Shades of Enlightenment

Gertrude Himmelfarb
The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments
Knopf, 2004, 284 pages.

Reviewed by Jonathan Marks

He favored state-supported and state-administered education, so that even those destined for the lowest occupations would learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. He defended high wages on the grounds that the poor could be expected to be more, not less, industrious when they were working for more than bare necessities, and because it was "but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people should have such a share of the produce of their own labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged." He denounced the "mean rapacity" of merchants and manufacturers who profited at the expense of the public, especially the poor. He was not Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that well-known champion of the downtrodden, but Adam Smith, that well-known champion of the

"system of natural liberty," or capitalism. In comprehending in one system of thought concerns that would later seem necessarily opposed, Adam Smith represented the British Enlightenment.

In *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, Gertrude Himmelfarb, professor emerita of history at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, offers "an explication—and an appreciation—of the British Enlightenment, with the French and American Enlightenments serving as foils for the British." The French Enlightenment, however, is the more important of the two foils, so much so that Himmelfarb promises to "reclaim the Enlightenment… above all, from the French, who have dominated and usurped it." An eminent historian of Victorian England, Himmelfarb is today best known as a cultural critic who offers the Victorian case as an aid to reflection on the moral decline of contemporary Western societies, and on a moral revival that may be under way in the United States. She now turns from the nineteenth to the eighteenth century with a view to exposing the roots of today's culture wars in the French Enlightenment and, in the case of the British Enlightenment, the broad outline of a possible peace that would preserve the dignity of both sides. In so doing, Himmelfarb reveals what is at stake in the recovery of ideas that we have somehow forgotten even as we remain entangled in them.

Himmelfarb faults Voltaire, Diderot, D'Holbach, and other leading figures of the French Enlightenment for making reason an end in itself and "the fundamental principle of politics and society." The French Enlightenment's elevation of reason had at least three important consequences. First, because human beings and societies are not particularly rational, the attempt to establish the rule of reason was bound to call for a revolutionary and violent politics devoted to the regeneration of mankind. Second, because the people "were incapable of the kind of reason that the *philosophes* took to be the essence of enlightenment," the French Enlightenment entailed an elitist politics. And third, rationalizing politics and society meant that reason must outrank religion and tradition. Hence the French Enlightenment was bound to call for an attack on any religion or tradition that declined to submit to reason, the God of the philosophers. Himmelfarb thus holds the French Enlightenment responsible for a "*Kulturkampf*… pitting the past against the present, confronting enlightened sentiment with retrograde institutions, and creating an unbridgeable divide between reason and religion." The

French Revolution, she shows, gave birth to a Western politics that is with us still, pitting the Right against the Left, and the religious against the secular.

Whereas the French Enlightenment once almost stood for Enlightenment altogether, Himmelfarb asserts that there was also a distinct British Enlightenment. Although several of its leading figures were Scots, it thrived in London's coffeehouses and clubs and included such undeniably English figures as Edward Gibbon. At the core of this Enlightenment was not reason, but a moral sense or sentiment that gave rise to social virtues or affections like "sympathy, benevolence, and compassion for others." Its most important intellectual figures were moral philosophers like Adam Smith and David Hume, who, though they were far from rejecting reason, gave it a "secondary, instrumental role, rather than the primary, determinant one that the *philosophes* gave it." Reason was a means to a decent and prosperous society best achieved through the social virtues or affections.

Because the moral sense or sentiment was either innate or so common as to be as good as innate, its elevation did not call for the regeneration of man or the revolutionary or violent politics required for such a regeneration. The British Enlightenment was reformist in theory and in practice. Moreover, because it held that the moral sense prevails among ordinary people no less than among intellectuals, its advancement did not call for a politics of elitism. Indeed, Smith famously asserted that the difference between "a philosopher and a common street porter… seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education." And because the British Enlightenment seeks to establish a reign of benevolence, not a reign of reason, its practitioners had no quarrel with religion or tradition and were capable of recognizing the utility of both for the promotion of virtue.

Going further, Himmelfarb argues that John Wesley—a contemporary of Hume and Smith and the founder of Methodism—recognized a kinship between the idea of the moral sense and his own idea of conscience, and deserves a place in the Enlightenment. In this way, Himmelfarb's British Enlightenment not only recognizes the utility of religion but includes religious enthusiasts. The war between religion and reason characteristic of the French Enlightenment, the Revolution, and the politics that survives them was in the British case replaced by a common purpose that put the moral sentiment to work in the education and relief of the poor,

the abolition of slavery, and other causes. This enterprise, Himmelfarb says, united "secular philosophers and religious enthusiasts," "Church of England bishops and Wesleyan preachers and missionaries." It also cut across class lines, appealing to the upper and middle classes while inspiring the poor to form self-governing, self-supporting, mutual aid societies.

The political theorist Alan Ryan has accused Himmelfarb of "parochialism, narrowness, and insularity" and of defending "America, in its current Republican incarnation" as representing the best of modernity. It therefore seems worth noting that Himmelfarb takes pains here to credit the role of "an elaborate system of public relief" in Britain, and that she praises Adam Smith for defending that system. In addition, it hardly seems likely that Himmelfarb's repeated insistence on the egalitarianism of the British Enlightenment, or her placement of enlightened skeptics at the heart of that Enlightenment, will please every Republican. It is true that Himmelfarb is a partisan and makes no secret of her partisanship, but it is also true that the stands she takes are guided by a latitudinarian, moderate, and humane politics not unlike that favored by the moral philosophers at the heart of her book.

As for Himmelfarb's "parochial" suggestion that the United States has a better chance than any European country of joining, as the British Enlightenment did, the spirit of John Wesley and the spirit of Adam Smith, it does not seem far-fetched. In any case, Himmelfarb's argument that the latitudinarian, moderate, and humane British Enlightenment is a model for those who hope to moderate and sometimes even get beyond economic, political, and religious conflicts is convincing, although it clearly will not convince every partisan in those conflicts.

That said, it seems to me a consequential error to include John Wesley in the British Enlightenment. Wesley is important to Himmelfarb's argument as a test case: Wesley and Methodism are known less for philosophy than for emotional fervor, and less for public reason than for private revelation. If Himmelfarb can demonstrate that Wesley and Methodism genuinely belong to the British Enlightenment, she will have demonstrated that the unity between secular philosophers and religious enthusiasts that characterized the movement for reform in eighteenth-century England was no fluke. It is for this reason, in part, that she devotes an entire chapter and more to Wesley and Methodism. Unfortunately, Himmelfarb does not succeed

in showing that the alliance between the moral philosophers and the religious enthusiasts is more than pragmatic. Fortunately, however, a more than pragmatic alliance is unnecessary to achieve Himmelfarb's ends.

Himmelfarb observes that Wesley was familiar with and even helped to publish secular works, and that he considered himself "enlightened." But to equate considering oneself enlightened with genuine membership in an Enlightenment movement is to deprive Enlightenment of any meaning. The Puritans of New England, for example, who admired classical learning, established Harvard College, and abhorred witches, were enlightened without being part of an Enlightenment movement. Interestingly, Himmelfarb comes close to including the Puritan Cotton Mather in the American Enlightenment, noting that while he is "today remembered for his fiery sermons about witchcraft and satanic possession, which helped provoke the Salem witch trials," he was "also an enthusiastic student of astronomy and of the Copernican system." While one can only cheer Himmelfarb on when she denies that figures like Wesley and Mather were "stereotypically retrograde and repressive religious fanatic[s]," one should also resist the temptation to admit them into the Enlightenment merely because they were not stereotypical fanatics. To do so is to obscure differences that believers and skeptics have to have in mind, even as they forge the kind of practical and partial alliance that, on Himmelfarb's own account, was more important in making an age of benevolence possible in Britain than any deep theoretical affinity.

To take another example, Himmelfarb observes that Adam Smith praised religious sects for promoting an austere morality, which promoted virtues that the poor needed to avoid ruin. She argues that Smith thought religious zeal dangerous only in societies with few sects, and that he observed with displeasure the inactivity of dissenting sects once legitimized, comparing them unfavorably to the "Methodists" who, "without half the learning of the dissenters, [were] much more in vogue." But Smith also pointed out that the morals of such sects "could be rather disagreeably rigorous and unsocial" and that, indeed, those sects that carried austerity "to some degree of folly and extravagance" often won the people over precisely because of their "excessive rigor." To cure this sectarian disease, Smith proposed that the state promote "the study of science and philosophy," those "great antidotes to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition," and "public

diversions" to "dissipate… that melancholy and gloomy humor which is almost always the nurse of popular superstition and enthusiasm."

Even if Wesley took Smith's comment about Methodism as praise, he presumably would have distrusted Smith's proposal. Wesley regarded public diversions as, if not always blameworthy in themselves, distractions from the serious business of usefulness and piety. For those who wish to divert themselves indoors, there is useful history, pious poetry, and natural philosophy, but "above all" prayer. Since Smith had proposed that the state offer diversions to the pious with the explicit purpose of diminishing their "enthusiasm," Wesley could not have helped regarding Smith as an adversary, however friendly.

Besides, Smith looked forward to the growth of "that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism." While Wesley, as Himmelfarb reminds us, insisted that "religion and reason go hand in hand," he also insisted that reason is incapable of producing faith, hope for eternal life, love of God, love of one's neighbor, or happiness. Wesley took especially seriously the failure to acknowledge that love of one's neighbor, or benevolence, is rooted in gratitude toward God, regarding this failure as amounting to "a decent and therefore more dangerous attack upon the whole of the Christian Revelation." In acknowledging the decency of benevolence whatever its source, he acknowledged the alliance between Methodism and the British Enlightenment that Himmelfarb celebrates, but not without acknowledging that benevolence as taught by some of the leading figures in that Enlightenment was a potent danger to people of faith. Although on Wesley's account Methodism was not inconsistent with reason, it could not be described as a "pure and rational religion," either.

In inviting Wesley into the Enlightenment, Himmelfarb underplays the differences between religious and secular moralists, perhaps in the hopes of bringing them together. But her own account of the relationship between the moral philosophers and the Methodists suggests that there is no need for such a rhetorical move: "Whatever the differences between the moral philosophers and the Methodists—philosophical, theological, temperamental—in important practical matters, they tended to converge." If the moral philosophers and the Methodists converged in spite of Wesley's belief that separating benevolence from the love of God was "neither better nor worse than Atheism," then there is no reason to suppose that the practical convergence Himmelfarb hopes for in our time requires us to forgo

clarity about the differences between the Enlightenment and revealed religion. Because such differences have at times produced not only culture wars but also real wars, restraint about them is appropriate. But because in our time unclarity about principles may be every bit as dangerous as culture wars, it is also appropriate for the defenders of reason and the defenders of revelation to be wary of one another, even as they engage in common work.

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