: that although the central Enlightenment beliefs in a common humanity, the awareness of belonging to some world larger than the community, parish, or patria, may still be shakily primitive and incomplete, it is also indubitably a great deal more present in our lives – whoever 'we' might be – than it was even fifty years ago" (p349).

Kant declared of his time in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that it "is the genuine age of criticism, and to which everything must submit". Baron d'Holbach echoed Kant in his *System of Nature* by saying that it was the task of every enlightened being to "attack the prejudices of which the human race has been so long the victim". As Pagden demonstrates, the biggest prejudices centred on religion, and the Enlightenment only began to take hold when philosophers questioned religious authority. Diderot, d'Alembert, Voltaire, Kant, Hume and other leading thinkers "effectively discredited the idea that any kind of religious understanding might prove a true source of knowledge" (p123).

Pagden concedes that the Enlightenment was an exclusively European phenomenon and that it could never have arisen except in a broadly Christian world. It was, in a sense, a form of secularised Christianity because, as D'Alembert affirmed, it is a truly cosmopolitan faith. Nevertheless, most of the major Enlightenment thinkers not only distanced themselves from the claims made in the name of revealed religion but also "rejected the very idea of a deity at all, or rather of a deity who, at some remote period of historical time, had made his intentions known to man, or took any interest in his affairs, or was prepared to intervene on his behalf" (p80).

Of course, there is a counter-argument. Basically, it says that in sacrificing emotion, love, tradition, authority and religious faith on the altar of reason, science and misguided utopianism, the Enlightenment led to the guillotine and eventually to the Holocaust. Napoleon and ultimately Hitler are the true inheritors of Enlightenment values.



Critics like John Gray (see *New Statesman*, 14th June) draw parallels with Christianity. Many Christians will angrily deny that their teachings played any part in the Inquisition or even the Troubles in Northern Ireland. A religion of love, they splutter, has nothing to do with such hateful crimes. Similarly, Enlightenment evangelists respond to the fact that some of the worst crimes have been committed by militant secular regimes with incredulity: how could a philosophy of reason and humanity be involved in anything so irrational and inhuman?

This highly flawed analysis ignores a fundamental historical truth: Enlightenment values did not actually take hold in the wider society until the second half of the last century. There was a counter-Enlightenment spearheaded by thinkers like Rousseau, Burke, Herder and de Maistre, which advocated tradition and religion, a spiritual dimension, a suspicion of science and education, an emphasis on instinct and feelings, divisions between people on grounds of culture, language, ethnicity, religion etc., and a belief in force and war as purging and liberating characteristics of the human condition. It was these counter-Enlightenment ideas that were eventually followed through in all their brutal logic by the totalitarian regimes of the early 20th century.

Nationalism, imperialism and militarism developed during the 19th century as the ruling ideas. Liberal thinkers in Europe, anxious not to defend autocratic monarchies and empires, latched on to nationalism as the political embodiment of 'liberation' and 'self-determination'. After all, the entire basis of the Enlightenment was the liberation of the individual from traditional beliefs. But in most western societies nationalism was a romantic, militaristic, closed, exclusive ideology which subsumed the individual into the 'nation' and stressed the differences between 'nations', rather than an open and inclusive philosophy that promoted the essential unity of humankind, despite their differences.

In short, the Enlightenment was betrayed by a divisive and destructive nationalism, aided and abetted in many cases by fundamentalist ideologies, both religious and secular. The horrors of the early 20th century have reawakened the western world to the values and ideals of the 18th century philosophers. Pagden stresses one truth above all others: man, they realised, is neither a creation of a god nor a selfish pursuer of his own interests; instead, fundamentally, he is the friend of man.

This cosmopolitan idea of universal sympathy and brotherhood, more than reason or science, was at the core of the Enlightenment project, just as it is at the heart of Humanism. This is why the Enlightenment still matters and why Humanism, in embodying Enlightenment principles, is the future hope of humankind. □