

THE REGULATORY FUNCTION OF RELIGION IN SOCIAL CONTROL. ENLIGHTENMENT CONCEPTS

by Ryszard Stefański

Andrzej Wierciński (1930–2003) wrote that the period Enlightenment (he did not use the term, however) saw the separation of philosophy¹ and religion² as a consequence of the development of empirical sciences, mathematics and logic:

The rationalised philosophical world-model was advanced to the rank of an ICS [Ideological Control Subsystem]. Its institutional carriers were bourgeois groups and political parties which caused the first breakdown in the feudal system during the French and American Revolution³.

Mechanicism was therefore to replace animism as a principal generator of the world-view⁴. Wierciński's approach does not contradict the perspec-

¹ The essence of philosophy is „a rational and general model of the world which is verbal and employs highly abstract notions.” A. Wierciński, *Magia i religia. Szkice z antropologii religii* [Magic and religion. Essays on the anthropology of religion], Kraków 1994, p. 98.

² Religion is defined as „the part of spiritual culture being an organised system of magical and religious beliefs including moral, ethical and ritual rules of conduct. It forms an IPs with institutional carriers, as well as magic and sacral artifacts.”, op.cit., p. 95.

³ Ibidem, p. 100.

⁴ World-view (Weltanschauung): „World-view means an individually generated, however socially disseminated general world model which determines the human stance

tive generally accepted by historians. Probably never before had the fight against revealed religions, including Roman Catholicism, been so intense. The best example is the attitude of Enlightenment authors towards Catholicism and church institutions.

Diderot⁵ ridicules the concept of Trinity. The divine persons are either three accidents or three substances. In the first case Christians are either atheists or deists. If the persons are three substances, the Christians are pagans⁶. How to conceive the unity of divine will, and how to make the “catholic verbiage” agree with it? God the Father is vengeful, the Son merciful and the Holy Ghost neutral⁷.

Why God gives the first law to man and then abolishes it—perhaps He had made a mistake first?⁸ How could God make himself die in order to appease himself (“Ce Dieu, qui fait mourir Dieu pour apaiser Dieu”)?⁹ But that is not all— if grace is necessary in order to do good, then of what use was Christ’s death?¹⁰ The nonsense of Christianity is also evident from the relation of God to man. How to explain the payment of the sin of the first mother Eve? What did female animals do to God that they too give birth in pain?¹¹ The Christian God is a father who cares much of his apples and very little of his children¹².

How could a theologian prove the divine authorship of the Bible? There are tens of apocrypha, so which book contains the true words of God? The

and the sense of human actions. A world-view determines general truths concerning the universe and means of unravelling them, as well as general aims and means of achieving them, i.e. comprehensive human strategies. World-views satisfy the need of comprehensive cognition and explanation of the structure of the universe thereby supplying a motivated and conscious meaning to human actions.”, op.cit., p. 88, 90.

⁵ Diderot’s works are cited according to Assézat–Tourneux edition (*Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. Jean Assézat & Maurice Tourneux, Garnier Frères, Paris 1875–1877), as „*ŒcD*” with respective volume and page numbers.

⁶ D. Diderot, *Addition aux Pensées philosophiques ou objections diverses contre les écrits de différents théologiens*, pt. XLVI, [in:] *ŒcD* 1, p. 165.

⁷ Loc.cit., pt. XLVII.

⁸ D. Diderot, *La Promenade du Sceptique ou les Allées*, [in:] *ŒcD* 1, p. 191.

⁹ D. Diderot, *Addition aux Pensées philosophiques*, pt. XL, p. 164.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pt. XIV, p. 160.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pt. XXXVII, p. 163.

¹² *Ibidem*, pt. XVI, p. 160.

internal inconsistency of the Bible is best proven by the Gospels. Facts concerning the life of Jesus are sometimes given by one Evangelist and omitted by the others.¹³ It is an unexampled impudence to cite the conformity of the writers of the Gospels. Even if the facts were described there, one cannot be sure whether translations are correct as there is no certainty concerning the fidelity of copies of original manuscripts etc.¹⁴

Helvetius¹⁵ claims that the only lesson from the history of revealed religions is that intolerance causes wars, destruction and the shedding of innocent blood, never any improvement in human conduct¹⁶. The cult of Jesus Christ did not make rulers and ordinary people any better. He compares a pious Portuguese, who not more virtuous than a less credulous one, however more tolerant than an educated Englishman¹⁷. Fanatics of the Christian superstition desire only to render man stupid, as fools are easier to manipulate. The bigots commit the care of making men brute to “the scholastics, for of all the sons of Adam they are the most stupid and conceited”¹⁸.

The clergy, motivated only by greed, promoted ignorance, allowed and even encouraged the trade in indulgences and transferring property to the Church for a prize to be received in an imaginary heaven. Helvetius condemned these practices, adding that a religion which makes people poor in spirit precludes their will to development and perfection. Therefore the interest of the clergy has always contradicted the public good. Moreover, the Catholic Church introduced celibacy to bind priests to its interest, hoping that those who live in ease without wives and children will be more and more attached to their institution thus becoming more loyal to their superiors¹⁹. Secular despots are defended by their armies, and the power

¹³ Ibidem, pt. XLIV, p. 164.

¹⁴ D. Diderot, „Bible”, *CEd* 13, p. 432–433.

¹⁵ Helvétius’ works are cited according to the 5-volume London edition (*Œuvres complètes de M. Helvétius*, no publ., London 1781), as „*EcH*” with respective volume and page numbers.

¹⁶ C.A. Helvétius, *De l’homme, de ses facultés intellectuelles & de son éducation*, Vol. I, [in:] *CEcH* 3, Sect. III, Chap. XVIII.

¹⁷ C.A. Helvétius, *De l’homme*, Vol. II, [in:] *CEcH* 4, Sect. VII, Chap. I, especially p. 137.

¹⁸ Ibidem., Vol. I, p. 6 (W. Hooper’s translation).

¹⁹ Ibidem, Sect. I, Chap. XII, especially p. 52.

of the Roman Church is guaranteed by the Inquisition and Jesuits. The Inquisition applied direct terror against people considered dangerous or whose property was to be seized²⁰.

The father of philosophers, as Voltaire²¹ was sometimes called, wrote in *Notice to the public concerning the parricides alleged against the Calas and Sirven families*, that monks were the worst pestilence. They depraved people and were enemies of the human race. They resigned from tasting the fruits of life in society, so obviously began to hate people²². Monastic life goes against natural law, as men were not created for solitary life: they should live with their families and communities. Those who behaved in such an unnatural way got rid of their humanity using lies and violence to maintain their power. Certainly, the institution of confession is an important instrument of subjection of secular power to the ecclesiastical one²³. Religious orders turn against each other, officially motivated by doctrinal controversies (as did Franciscans and Dominicans in the case of the Immaculate Conception)²⁴, however the real reason is money. The most degenerated order is the Society of Jesus. Voltaire denounces them as conspirators and murderers of clerics, infidels and representatives of secular authorities²⁵. Happily the king abolished the order when he realised that the authorities and the whole of society were in a mortal danger²⁶. Many similar remarks concerning the Church can be quoted, some of them arising from anticlerical resentment, some from deeper insight.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 190.

²¹ Voltaire's works are cited according to the Moland edition (*Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland, Garnier Frères, 1877–1885), as „ŒcV” with respective volume and page numbers.

²² Voltaire, *Avis au public sur les parricides imputés aux Calas et aux Sirven*, [in:] ŒcV 25, p. 531–532.

²³ Ibidem, p. 524.

²⁴ *Traité sur la tolérance, à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas*, [in:] ŒcV 25, p. 97. Let us remind that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was pronounced only by Pius IX in 1854.

²⁵ Ibidem, Chap. XVII.

²⁶ Jesuits were expelled from France in May 1767, Pope Clement XIV finally suppressed the Society in 1773.

One can ask whether our philosophers were so determined to erase all religions and church institutions. The answer is seemingly yes, but even Helvetius who fought against Christianity so fiercely was aware of the vast possibilities of religious influence on people. He did not intend to get rid of religion at all. Harmful religion should indeed be erased, however only if replaced with a new one. The future enlightened state should introduce a natural religion founded on eternal and invariable principles capable of rigorous demonstration as they are drawn from the nature of men and the world²⁷. The principles must include “that which secures to every one his property, his life, and his liberty”²⁸. In fact, the purpose of religion is to be limited to instilling ethical principles. Therefore true religion is composed of sacred ethical principles in turn having a scientific (empirical) character.

There is no obstacle to give a transcendental character to what is beneficial for society, to erect temples, to institute a religious cult, and to employ enlightened philosophers as priests²⁹. The promises of the revealed religion should be replaced with earthly rewards. Unnatural ascetic practices and blind obedience should be abandoned³⁰. The only useful religion is that, that conforms human behaviour to the law thereby obliging people to instruct themselves and to serve the society³¹. This in turn secures them a real prize in the only real world.

Montesquieu³² claimed that the first laws of human societies, stemming from natural law, included gratitude for a benefit from another “intelligent being”, dependence of children on their parents, and retaliation for injuries³³. Any religion embracing these laws serves humanity: “for the prin-

²⁷ Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De l'homme*, Vol. I, Sect. I, Chap. XIII.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 54 (W. Hooper's translation).

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 55–56.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 62.

³¹ Ibidem, Vol. II, p. 151.

³² Montesquieu's works are cited according to Laboulaye edition (*Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Édouard Laboulaye, 1875–1879), as „*EcM*” with respective volume and page numbers.

³³ Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, [in:] *EcM* 3, p. 91.

cial part of any religion consists in obedience to the laws, in loving mankind, and in revering one's parents".³⁴

Also Voltaire was far from removing religion from society despite the claim that revealed religions do more harm than good. In principle, atheism is less disastrous than religious fanaticism, however the former in its violent form is dangerous, too. The average man always needed to be curbed. Religion is a necessary foundation of social order, as the state is to watch the crimes known, and religion to watch the crimes which are secret³⁵. It is better to believe that wickedness or perjury will be punished in a future, even imaginary, world, than to allow the belief that such crimes go unpunished. Religion is thus useful for society, naturally given that it would not degenerate to superstition. Voltaire would not have anything to do with an atheistic ruler. He also stated: "Were I a sovereign, I would not have anything to do with atheistical courtiers, whose interest it was to poison me; I should be under the necessity of taking an antidote every day. It is then absolutely necessary for princes and people that the idea of a Supreme Being—creating, governing, rewarding, and punishing—be profoundly engraved on their minds."³⁶ To put it differently, if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him as a guarantee of the social order³⁷.

Outstanding figures of the Enlightenment, being mostly adherents of mechanistic materialism, knew that the political system which they proposed would gain social appeal and steering capacity only if dressed as a religion. In other words, authority and world-view must be founded on an idea of a transcendent being even if only imaginary, and however one would name it: God, Nature, or Big Brother. After two centuries of great cultural and civilisational changes, we may still say that Enlightenment philosophers despite their limited methodology correctly described human nature composed of overlapping domains of *homo politicus* and *homo religiosus*.

³⁴ Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, [in:] *CEM* 1, Lettre 46, p. 464 (Davidson's translation).

³⁵ Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance*, p. 100.

³⁶ Voltaire, *Athéisme*, [in:] *Dictionnaire philosophique*, *CEV* 17, p. 475 (Fleming's translation).

³⁷ "Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer"; Voltaire, *CEV* 47, epistle 8069, p. 241.