

# 1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

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**SPECIAL FEATURE**

**THE CATHOLIC  
ENLIGHTENMENT**

## SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

# THE CATHOLIC ENLIGHTENMENT

Theodore E. D. Braun

 Although the idea for a Special Feature on the Catholic Enlightenment<sup>1</sup> came to me as a result of the 2008 meeting of East-Central/American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and the 2009 meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, the Catholic Enlightenment had long been a subject of my research, especially on Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan (1709–1784). He had always been called an *anti-philosophe*, despite the fact that he looked all his life for truth. As a lawyer and judge, this meant knowing the law and its interpretation through the years and centuries.<sup>2</sup> As a historian and archeologist, he needed to know as much as he could of the past, assemble his facts and artifacts, and

<sup>1</sup> This term is a direct translation of *Lumières catholiques*, which I found in an article by Marc Fumaroli, "L'Anti-Émile: Voltaire et ses éducateurs jésuites," *Revue Voltaire* 3 (2003), 222.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, his *Dissertation sur les biens nobles*, 1749 (Paris 1758) and the *Observations sur le vingtième*, 1756, published in the same volume as the *Dissertation sur les biens nobles*, both of which deal with French law and customs as they evolved over centuries.

check ancient histories and chronicles.<sup>3</sup> As a translator of the Bible, he worked from the Greek and Latin texts, languages he had learned at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, but for greater exactitude he also learned Hebrew under the tutelage of the Benedictine monk, Dom Jean-Joseph Pont, and shows in some of his notes and presentations of his *Poésies sacrées* the fruits of his erudition.<sup>4</sup> He put his thoughts on this matter in the middle of the third Epistle of Book II of his *Epîtres*, a poem he had written in 1738:

Soyons de notre esprit les seuls législateurs.  
Vivons libres du moins dans le fond de nos coeurs:  
C'est le trône de l'homme; il règne quand il pense.  
L'âme est un être pur, fait pour l'indépendance;  
Qui veut l'assujettir en brise les ressorts,  
Et lui fait partager les disgrâces du corps.  
Jugeons, examinons, c'est là notre apanage.  
Cherchons la vérité dans son épais nuage;  
Mais que par la raison nos doutes soient bornés  
Aux objets que le ciel nous a subordonnés.  
Qu'ils ne s'élèvent pas jusqu'au Maître suprême.<sup>5</sup>

[Let us be the only law-givers of our minds.  
Let us live free, at least in the depths of our hearts:  
Our mind is our throne, it rules when we think.  
The soul is a pure being, made for independence;  
Whoever tries to control it destroys its mechanism,  
And makes it suffer the weaknesses of the body.  
Let us judge, let us examine, that's where our glory lies.  
Let us seek out truth hidden behind its thick clouds;  
But may our reason set limits to our doubts  
Within the bounds that Heaven has set for us.  
Let our doubts never rise to the existence of God.]

<sup>3</sup> See his *De Antiquitatibus Cadurcorum, ad Academiam Cortonensem epistola*...1745 (Paris 1746), in which he tries to prove that Cahors, in the time of the Gauls, was the site of an important settlement.

<sup>4</sup> The *Poésies sacrées* were published in 1751 (with further editions in 1753 and 1754), and greatly expanded in 1763 (and as part of his *Oeuvres* in 1784).

<sup>5</sup> *Oeuvres* (Paris 1784), II, 213.

The spirit of this poem is the spirit of the Catholic Enlightenment, and the sense of faith expressed in it is what makes it different from the secular Enlightenment, often called the French Enlightenment. I had come to think, as early as the 1970s, that there was ground between the secular philosophy of the "French Enlightenment" and the faith-blinded beliefs of the more conservative side of the Catholic Church in France of the eighteenth century. And now I could find a word for this middle space. There is much talk, particularly in the articles dealing with Spain and Spanish America in this Special Feature, of the French Enlightenment; but the Enlightenment in France also had a Catholic side to it. And in the articles that follow we see that side of the Enlightenment reflected not only in France, but also in Peru, Spain, and Germany.

We begin our exploration of this phenomenon in Peru and move progressively eastward, first to Spain where two articles show differing aspects of it; then to the trans-Pyrenees region in a transitional article showing how Spain was reflected in France through the eyes of Voltaire and Italy through the eyes of Sade; then to France, where we encounter numerous *abbés* and other Catholic clerics writing for the *Encyclopédie* (which is often thought of as an anti-Catholic publication and is taken to be a symbol of the French Enlightenment), and end our itinerary in Germany, where we go inside the walls of Benedictine monasteries and find a surprisingly lively spirit of Enlightenment. The articles on Peninsular and Colonial Spain take us from the 1730s to about the time of the downfall of Napoleon, and deal with literary texts in various genres and with the scientific knowledge that formed a basis for much of what they were advancing. The authors studied are scholarly, desirous of reform in government and the Church, are rooted in their religious faith, and see the importance of the scientific discoveries and new theories of their era.<sup>6</sup>

Renee Gutiérrez offers us one example of an early Enlightenment figure who evidenced the union of science and religion documented by careful bibliographic citation: Pedro de Peralta Barnuevo Rocha y Benavides. The Peruvian scholar and statesman wrote the epic poem *Lima fundada* (1732) about Spanish Conquistador Fernando Pizarro's conquest of the Inca federa-

<sup>6</sup> My own religious beliefs notwithstanding, I have been and remain a firm believer in the separation of church and state and in the principles of the secular Enlightenment. But I also believe that it is high time for all of us to examine the religious point of view, which has been too often minimized and marginalized and derided by scholars of the leaders of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire, Rousseau, Condorcet, Diderot, D'Alembert, and the others.

tion. Peralta annotates his octaves with a multitude of scholars, works, and ideas as well as unifying science and religion within the verses themselves. His approach is emblematic of the Catholic Enlightenment. Moving eastward across the Atlantic, Elizabeth Franklin Lewis takes us to Spain where in 1750 Bernardo Ward published *Obra pía* and in 1762 his *Proyecto económico*. We can see the shift in emphasis in dealing with the poor from a sense of Church-directed charity to a more modern and more secular concept aiming at providing employment for those without work. Mark Malin leads us, through an exploration of two novels from the end of the eighteenth century, to the split between traditionalism and orthodoxy on the one hand, and a desire for enlightened reform on the other: Antonio Valladares y Sotomayor's *La Leandra* (1797) and Luis Gutiérrez's *Cornelia Bororquia* (1801). This shift in emphasis mirrors the change from the enlightened despotism of Carlos III and the return to the orthodoxy and repression of the past during the reign of Carlos IV.

Frédéric Conrod takes us on a journey to Spain and Italy as seen from France, or more precisely as reflected in the thought of Voltaire and Sade expressed in their works. Interestingly, Voltaire had never been to Spain, nor had Sade ever been to Italy, and so the countries and the societies they describe are in large measure imaginary. But their explorations are fascinating. Then Robert Frail discusses the writings of a number of defrocked or former French priests (*abbés*) who contributed a great many articles to the *Encyclopédie* on a broad variety of subjects. Their erudition and their independent spirits seem surprising for men who were raised in the rather confining walls of official Catholic beliefs. Finally, Ulrich Lehner, opens up the walls of Benedictine monasteries in Bavaria, where truly remarkable events took place in the period studied, including in some cases a laicization of the monks' way of life, their philosophy, and their exposure to new ideas.

All in all, readers of this Special Feature will, I am sure, come away from the articles presented here with a healthier, more robust, and more nuanced sense of what the Enlightenment was. After all, the British Enlightenment presents numerous points of convergence with those of the Catholic Enlightenment. The arguments and the debates in these articles should make for a lively new look at Enlightenment studies in Catholic Europe.