CHAPTER 1

Listen to the modern *philosophes*,

lend an ear to their lessons,

receive and practice their doctrines and

all will be overturned. . . .

—Charles Louis Richard,

*Exposition de la doctrine des philosophes modernes* (1785)
A CENTURY BLINDED BY LIGHT

On the night of the opening of Voltaire’s *Irène*, a small “cabal . . . excited principally by men dressed in the costumes of abbés” mingled with the enthusiastic onlookers who had come to pay tribute to the great *philosophe*. Little is known of these men, except that they were at odds with the majority of spectators. As a firsthand witness, Voltaire’s personal secretary, Wagnière, reports, they attempted to disrupt the performance in “violent” protest before its onset. Their voices, however, “were snuffed out by the general applause,” serving only to “enliven the room” before the raising of the curtain. Two weeks later, at the performance attended by Voltaire himself, the *anti-philosophe* contingent was even smaller. A single voice, that of the poet Nicolas-Joseph-Laurent Gilbert, cried out, “There is no more religion in France. All is lost!” He was forcibly subdued by the crowd.

The number of those opposed to Voltaire’s Parisian presence—and to what it seemed to stand for, the triumph of *philosophie*—was greater than this meager collection of abbés and the lone Gilbert would suggest. Nor was religion lost in France. The *pro-philosophe* newsheet, the *Mémoires secrets*, was even ready to tip the balance in favor of Voltaire’s adversaries. “Despite the great number of partisans and admirers of M. de Voltaire,” it observed amid the pandemonium of the apotheosis, “he has even more enemies. He has against him all the party of the *dévots* and the clergy.” Yet to view the eighteenth century from the perspective of devoutly religious men and women is to understand their exaggeration. In their view, the so-called century of lights represented the single most concerted attack on the Christian religion in the history of humanity, and figures like Voltaire—self-styled *philosophes*—were directly responsible for waging this war. That France could now lionize a man long deemed by religious observers to be in close consort with the devil seemed to confirm that the most advanced country on the European continent had undergone a startling transformation (see Figure 3). As the esteemed orator the abbé de Cambacérès had already warned in a celebrated sermon preached at the court of Louis XV, modern disbelief was producing a “revolution” in “the morals and characters of the nation.” In the face of this revolution, religion was “threatened, tottering on a precipice.”

What might a world in which religion had plunged to its demise, a world ruled by modern philosophy, entail? As we shall see in this chap-
ter, enemies of the Enlightenment left little to the imagination, painting a portrait of the triumph of *philosophie* in vividly apocalyptic terms. In doing so, they necessarily constructed an image of *philosophie* itself and of the age in which it was formed—an image, that is, of the Enlighten-

ment. However disfigured, this construction proved powerful and last-

ing. However far from the original, it served admirably as both a specter and a foil: a specter of a modern world to come and a foil against which to rally opposition. Conceiving of their century as a fallen age, enemies of the Enlightenment refused to fall before it. Rather, they rose to the challenge, bidding hitherto disparate groups and individuals to come to-

gether in a militant, Counter-Enlightenment response. In the process, they forged not only new alliances but also a view of the world that was every bit as modern as that of their adversaries.

Anti-*Philosophes* at the End of the Old Regime

Opposition to the *philosophes* did not begin in 1778. In fact, Voltaire’s enemies were quick to view his apotheosis as symbolic of French de-
Figure 3. Frontispiece to the physician Claude-Marie Giraud’s *Epistle from the Devil to M. Voltaire*. This brief work, chronicling Voltaire’s traffic with Satan, was republished over thirty times between 1760 and the outbreak of the Revolution. Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
cline, in large part because it reminded them—painfully—of their own, prior failings. From bases in important cultural institutions and circles of power, anti-*philosophes* had waged war from the middle of the century on what they saw as the corrosive effects of modern philosophy, seeking especially to eradicate the flow of illicit books. Thus, since 1755, each of the church’s national general assemblies, held at least once every five years to coordinate policy and review fiscal matters, had taken up the problem of the “contagion” being spread “throughout the realm” by the poisonous writings of “so-called *philosophes*.”

The learned doctors at the Sorbonne, too, had issued a steady stream of refutations of these works, denouncing the concerted effort to destroy the “religion of our fathers” and to undermine the “authority and power of kings.” Always these warnings were insistent and often graphic, confronting the crown directly with the prospect of “bloodied thrones” and the “horrors of anarchy” if it failed to act with haste.

Unable and at times unwilling to significantly curb the well-documented flow of subversive books in this period, the respective reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI witnessed, instead, a dramatic increase in their circulation. In the years following Voltaire’s apotheosis, this showed no signs of slowing. As Jean-Marie Dulau, bishop of Arles, complained in 1782, “enemies of revelation” now freely scattered “heaps” of “licentious productions” throughout his diocese, even daring to throw these works into the gardens and enclosures of convents.

No place, it seemed, was sacred. By the last years of the Old Regime, the General Assembly of the Clergy was forced to admit its defensive stance, alleging in 1785 that the “lessons of the *nouvelle philosophie*” now resounded “even in the workshops of the artisan and under the humble roofs of peasants.”

Likewise, in the provincial and Paris *parlements*, where influential men such as Jean-Omer Joly de Fleury and Antoine-Louis Seguier had fought consistently to defend the Catholic faith against the ravages of *philosophie*, anti-*philosophes* looked on in baffled horror at what they saw as the steady advances of their enemies.

As early as 1759, Fleury had complained that the *philosophes* “conspired” to “sap the foundations” of the state, urging authorities to take “sword in hand to smash . . . these sacrilegious and seditious authors.” Despite Fleury’s efforts, however, these authors continued to produce their “poisonous” works. By 1781, speaking before the Grand’Chambre, Seguier presented their threat as more imminent still. “In vain,” he intoned, has the “administration established the wisest precautions, in vain has it multiplied obstacles to the publication of writings that spread audacity and irreligion throughout society. The wisdom of government is annihilated, the vigilance of the magistracy destroyed. More and more the *esprit philosophique* becomes the spirit of the day.”
From the perspective of opponents of the *philosophes* in the church and parlements, then, the outlook was dire. So, too, did other intransigent defenders of the faith regard the *philosophes*’ advances with consternation. At court, the militantly Catholic dévot faction had seen its partisans consistently pushed aside during the dissolute reign of Louis XV. Helpless to unseat an open protector of the *philosophes*, Malesherbes, as director of the book trade from 1750–1763, it suffered further ignominy when a coalition of Jansenist parlementaires and philosophic allies managed to orchestrate the expulsion of the Jesuits from France in the mid-1760s. As if to add insult to injury, 1765 witnessed the premature death of the dévots’ leader and erstwhile heir to the throne, Louis Ferdinand, the pious son of Louis XV (see Figure 4). And although the heir apparent, Louis XVI, was noted for the conviction of his faith, his youth, vacillation, and susceptibility to persuasion did not favor the prospect of a sustained anti-*philosophe* crusade. Such doubts proved well founded. Despite the presence in Louis XVI’s early reign of leading dévot ministers, including Maurepas; du Muy; and most notably, the Count of Vergennes—all men convinced that the *philosophes* constituted a pressing threat to the realm—their influence was offset by less religiously inspired courtiers. When Voltaire marched triumphantly into Paris in 1778, his presence unimpeded and his play conspicuously attended by an adoring Marie Antoinette, hopes that the young king would make fighting the *philosophes* a priority of his reign were even more difficult to sustain.

Beyond the reception halls and drawing rooms of court officials, royal magistrates, Sorbonne doctors, and practicing clergy, one other active group looked on with alarm at the advance of the century’s new learning: anti-*philosophe* men of letters. Though the *philosophes* might claim a preeminent place in the cultural landscape of France, they had not won this position without an, at times, dirty fight. Climbing to the top, they
La Philosophie, sous les auspices de la Religion, présente l’ouvrage à Monseigneur le Dauphin.
trod on rivals in the process, often intentionally and frequently with skill. Their vaunted social graces did nothing to impede their ability to slander. In a single work, Voltaire could dub one anti-philosophe adversary, the journalist Elie Cathérine Fréron, “a scribbler,” “scoundrel,” “toad,” “lizard,” “snake,” “viper’s tongue,” “crooked mind,” “heart of filth,” “doer of evil,” “rascal,” “impudent person,” “cowardly knave,” “spy,” and “hound.” As much as genuine difference of opinion, deliberate offensiveness of this kind—a desire not only to smash the infamous thing but also to rub one’s face in the shattered remains—earned the philosophes vehement enemies. Thus, during the 1750s and 1760s, the abbé Gabriel Gauchat devoted his monthly journal, the Lettres critiques, ou Analyse et réfutation de divers écrits modernes contre la religion, to refuting the works of men who “combined against truth . . . the salt of irony . . . and the blackness of calumny.” Still others adopted the tactics of the philosophes themselves. Fréron consistently employed ridicule, defamation, and sarcasm to pillory his enemies in his influential Année littéraire, and many others mocked the philosophes in a host of satirical plays, libels, and novels published in the late 1750s, 1760s, and early 1770s. Despite this prodigious output, these writers could not deny the philosophes’ gains. The poet Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, who in 1760 had used the occasion of his election to the Académie française to condemn a century “drunk with the philosophic spirit . . . the scorn of religion, and the hatred of all authority,” was regarding such drunkenness by the 1780s as total intoxication.

These were the philosophes’ principal enemies. At odds with their century, they conceived of themselves as a marginal, and marginalized, group, living in a world apart. As the anti-philosophe journalist J. M. B. Clément complained, those who resisted the “rally cry of philosophie” were “scattered, without leaders, without credit, and without honors.” Largely as a consequence, we know far too little about them. We have, for example, no study of the parti dévot, no treatment of the booksellers and distributors who traded in anti-philosophe writings, no consideration of their readership, no analysis of the anti-philosophe press. Only recently have scholars begun to acknowledge that conservative salons existed in the eighteenth century in which the philosophes’ ideas were regarded with horror; and only recently have they have begun to consider the patronage networks and social geography that shaped anti-philosophe production. Still, it is clear from even this attenuated cross section that the anti-philosophes drew from a varied lot, comprising lofty courtiers, influential ecclesiastics, and powerful parlementaires, as well as lowly administrative officials, minor abbés, and Grub Street hacks. Such diversity should warn us not to take the anti-philosophes’ protestations of
marginality too closely to heart. Clearly, some in their ranks enjoyed positions of power, although it was ultimately religious and cultural conviction, not social standing, that shaped their beliefs. And it was almost certainly the case that more men and women shared their disdain for the Enlightenment than the anti-*philosophes* themselves were ready to acknowledge. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was not the only cultural critic in the eighteenth century to adopt the stance of embattled minority.

Whatever their final numbers, the anti-*philosophes*’ inability to halt the advance of *philosophie* was real and their frustration well founded. The very diversity of their ranks was undoubtedly a contributing factor. Although select royal officials and Catholic *parlementaires* might well share bitter resentment of philosophic triumph, they were just as apt to quarrel over the nature of the *parlements*’ role in the legislative process or the limitations and checks on the power of the king. Ecclesiastics also engaged in endless disputes with both the crown and the courts on a number of issues, ranging from the boundaries of legal jurisdiction to the failings of the police in controlling the book trade to the amount of the church’s contributions to royal coffers. Even the anti-*philosophes*’ greatest institutional stronghold, the church, was by no means a house united. Rent by protracted battles between Jansenists and *dévots*, Gallicans and Ultra-

A CENTURY BLINDED BY LIGHT 25

*philamentaires*, and the impoverished lower clergy and the wealthy hierarchy, it also harbored numerous members who were little inclined to view the *philosophes*’ ascendance with displeasure. Part of what has been described as a European-wide “Catholic Aufklärung,” these figures drank deeply of the new learning.²¹ And although they at times paid lip-service to the fight against “infidelity,” they took, on the whole, a benign view of the *siècle des lumières* and were even inclined to see the *philosophes* as a source of potential renewal and rejuvenation. The archbishop of Toulouse, Loménie de Brienne, is a perfect illustration of this type. When this close friend of d’Alembert was recommended as a candidate to assume the archbishopric of Paris, Louis XVI quipped that “at the very least” such a high-ranking official of the church “must believe in God.” This didn’t, however, stop the king from appointing Brienne controller-general of France in 1788.²² With colleagues like these, opponents of the *philosophes* scarcely needed enemies.

Divided allegiances and crisscrossing interests of this kind effectively stymied any concerted campaign against the social influence and publishing prowess of the *philosophes*.²³ Scattered and set against themselves, men and women who shared a deep antipathy to the century’s leading lights thus felt impotent before them. When an exultant supporter of the *philosophes* mocked his adversaries in 1776 as “powerless enemies of *philosophie*,” his jibe carried more than an element of truth.²⁴
But to cite these admissions, as many commentators have done, simply as testimony to the anti-philosophes’ defeat would be to miss the genuine strain of revulsion in their rhetoric, the seething bitterness, and the apocalyptic note of terror. Seemingly at odds with their century, these men and women looked at the society around them as one gone mad. “I no longer recognize my nation,” grumbled an anonymous commentator in the *Journal ecclésiastique*, the leading professional publication of the clergy. “The philosophes are the men of the day.” “Philosophie, philosophie—voilà the tone of the times,” complained another enraged opponent, the Franciscan Élie Harel. “One speaks now only of philosophic spirit, philosophic varnish, philosophic gloss.” Anti-philosophes lamented, even overstated, this plight, but they did not simply wither and blow away in the last decade of the Old Regime. On the contrary, the very triumph of the philosophes further embittered their adversaries, enjoining them to come together in the face of a common enemy. Hardened by their setbacks and frustrated by their failures, they fought on with continued vehemence, viewing their battle in cosmic terms as an eschatological struggle between good and evil. Far from succumbing to the triumph of philosophie, anti-philosophes waged an even more desperate struggle. Indeed, it is possible to speak of a reaction.

From Dark Despair to Dark Reaction

Certain contemporary critics were quick to note this shift. Writing in April, 1776, the astute social observers of Grimm’s *Correspondance littéraire* commented with perplexed fascination on the tremendous outpouring of religiosity associated with the jubilee celebrations in Paris of that year. Speculating that these “outbursts of zeal” were based as much on the “mood . . . against the party of the philosophes” as on genuine piety, the journal ventured that “it would be somewhat amusing if philosophie [through its very successes] unwittingly contributed to rekindling the faith of the century.” Two years later, at the time of Voltaire’s apotheosis, an anonymous pro-philosophe pamphleteer was complaining that it had become “fashionable . . . to persecute the philosophes,” a development that the *Correspondance littéraire* now seemed less inclined to view as “amusing”: “Pamphlets of all kinds against philosophie and the philosophes multiply every day, and the goal of these writings is to accuse the sect of Encyclopedists for all our disorders, for all our woes: general depravation, the excesses of libertinage, the decline of taste, the progress of luxury, the weakening of all the orders of the State, bad harvests, and the increase in the price of bread.”
Sweeping condemnations of this sort were common in the last decade of the ancien régime.\textsuperscript{32} Called forth by the general triumph of the philosophes symbolized by Voltaire’s apotheosis and also by such specific episodes as the well-publicized effort to distribute Voltaire’s collected works in the early 1780s, this anti-philosophe reaction took the form of hundreds of books, pamphlets, sermons, essays, and poems.\textsuperscript{33} In part these condemnations were actively subsidized by the Assembly General of the Clergy’s Committee on Religion and Jurisdiction, which spent close to 200,000 livres in the 1780s to fund antiphilosophic propaganda, including an unprecedented 46,600 livres in 1782 and 97,000 livres in 1785 alone.\textsuperscript{34} They were also actively solicited by groups such as the Société des amis de la Religion et des Lettres, founded in 1778 to encourage anti-philosophe production by sponsoring essay contests and awarding prizes for the works that best defended religion.\textsuperscript{35} Finally, these writings found outlets—for review, excerpt, subsidy, and advertisement—in a buoyant, anti-philosophe press. Established journals such as the Année littéraire, the Journal historique et littéraire, and the Journal ecclésiastique continued to make combating the philosophes their raison d’être. And more recent publications, such as the Journal de Monsieur; the Journal de littérature, des sciences et des arts; and the Affiches, annonces et avis divers, brought fresh vigor to the fight. Edited and staffed by the likes of Thomas-Marie Royou (1741–1792), Julien Louis Geoffroy (1743–1814), Jean-Baptiste Grosier (1743–1823), Louis-Abel Fontenai (1736–1806), Augustin Barruel (1741–1820), and François-Xavier Feller (1735–1802), these journals shared a common purpose. Their editors were intimates and associates and, significantly, all displaced Jesuits who would become prominent counterrevolutionary journalists.\textsuperscript{36}

By combing through sources such as these, one obtains a sense of the contours and content of the anti-philosophe reaction of the final years of the Old Regime. Spanning a range of genre and form, the writing of this period tended to be simplistic and reductive, consciously avoiding the detailed theological arguments of formal Christian apologies and directing itself, on the whole, to a lay audience.\textsuperscript{37} But it is this very simplicity that renders the anti-philosophe invective of the last years of the ancien régime of greatest interest. Abjuring tortuous explication and meticulous critique, this literature was content to make broad and brash assertions, drawing on a set of what by the 1770s were already well-established criticisms. Collapsing the diverse and variegated opinions of eighteenth-century philosophy into a reified whole, this literature repeated a number of consistent charges against the philosophes in a coherent, predictable, and fully articulated language. In broad terms, this language should be understood as a unified phenomenon, a linguistic
strand—what I call an “anti-philosophe discourse.” Pulling together the more nuanced reflections of countless earlier apologists, this discourse radically simplified complex phenomena, providing a master narrative through which orthodox Catholics could understand the bewildering changes that seemed to be overtaking their society. In a manner similar to the way in which, as Robert Darnton has argued, an underground literature of political slander and libel closed off debate from the Left in the final years of the Old Regime, the anti-philosophe literature examined here closed off debate from the Right. It, too, operated on the principle of “radical simplification,” polarizing views and forcing the public to take sides in either-or, black-white terms. And it, too, reduced the history of the eighteenth century to “a central theme with a single moral.” Whereas the libelists of the literary underground, however, saw only the degeneration of monarchy under despotism, anti-philosophes saw the degeneration of France under philosophie.

Constructing Philosophie, Constructing the Enlightenment

Before moving on to a more general discussion of this anti-philosophe discourse, it is useful to consider in detail a characteristic example: Charles-Louis Richard’s *Exposition de la doctrine des philosophes modernes*, a sixty-nine-page pamphlet published in 1785. Born in 1711 to a noble family from Lorraine, Richard received a doctorate in theology from the Sorbonne and spent his life as a priest in the Dominican order. A prolific religious apologist who would later be put to death by the Jacobins for his outspoken counterrevolutionary views, Richard was no stranger to doing battle with enemies of the faith. He had even known some success. Yet by his own admission, the majority of the writings of the century’s Christian defenders had touched only “a certain number of people for whom they [were] the least necessary”—other theologians. They were, consequently, “useless to the multitude who, without arms and without defenses, succumbs rapidly to Philosophie. . . .” Richard conceived his work “with the design of putting in the hands of all those who know how to read a victorious weapon against the assaults of this turbulent Philosophie.” It is doubtful that the work fulfilled this ambitious goal, but the attempt is instructive.

Departing from the premise that there was such a thing as a “philosophic doctrine,” a coherent body of ideas working toward mutual, pernicious ends, Richard grouped these ideas into three principal categories—physics, metaphysics, and ethics—to show that la doctrine philosophique collectively entailed a thoroughgoing materialism, a com-
plete rejection of man’s duties to God, and a morality based solely on self-interest and pleasure. In its conception of the physical world, the philosophic doctrine, Richard maintained, posited a universe moved solely by self-propelling particles of matter. Man and the world were only random assemblages of matter without purpose or design, a physical supposition with direct metaphysical and ethical consequences. Stripped of higher calling, the philosophes responded only to pleasure and interest, refusing to recognize God. The only being recognized by the philosophes at all, it seemed, was the self. “Read, if you can, the innumerable writings to which modern philosophy has given birth. You will see that the great motor of human action is love of the self, of this me that constitutes the center and final end of everything. All is related to the self and to one’s well being, one’s interests, one’s pleasures. . . .”42 Following from this radical individualism—the core of philosophie’s ethics—was a complete denial of social responsibility. Just as the philosophes sacrificed society as a whole to the individual, so did they assert that “Kings, Czars, Sultans, and Emperors owe[d] their institutions, their ranks, and their authority to the people.” The doctrine philosophique was thoroughly “republican.” Not only did the philosophes allege that subjects could “freely establish and dissolve” their governments at will, but their “discourses and seditious writings . . . had no other goal than to arm citizens against their kings.”43

None of Richard’s principal allegations were new in and of themselves. Charges of materialism, atheism, ethical self-interest, republicanism, and sedition abound in earlier Catholic critiques. And indeed, when applied to particular works, they were not wholly without foundation. La Mettrie’s L’Homme machine, for example, presented a radically materialist view of the universe, which denied the distinction between mind and matter, body and soul. The Baron d’Holbach wrote consistently in a similar vein, drawing clearly atheistic conclusions in such anonymous publications as Du Bon sens and Système de la nature. Helvétius’s De l’Esprit did base its ethical propositions on the calculation of personal interest and a sensationalist epistemology of pleasure and pain, and the Encyclopedia’s article on authority or Mirabeau’s Essai sur le despotisme possess more than a whiff of republicanism. But though Richard cited all these authors, he lumped them together indiscriminately with a host of others—Voltaire, Raynal, Robinet, Diderot, and d’Alembert—quoting selectively and eclectically to construct a reified philosophie, a composite caricature of the complex and conflicting ideas of eighteenth-century philosophy, reduced to the sum of its worst parts. And regarding the general effects of the doctrine, he left little to the imagination:
The simple exposé that we have just made of the doctrine of the modern *philosophes* proves evidently that it can have no other result, as it has no other goal, than to corrupt the faith and its morals, to raise from the earth every manner of religion and religious worship, every idea of duty, of obligation, of conscience, of justice and injustice, of vice and virtue, of God . . . and consequently, to lose without recourse—for this world and for the next—the entire human race. What a picture! What goals! What effects! . . . Voilà, the natural outcome of the philosophic doctrine.44

This was a voice of stupefaction at the blindness of an age, a voice of incomprehension, of outrage and hate. But although it must be admitted that Richard was among the more inflammatory of late anti-*philosophe* writers, his general tendency to reify *philosophie* in precisely these terms, dwelling on its terrible, adverse consequences, was entirely characteristic. The preliminary discourse to the Grub Street anti-*philosophe* Sabatier de Castre’s *Trois siècles de la littérature française*, for example, drew together Holbach’s *Système de la nature*, La Beaumelle’s *L’Asiatique tolérant*, Voltaire’s *Micromégas*, Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique & politique des deux Indes*, Naigeon’s *Militaire philosophe*, Rousseau’s *Émile*, Helvetius’s *De l’Homme*, and the *Encyclopédie*, among other works, to prove that the maxims of *la philosophie moderne* “breathed only trouble, sedition, and upheaval.”45 Madame de Genlis’s 1787 primer for children, *La Religion considérée comme l’unique base du bonheur*, similarly quoted extensively from the works of Helvétius, Voltaire, Diderot, Mably, Holbach, Condorcet, Raynal, and others to emphasize modern philosophy’s collective quest to “destroy religion,” its ceaseless declamations against authority, and its violent enjoinders to “overturn thrones” in language all could understand46 (see Figure 5). These were standard denunciations, intended, like Richard’s work, to move beyond intricate theological debate and sustained refutation, reaching out in the process to the widest possible audience. As one exultant publicist for Sabatier affirmed, his works drew readers of all types—“men of the Church, men of letters, men of the world, women, and even the most frivolous spirits.”47 Given that the *Trois Siècles* went through at least seven editions prior to the Revolution, this may have been more than exaggeration.

Admittedly, we know very little about who, in fact, constituted the readership of these works, although there are strong indications that more were reading them than previously acknowledged. To take only one example, the abbé Barruel’s epistolary novel, *Les Helviennes*, went through at least five augmented editions between 1781 and 1788. Barruel was every bit as violent in his treatment of *philosophie* as Richard. But
arguably for that very reason the book was glowingly reviewed, often in multiple installments, in the *Année littéraire; Journal de littérature, des sciences et des arts; Journal de Monsieur; Journal historique et littériaire; Affiches, annonces et avis divers;* and *Journal ecclésiastique.* Clearly, some found this literature compelling.

Detailed understanding of the readership, publication networks, and communication channels of this work awaits further study, as does so much else in this forgotten, Counter-Enlightenment world. What can be said with certainty here is that the literature itself drew on arguments rehearsed over the course of decades to present the *philosophes* and *philosophie* in consistent, hypostatized terms. In the mind of *anti-philosophes,* *philosophie* was a "thing," a coherent entity, a unified whole, and the *philosophes* themselves were working toward mutual ends. As the abbé Grosier observed typically in the preliminary essay to his *Journal de littérature, des sciences et des arts* in 1779, "Let us stop for a moment to consider *Philosophie* from the simple perspective of league and confederation. One cannot deny that the *Philosophes* fulfill amongst themselves the mutual duties imposed by a strict confraternity. . . . Between them, what union, what accord, what reciprocity of zeal . . . !"
In envisioning *philosophie* in this way, Grosier pointed most acquisitely at what he termed the “Encyclopedic school.” Neither he nor his anti-*philosophe* comrades, in fact, had any doubt that the men who made up what is now referred to as the High Enlightenment were the principal architects and original agents of the philosophic doctrine. As such, they were portrayed as men of vast and diabolic strength—“new titans”—whose influence extended outward on a terrific scale. Revered by kings, they were also the “masters and doctors of the multitude.” But Grosier and others also referred to the many “apprentices” who studied the writings of the great *philosophes*, presenting these “Encyclopedic lackeys,” too, as active disseminators of the *doctrine philosophique*. “Vermin,” as Élie Harel observed, made fine carriers for their more celebrated hosts. The disease—*la nouvelle philosophie*—was common to both. Such conflation was typical, and underscores just how few distinctions anti-*philosophes* were inclined to draw between “Enlightenments” low and high, early and late. From their perspective, *philosophie* was a continuum, flowing outward and downward from the pens of a few controlling evil geniuses to encompass all those dissidents who claimed to bear the torches of the *siècle des lumières*. Acknowledging few differences, anti-*philosophes* inveighed collectively against this hydra of many heads, employing a host of neologisms—*philosophailles, philosophistes, philosophesque, philosopherie, philosophisme*—that displayed their semantic, as well as ideological, disregard for fine distinctions.

Language of this sort forces us to contemplate a strange irony: as a conceptual entity, an idea, the Enlightenment was “invented” as much by its enemies as by its friends. Long before Immanuel Kant had even posed his celebrated question—*Was ist Aufklärung?*—critics in France had answered him. The Enlightenment, or in their terms, the *siècle des lumières*, was an abomination; *philosophie* was a unified force, one that produced radical, even revolutionary consequences. Well before 1789 anti-*philosophes* were making this claim, reconciling and uniting their enemies well beyond their extreme differences, attributing to them common aims and common ends. Tautology aside, there is much truth to the claim that the Counter-Enlightenment invented the Enlightenment.

**Anti-Philosophe Discourse**

At the most fundamental level, *philosophie* was accused of subverting the foundations of the Catholic religion, leading necessarily to the wholesale destruction of the faith. To the majority of anti-*philosophes* of the waning years of the Old Regime, this was the explicit aim of the
philosophes, who had “conceived the design of arming all the forces of their reason towards the ruin of religion.” They sought to destroy all means of their reason towards the ruin of religion.” As the Sorbonne censors of Raynal’s Histoire philosophique commented in 1781, “It is no longer the single individual who dares to raise his voice against the Lord and his temple, but a formal conspiracy, a numerous league . . . [that] seeks to destroy religion, wiping its every trace from the face of the earth.”

These observers spoke in the charged language of conspiracy, accusing the philosophes of overtly plotting the demise of Christianity. Such language was common. But even those who did not dwell on the conscious agency of the philosophes still depicted the result of their doctrines as the weakening and annihilation of the faith. In their countless anticlerical tirades, their questioning of the authenticity of Scripture, and their arrogant confidence in the power of the unaided human mind, the philosophes, their enemies charged, “made pretensions to doubt all,” bidding men and women to set foot on the slippery slope that led to disbelief. Undermining the twin pillars of Catholic certainty (revelation and the tradition and authority of the church), they tempted their converts with the oldest of sins (vanity and pride), urging them to trust blindly in individual reason. “Unbelief,” the Bishop and Duke of Langes proclaimed in a typical refrain, was “always born of pride.” Only in the law of the Gospel, in revelation, and in the church could man’s reason be harnessed and employed effectively. Without this mitigating restraint, the individual necessarily fell prey to the vagaries of vain speculation.

As proof of this assertion, opponents of the philosophes frequently cited the wide range of the philosophes’ religious speculations, presenting this very diversity as evidence of their inability to arrive at a constant truth. “I defy you,” challenged a journalist in the Année littéraire, “to cite me an error, however absurd . . . that the philosophes have not adopted,” guided solely “by the torch of reason, of philosophie.” For whatever the variety of its manifold conclusions on religious matters, philosophie stemmed from a single source, the arrogance of the human intellect, and tended in the same direction, the destruction of all belief. The fatal seeds of doubt might bear many vines, but they were all working to choke off belief in its entirety. As the abbé Liger summarized pithily, “[T]he boisterous philosophy of this century is, properly speaking, the art of disbelief.”

Again, the individual themes of this rhetoric were not particular to the final years of the Old Regime. The critique of pride, for example, as old as Ecclesiastes, was sharpened in the wake of the Reformation when the attack on the Catholic rule of faith and the revival of Greek Pyrrhonian skepticism provoked a flood of writing on the inevitable
shortcomings of human reason. Defenders of the church had also long held that atheism was the inevitable outgrowth of dissidence, leveling the charge consistently (and with great liberality) at a host of religious dissenters since the mid-seventeenth century. But though their intellectual weaponry was battle-hardened, Catholic opponents of the philosophes who were fighting at the end of the century wielded it with their own innovative parries and thrusts, commanding their forces in new ways. Of particular importance was their willingness to use both Pascal and Rousseau to buttress their claim, as the abbé Gérard explained in his best-selling anti-philosophe novel, *Le Comte de Valmont, ou les Égarements de la raison*, that the “obsuencing of reason . . . its aberrations, contradictions, and limits, proves to us the extreme need of more abundant aid, of a guide more sure” (see Figure 6). Pascal, of course, had used this same argument in the *Pensées* to poignant effect, dramatizing the insufficiency of human reason and highlighting the consequent need of a “guide more sure” in a manner that disturbed even Voltaire. Yet his powerful fideistic argument for faith had largely been off-limits to orthodox Catholics, who were wary of Pascal’s Jansenist

*Figure 6.* Philippe-Louis Gérard (1737–1813). Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

34 ENEMIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT
convictions and his celebrated attacks on the Jesuits. Jansenism re-
mained an orthodox bugbear at the end of the century. But when faced
with the dire threat of corrosive, philosophic reason, many were in-
creasingly prepared to borrow their weapons where they could, over-
looking Pascal’s shortcomings and drawing freely on his strengths.65

So, too, did orthodox religious defenders adopt this approach to the
thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose influence on Catholic apolo-
getic writing in the last decades of the Old Regime was immense.66
Rousseau, of course, was by no means irreproachable either. But by
quoting selectively and discounting his more “enlightened” propensi-
ties, anti-philosophes tended to set him apart. As even the unimpeachable
F.-X. Feller was prepared to concede, Rousseau was “less guilty than
the more decided philosophes, and one of their most ardent adver-
saries.”67 As a consequence, anti-philosophes borrowed from him exten-
sively, citing Rousseau’s passages against their common enemies; shar-
ing his dissatisfaction with the corruption of the age; and echoing his
belief that sentiment, emotion, and feeling were wellsprings of faith.
Like Pascal, Rousseau argued convincing that the heart had reasons
that reason knows not, that when left to themselves our rational faculties
left us lifeless and cold, uncertain and unsure. This was a powerful
weapon in an “age of reason,” and opponents of the philosophes drew on
it repeatedly to attack the pretensions of those who would live by
thought alone. Offering the bread of faith to the disillusioned, they
sought to respond to the hunger and anxiety of a modern age.

In these ways, as in others, enemies of the philosophes looked more to
the future than to the past, marshaling arguments in defense of religion
that would soon be employed, with greater flair, by no less a modern
than Chateaubriand. But it is perhaps less the argumentative nuance of
this literature than the novelty of its drumming consistency and the co-
herence of its rage that should arrest our attention, for the vastness of
the philosophes’ assault on religion struck their opponents as unprece-
dented. Moreover, the apparent convergence of the philosophes’ aims
seemed without parallel. As the assembled clergy noted in a pastoral
letter circulated in every parish in the country in 1775, “In previous cen-
turies there were impious persons here and there, but without party and
results. There were books that taught impiety, but [they were] obscure
and little read. Today the unbelievers form a sect, divided as it should
be, over the objects of its belief; united in the revolt against the au-
thority of divine revelation.”68 This was clearly sacrilege on a scale that
the world had never known, an “open war,” as the Affiches annonces et
avis divers emphasized, “on eighteen centuries of belief” that far sur-
passed any previous heresy or schism.69 Left unopposed, the philo-
sophic army would overrun France and then the world, leaving only charred remains in its wake. As the Marquis de Pompignan observed in a statement that captures perfectly the anti-*philosophes*’ sense of the ir-reconcilable opposition between Catholicism and *philosophie*, “In order to light the torch of *philosophie*, the torch of religion is extinguished.”

In the cosmic struggle between light and dark and good and evil, there was no room for shady middle ground.

If the destruction of religion was thus seen as an explicit goal and an inherent result of the teachings of the *philosophes*, one that threatened society on a vast scale, their opponents viewed this horrific outcome as both cause and effect of another of *philosophie*’s pernicious consequences: the corruption of social morals. At the most basic level, anti-*philosophes* argued that by eliminating the fear of God and an afterlife, breaching the ramparts of Christian morality, and destroying respect for religious authority, the *philosophes* removed all impediments to humanity’s basest tendencies. Stripped of the restraining bournes of religion and the self-controlling impulses of conscience, men and women would carry out every manner of depravity. “What have we seen as a result of this so-called century of lights but a frightening inundation of every sort of crime—impiety, injustice, cruelty, libertinage, deception, fraud, and suicide?” asked the Dominican BarthéleThi Baudrand in what would prove to be an extremely popular work of anti-*philosophe* piety.

In his similarly successful anti-*philosophe* novel, *Les Helviennes*, the abbé Barruel charged that the “natural effect” of the *philosophes*’ writings was to create “monsters,” who could be seen at every level of society, from the *grands* down to the “brigand who lays his traps for travelers in the isolation of the forest, or the valet who assassinates his master in the shadow of night.” Having imbibed the teachings of the *philosophes*, these men were restrained by no moral restrictions, only by fear of punishment. Well before Dostoevsky, if with little of his subtlety, anti-*philosophes* were contemplating the plight of Raskolnikov.

An increase in criminal offenses, however, was merely one of the ravages wrought by *philosophie*. Not content to remove the mitigating restraints of religion, the *philosophes* actively encouraged the most sordid human impulses as well. “Under the pretext that there are natural and necessary human penchants,” observed the abbé Gérard, “a false and dangerous *philosophie* eulogizes the most unbridled passions.” It flagrantly celebrated self-love, avarice, ambition, and lust as “natural” instincts, the motive forces of human *grandeur* and greatness. And it urged its adherents to seek happiness in their satisfaction alone. Unbeholden to an afterlife or the duties imposed by a higher power, *philosophie* based individual action simply on calculations of pleasure and pain.
equating the good with what was pleasurable in the here and now and the bad with what denied it. The result was an ethics of utility that sanctioned the most frightful egotism, making personal interest the sole criterion of morality. As Liger commented in a typical refrain, “All the duties of men are reduced to personal interest and pleasure.”

Philosophie was a prescription for the “most vile, the most absolute, the most fatal egoism,” a recipe for personal indulgence of every kind.

If the *philosophes* advocated the shameless pursuit of the things of this world at the expense of those of the next, the hedonistic gratification of the senses in place of Christian self-sacrifice and denial, it was no surprise, their opponents agreed, that lucre and sex were at the top of their list. Regarding the former, anti-*philosophes* read their enemies’ praise for industry and economic development as blind slavishness to the profane. *Philosophie*, as one critic charged, pressed men to “search only for temporal happiness during their sojourn on earth, to amass riches that all-too-soon will be taken away.” Seeking satisfaction in the greatest extravagance, the *philosophes* were frank “apologists and defenders of luxe,” the consummate “eulogists” of material splendor that further enervated the soul, the body, and the mind. At the same time they sought to restimulate their blunted senses through sexual debauchery, for the two—"licentious passions and impious luxe”—went hand in hand. Symptoms of a sensual society, they further promoted its decadence. The evidence shouted from the walls. “One hears nothing from all quarters but the cries of [sexual] passion,” Élie Harel affirmed in alleging an intimate connection between *philosophie* and libertinage. Barruel was more explicit. The *philosophes*’ obscene morality sanctioned “hideous vices”—adultery, incest, and even the “love most contrary to nature” (homosexuality). As Madame de Genlis affirmed, the *philosophes* scorned “all who recommended moderation of desire.”

It need hardly be stressed that these charges, like the great majority of anti-*philosophe* accusations, were vastly overstated and grossly unfair. Yet it is important to appreciate that they were not arbitrary either. There was a basis to the anti-*philosophes*’ criticism, an element of truth, however exaggerated, that gave order and internal logic to their attacks. Anti-*philosophes* could point, for example, to a strong utilitarian current that ran through much of Enlightenment thought—a frank acknowledgment, from Locke to Condillac, Helvétius, and beyond, that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain was a prime mover of human actions, one that should be factored into moral and political judgments. Stemming from a sensationalist epistemology that discounted or rejected altogether the importance of innate ideas, this moral calculus rooted human thoughts in physical sensations. And although few

A CENTURY BLINDED BY LIGHT 37
philosophes went so far as to identify the good purely with physical enjoyment, most did seek to reclaim the moderate pleasures of the senses from the strictures of Christian asceticism. Moreover, by praising the fruits of modern civilization—the benefits of work, industry, and commerce—they readily granted an important place to material reward in the garden of earthly delights. Wealth, in the philosophes' view, was a respectable component of human happiness, not something to be shamefacedly excused. In the same way, they were quick to “celebrate” the passions, almost uniformly rejecting the view that human nature had been vitiated by the Fall. Rather than see such “natural” penchants as egotism, ambition, vanity, and covetousness as divine punishment for original sin, the philosophes pointed out instead the positive role these passions played in the development of civilization. Vanity, egotism, and sexual desire, Helvétius maintained in De l’Esprit, stood behind all the great events and discoveries of history. Taking the part for the whole, as they did so often, anti-philosophes could point to such apologies as proof of their accusations, condemning philosophie en masse.

In at least one other area—the bedroom—the philosophes provided their opponents with explosive ammunition. Not only did many preach a healthy appreciation of the pleasures of the body against what they regarded as the confining prudery of Catholicism, but they spiced their works with ample lubricious material as well. The dreamer of Diderot’s Rêve de d’Alembert, for example, interrupts a disquisition on materialism to masturbate in the presence of his hostess (a general practice that is later prescribed liberally by the story’s Dr. Bordeu), and Les Bijoux indiscrets blurs the lines between pornography and philosophie even further, centering the story’s action around two talking vaginas. Other great philosophes engaged in enlightened eroticism of this sort, using sexual awakening as a metaphor for intellectual expansion and growth. Moving down a notch to the depths of the literary underground, philosophie and smut were virtually synonymous. Lovers of knowledge here were also lovers of men, women, animals, and all combined, liberating themselves from the strictures of Catholicism, as well as the grasps of debauched clergy, to find freedom in the coupling of sexual pleasure and philosophie. To the anti-philosophes, in little need of convincing, these books and scores of others provided conclusive proof that sexual depravity lay at the heart of the doctrine philosophique (see Figure 7).

Promoting carnal materialism, vicious egoism, and the unadulterated pursuit of worldly pleasure, philosophie reduced men and women to the level of beasts, creating “tigers,” “lions,” and “brutes.” A “poison,” it tore away at the social fabric, dissolving the ties that bound individuals to friends, to family, and to country. It flowed into the hearts and
minds of youths, corrupting their sensibilities; it seduced women, bidding them to despise chastity and to throw off their marital vows; and it encouraged children to brazenly disregard the authority of their parents. Having seeped into the most basic constituent element of society, the family, philosophie was rotting France from within, a theme the anti-philosophes returned to with great regularity. "Oh discord of families!"—the "horrible monster" created by the philosophes—lamented one typical observer, bemoaning the ease with which husbands and wives alike cast aside their oaths of fidelity to pursue their own selfish pleasure, the facility with which children disavowed their parents' strictures. Once an asylum from the evils of the world, the family was now a germinating source of its corruption. As "society as a whole" was nothing but an "imitation" of the order of families, the horrors within

Figure 7. Voltaire in flagrant delight with Madame du Châtelet, one of a number of "gallant scenes" that depict Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and other freethinkers practicing the craft of free love. Though probably produced by the philosophes' admirers, such engravings only reaffirmed the anti-philosophes' contention that depravity of the mind led to depravity of the body. Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
spread abundantly without. “It is the domestic virtues,” the author continued, “that prepare the social virtues. And he who does not know how to be a husband, a father, a son, a friend, or a neighbor, will not know how to be a citizen.”91 The abbé Liger concurred wholeheartedly: families, being monarchies in which “fathers were rulers,” and “empires,” being “large families in which princes were fathers,” to undermine the one was to subvert the other. The strength of the patrie depended on the strength of the patriarch and vice versa.92

The anti-philosophes’ “family values” rhetoric, in this regard, drew on traditional monarchical conceptions that based social order and divine kingship on the paternal authority set forth in the Bible.93 Insofar as these conceptions regarded domestic government as the model of public government, with patriarchal power seen as God-given, absolute, and indissoluble, the anti-philosophes were not entirely without cause in fearing the larger ramifications of the philosophes’ assaults on the family. Not only did many philosophes advocate divorce—a practice that reduced marriage to a negotiable contract, with obvious parallels to the political process—but they also disputed the unlimited power of the father, the so-called puissance paternelle enshrined in ancien régime law.94 Also an explicit metaphor for absolute sovereignty, puissance paternelle entrusted fathers with nearly limitless power over the persons and property of their children and wives. To contest this, anti-philosophes argued, to emphasize children’s rights at the expense of their duties and to stress their reasonableness and independence from parental “tyranny,” was to sever the first link in the chain of hierarchical authority that connected subjects to rulers and to God.

Relaxing the most elemental of all human bonds, philosophie was thus insinuating corruption into every level of society, at a rate that their opponents observed with horror. Since the birth of Christianity, intoned the archbishop of Lyon in a pastoral letter circulated in 1785, “public morals have never been as corrupt as they are today.”95 Other critics moved the comparison further back, arguing that contemporary France surpassed even the horrors of antiquity. “What Rome was during the decline of the Republic,” warned the abbé Yvon, canon of Coutances, “Paris is today. Yes Paris, the center of all corruption and of all vices. It is there that a nouvelle philosophie has established its seat.”96 The Annae litteraire compared the philosophes, rather, to the “Germanic hordes,” the Goths, Visigoths, Lombards, Vandals, and Huns, who had brought about Rome’s downfall: “Reason, religion, morality, dogma—they have attacked all, destroyed all, overturned all . . . .”97 But by whatever measure, all agreed that the philosophes had carried out a frightening revolution in moral sentiment, transforming a world and citizenry
once sober and devout. As the provincial academician and anti-
philosophe author Rigoley de Juvigny summarized definitively in 1787,

> The destructive spirit that dominates today no longer has anything to
stop it. \textit{Philosophisme} has penetrated everywhere, has corrupted ev-

eything. . . . The outcome of this distressing revolution has been the
general depravation of morals. And indeed how could morals remain
pure when an all-consuming \textit{luxe} corrupts them? when everything gives
off a spirit of independence and liberty that leads us to sever the ties that
attach us to State and Society, making of us egotists who are as indiffer-

tent to evil as to good, to virtue as to vice? when an ungrateful and false
philosophe seeks to snuff out filial piety in our hearts, the love that we
possess, from birth, for our kings, the attachment we owe to our country
. . . ? when, in a word, we have lost all idea of duty, of principle, every
rule of conduct, and every sentiment of religion?

These were, Rigoley hastened to add, neither “false nor exaggerated as-
sertions” but a faithful picture of the “present state of society.” \textsuperscript{98}

Ruthlessly uprooting the seeds of the faith while sowing fetid im-
morality in putrid ground, the \textit{doctrine philosophique} could hardly fail to
have adverse political consequences. This, in any event, was the firm
conviction of the anti-\textit{philosophes}, who accused their adversaries of sub-
verting the political institutions of the Old Regime with as much consis-
tency and as little refinement as they attacked the \textit{philosophes’} corruption
of religion and morals. In their view, the \textit{philosophes} were “enemies of
the state,” “evil citizens,” “declared adversaries of throne and altar,”
and unpatriotic subjects guilty of human and divine treason. “Dis-
turbers of public tranquility,” “brigands,” and “frondeurs,” the philoso-
phes were engaged in destroying completely the existing political
order. \textsuperscript{99}

The great variety of the \textit{philosophes’} political beliefs, ranging from
mild republicanism to enlightened absolutism, presented their oppo-
nents with little conceptual difficulty in this regard. Just as in their treat-
ment of the \textit{philosophes’} religious and ethical views, the anti-\textit{philosophes}
were ever inclined to assume the worst, quick to see the most radical po-
sitions of their opponents as indicative of a general philosophic ten-
dency. Thus, the anti-\textit{philosophes} frequently accused their opponents of
spreading “republican” and “democratic” ideas. The \textit{philosophes}, they
claimed, preached the sovereignty of the people, advocated “perfect
equality,” and spoke endlessly of “social contracts.” \textsuperscript{100} They lauded
the political institutions of the United Kingdom, spreading a conta-
gious “Anglomania” that held up Parliament and the limitations placed
on the powers of the English crown as models to be emulated in
France. \textsuperscript{101} And they talked ad nauseum of “liberty and equality,” natu-
ral rights, and the “rights of the people” without ever mentioning duties or obligations.102

Yet far more dangerous was the general spirit of independence that lay at the heart of the doctrine philosophique. The same unmitigated confidence in the power of the individual mind, the same boundless arrogance that led the philosophes to throw off all religious restraint, prompted them to attack all political authority. “Whoever does not fear God, will not respect his king,” affirmed the abbé Proyart in his widely selling biography of the late anti-philosophe hero, the dauphin.103 The abbé Pey confirmed the sentiment, observing that “impiety and heresy have in all times been as much enemies of kings as of the Church.”104 The subject who would not genuflect before God, in short, would not bend a knee before the sovereign. “The school of Raynal, of Voltaire, of Jean-Jacques, of Helvétius, of Diderot,” Barruel clarified, “is one of rebellion, of insubordination, of anarchy.”105

Once again, it is scarcely necessary to point out that few of the philosophes of the High Enlightenment, or even most of the underground hacks of Grub Street for that matter, preached anarchy or the wanton destruction of the monarchy. Yet it is important nonetheless to appreciate that from the refracted perspective of the anti-philosophes, these conclusions were perfectly logical, following naturally from their portrayal of the philosophes’ assault on religion and morality. To the anti-philosophes, religion, public morality, and political order were inseparable, a tightly knit triumvirate enshrined in the canonical, if sadly ignored, phrase of the royal censors, “la religion, la monarchie, les moeurs.” As devout publicists had argued since mid-century, the altar was the necessary complement to the throne. To attack one was to attack the other. Likened to “two great trees whose intertwined branches offer to society delicious shade and sure asylum,” religion and monarchy, in the anti-philosophes’ view, were inseparably bound. They had little doubt that the philosophes were engaged in an effort to “hack down both these trees at the root.”106

Envisioning the Future

The violence of this metaphor, replete with its image of an organic, naturally ordered world of God and king hacked to pieces by unnatural, unrooted philosophes, is instructive. Although the anti-philosophes were sometimes vague about the processes by which the philosophes’ ideas would destroy the political order, they were explicit in detailing the end results. For example, in a discourse delivered at the church of the
Mazarin college, celebrating the birth of the new dauphin in 1781, the orator warned the heir apparent of the dangers posed by *la fausse philosophie*. After spelling out its “central principle”—namely, the denial of religion and the rejection of the belief in an active God—the speaker continued: “From this anarchy of the physical and moral universe results, necessarily, the overthrow of thrones, the extinction of sovereigns, and the dissolution of all societies. Oh Kings! Oh Sovereigns! Will you be strong enough to stay on your thrones if this principle ever prevails?” Clearly, the speaker implied, they would not. Far more graphically, Charles-Louis Richard undertook to explain the fate that a society in the grip of *philosophie* could inevitably expect:

Everywhere *philosophie* lights the torch of discord and of war, prepares poisons, sharpens swords, lays fires, orders murder, massacre, and carnage, sacrifices fathers by the hands of sons, and sons by the hands of fathers. It directs lances and swords at the heads and the breasts of sovereigns, placing them on scaffolds, which it yearns to see flowing with sovereign’s blood—blood that it will drink in deep draughts as it feasts its eyes on the horrible specter of their torn, mutilated, and bloody members.

One could multiply such extraordinary citations at much greater length, for they were common. It is perhaps more instructive here, however, to ask whence this anti-*philosophe* obsession with violence, this unsettling fascination with blood?

Without doubt, the Bible itself was one important source, providing a constant reminder of the fury of divine wrath. In the books of the Old Testament, Catholics could find ample precedents for envisioning the violent fate of a faithless people. And though generally immune to the sort of eschatological reflection on the New Testament so characteristic of Protestant millenarianism, Catholics were not entirely averse to borrowing from the Book of Revelation when it suited their purposes. Marc Antoine de Noé, bishop of Lescar, for example, in a sermon printed as the keynote address for the 1785 General Assembly of the Clergy, painted a vision of the church in ruins straight out of John’s apocalypse. “Six trumpets have already sounded; the seventh and the last is giving the signal,” he warned, predicting a “sea of blood” and “a flood of fire” in France’s future. The great beast of the end of the world was *philosophie*.

As we shall see in greater detail in chapter 2, biblical associations of this kind certainly helped to shape anti-*philosophes*’ expectations of the future. A more immediate influence behind their fears of violent social upheaval, however, were the lessons they drew from the past. Above all,
the cultural memory of the Reformation and the religious wars continued to haunt European Catholics well into the eighteenth century, serving as what Amos Hofman has called a “paradigm of civil disorder,” a terrible test case of the consequences wrought by a systematic attack on the church.111 Here was a graphic illustration of how religious heresy led to political upheaval, of how dissent from the one truth faith could unravel into the tangled web of internecine conflict and bloody civil war. By unleashing the tight reign of Catholic tradition, dogma, and ecclesiastical authority, the Reformation had turned men and women toward the frenzy of the unbridled human intellect, seducing them to believe that they could arrive at truth independently through the private study of Scripture and the private sounding of one’s heart and mind. This was pride of the ultimate sort, and the results were all too predictable: limitless, subjective speculation; continual conflict over Scripture; the dissolution of the original protestants into an endless babble of conflicting sects and heretical factions; and ultimately the long series of religiously inspired wars that had bathed Europe in blood.

These memories provided orthodox Catholics with a specter of the perils of religious dissent, genuine historical precedent that seemed to give substance to their fears of the violent consequences of philosophie. They also helped to shape their response to philosophie itself. From the vantage point of many anti-philosophes, there was something dangerously Protestant about the Enlightenment as a whole. Did not the philosophes adopt as their spiritual heirs a range of Protestant thinkers, from Tindal and Collins to Bayle, Locke, and Newton? Was not the Protestant demand of “tolerance” the central battle-cry of the philosophes, for whom the heretic Calas was a Voltairean martyr and saint? And like their Protestant forefathers, did not the philosophes continually attack the authority of the church, placing their trust in the subjective prompting of individual reason alone? From this perspective, it was fairly easy to view philosophie as yet another of the deviations wrought by the Reformation. Catholic apologists of the eighteenth century reaffirmed the connection by employing many of the same terms to combat philosophes as their Counter-Reformation predecessors had used against Lutherans and Calvinists.112 The term prétendu philosophe, for example, mirrored that of the prétendu réformé favored by French Counter-Reformation writers, as did the continual references to the philosophes as a “sect” or “cabal.”

Similarly, anti-philosophes’ constant attacks on their enemies as “fanatics” resonated with the violent overtones of the sixteenth century. “Fanaticism,” of course, was a charge consistently leveled by the philosophes themselves to condemn the religious zealotry they deemed
responsible for the excesses of the religious wars. Anti-*philosophes* merely reversed the charge, denying their own fanaticism and imputing it to their rivals. As Madame de Genlis observed, characteristically,

> There was no longer any fanaticism in France before the sect of modern *Philosophes* was formed. But voilà the *Philosophes*—and indeed those most renowned, who exhort the people of every nation to destroy temples and places of worship, to massacre Kings and Sovereigns, to suffer no authority—except that of the *Philosophes!* I ask of every impartial person: Is this horrible fanaticism not a thousand times more dangerous than that inspired by religion? ¹³

Following naturally from rhetorical questions of this type was the corollary assertion that the *philosophes'* demands for "tolerance" were insidious and insincere. On the one hand, anti-*philosophes* charged that the plea for tolerance merely confirmed their enemies' indifference to religious truth, laying bare a deeper, more sinister design. By treating all faiths equally, the *philosophes* sought to water down the one true faith in a deluge of relativism, drowning Catholicism in an endless sea of competing beliefs. On the other hand, the plea for tolerance itself was grossly hypocritical. Pointing to the *philosophes'* jealous monopoly of the literary world and to the scorn and ridicule they heaped on their religious opponents, anti-*philosophes* alleged the "extreme intolerance of those who preach tolerance the most." ¹¹⁴ As Feller observed with representative bitterness, "Sweet tolerance consists in giving free circulation to every error, and to opposing all that combats them with the arrogance of tyrants." ¹¹⁵

An intolerant sect, a fanatic cabal, bloodthirsty tyrants incensed with pride—the range of the anti-*philosophes'* characterizations clearly drew on stock phrases and concepts from the Counter-Reformation's fight against heresy. It is hardly surprising, then, that when Louis XVI relented to long-standing pressure to grant limited civil status to French Huguenots in the 1787 Edict of Toleration, many orthodox Catholics viewed this as the direct result of the machinations of a joint Protestant-*philosophe* plot and warned of imminent bloodshed. In their view, Protestantism and *philosophie* were closely allied, their doctrines intermingled and intertwined. ¹¹⁶

Enemies of the Enlightenment thus drew from the language and legacy of the Counter-Reformation, but they did so in a modern way. Their violent premonitions of the future were something more than mere regurgitation of the apocalyptic invective of old; their obsession with violence itself was novel in its own right. It is worth remembering in this connection that what Isaiah Berlin famously took to be the hall-

---

¹³

¹¹⁴

¹¹⁵

¹¹⁶
mark of Joseph de Maistre’s modernity was his “preoccupation with blood and death.” In making this claim, Berlin overstated his case, ignoring completely the long tradition of Catholic writing out of which Maistre’s own thought emerged, thereby attributing novelty to what was in fact a recurrent preoccupation. But Berlin’s general point was still perceptive. There was something modern about the anti-philosophes’ obsession with blood, for the same reasons that there was something modern about their radical fight against the Enlightenment itself. Whereas the anti-philosophes’ Counter-Reformation forebears had struggled to preserve a world in which the Catholic faith would retain its predominance, the anti-philosophes struggled, in their view, for simple survival. They were acutely conscious of the difference. This was, they believed, an unprecedented war of world-historical importance, a metaphysical fight to the death, an opinion that gave particular urgency to their appeals and that lent particular violence to their morbid imagination. The anti-philosophes’ frequent references to blood and destruction provide illuminating insight into the sort of anarchic world they believed their enemies were bringing about. Philosophie was a specter of the future, not of the past. The terrible world created in its likeness could only scarcely be conceived. “Imagine,” ventured the abbé Lamouret, “an exact picture of all the various crimes and random horrors in the history of the world. Add to this all the atrocities that up to this point have only been conceived. . . .” This was the terrible image created in the “books that one calls Philosophiques.” As the abbé Liger asked, with an equally morbid proleptic imagination, “My God, what theater of horror and confusion would society become if this murderous philosophie ever prevailed?”

This was, to reiterate, conjecture, much of it purposely exaggerated to rally the faithful to the cause. Yet if not all anti-philosophes believed that Armageddon was inevitable or immediately at hand, the logic of their categories stressed that unless something was done to impede the spread of philosophie, France would soon be engulfed in horrors. Some were coming to see this as a distinct probability. In the late 1780s, the editors of the Journal historique et litteraire repeatedly drew attention to the philosophes’ triumphs throughout Europe, with premonitions of coming disaster. “Within ten years,” an article entitled “Philosophic Fanaticism” argued in 1786, “the ministers of God will not dare show themselves in public” but will be forced, as in days of old, “to celebrate the divine mysteries underground, in unknown catacombs.” Later in the same year, the journal reiterated this point at greater length, noting that “without wanting to predict or foresee the future . . . it must be said that the revolution that makes those who are still Christians shudder
is in certain respects natural and inevitable.” The corruption of the age portended far more than an overturning of “this or that Christian dogma by a particular heresy,” but rather the “triumph of general impiety,” of “skepticism and atheism.” Quoting Fenelon, the reviewer emphasized, “The day of ruin is close at hand, time hastens to bring it about.”

One is always tempted to read in quotations of this nature “predictions” of the Revolution. Counterrevolutionary historians, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, did precisely this, seeking to establish thereby the clairvoyance of those who fought the philosophes before 1789. This, of course, is to succumb to the teleological fallacy: the imposition of an end result onto the thoughts and actions of individuals who were not conscious of this outcome at the time. Those who fought the philosophes in the waning years of the ancien régime did not—nor could they have done so—foresee the complicated events that would subsume France in the aftermath of 1789. But having made this important qualification, it is essential to stress that given their analysis of the state of France, social upheaval of a revolutionary character was more than conceivable to enemies of the Enlightenment. The philosophes had already carried out a “revolution” in moral and religious sentiment. It was a term that anti-philosophes used frequently. And although they did so with pre-1789 resonance, it was clear to them that such “revolutions” led in turn to social and political upheavals more in keeping with our modern use of the word. This, they argued, was the natural outcome of la doctrine philosophique. Left unchecked, it would destroy the church and bring down the crown, engendering anarchy, carnage, and dissolution on a scale hitherto unknown.

A Nascent Ideology of the Right

Ascribing to philosophie radical consequences and sinister intent, the anti-philosophe discourse of the end of the Old Regime presented France as a country imminently threatened by religious, moral, and political upheaval. A poison, a sickness, a disease, philosophie was corrupting the body of France, and unless arrested it would continue to do so until the body lay lifeless and cold.

That this characterization—of both the philosophes and philosophie—was a construction, a linguistic creation to a far greater degree than any reflection of social reality, has been observed. It should also be apparent that in this respect the anti-philosophe discourse served an ideological function. Raising the specter of a common enemy, it exhorted fellow
participants to overcome their differences to join together in mutual com-
bet. “If we love religion and the fatherland,” Harel affirmed, “let us
work together to destroy this [philosophic] vermin.” What interests did
the anti-philosophes share? Under what banner did they group? “Let us
speak openly,” Harel answered. “It is for God, king, and country that
we fight.”

To wage war against “the dogmas of the Encyclopedic
school,” concurred the abbé Grosier, was to adhere “to a party”—a
party of “honesty, morals, the religion of [our] fathers, and the laws of
[our] country.” These, it is true, were somewhat vague propositions,
a rather loose set of principles on which to found a party. As has been
pointed out all along, however, the anti-philosophes themselves were
a diverse lot, one that cut across any clearly demarcated social, or
sociological, lines. Sharing a common conception of philosophie, anti-
philosophes did not see eye to eye on every issue.

Yet to say that the anti-philosophe discourse fulfilled an ideological
function is not to assert that it offered a fully developed political plat-
form. Rather it provided a “symbolic template” through which to con-
strue a perplexing and rapidly changing world, a number of “authori-
tative concepts” and the “suasive images” by which they could be
grasped. It was through this common template, and before their com-
mon construction of the Enlightenment, that men and women in France
began to come together in the face of a mutually acknowledged enemy.
In the process, they articulated common interests and common concerns
that increasingly gave their “party” greater ideological coherence. And
in doing so, they generated a set of themes that would assume a promi-
nent place in subsequent right-wing thought.

Most essentially, the anti-philosophe discourse underscored the funda-
mental importance of the Catholic religion in maintaining the social
order. Anti-philosophes did not overlook the deeply personal role that
Catholicism played in the lives of its adherents. Increasingly, in fact,
they emphasized this aspect of the faith, arguing in a proto-Romantic
vein that the philosophes’ pretensions to define human happiness solely in
secular terms was deeply misguided. Only by satisfying the longings of
the soul, anti-philosophes argued, by fulfilling the demands of feeling,
could human happiness be achieved. But although the index of
human suffering could thus be measured in individual terms, the anti-
philosophes were more inclined to dwell on the social ramifications of
philosophie. As we have seen, one of their principal complaints was that
the philosophes exacerbated individual preoccupation at the expense of
the social whole. To preserve that whole, anti-philosophes agreed, the
Catholic religion was absolutely essential. It was religion that provided
the motive for self-sacrifice and duty; religion that held together fami-
lies; religion that prevented men and women from committing hideous crimes and horrible indulgences; religion that inculcated a sense of obligation and responsibility that extended beyond the self; religion, and above all the Catholic religion, that bred respect for hierarchy and power. Remove it, and the world would unravel, as indeed it already showed signs of doing.

Playing an indispensable role in preserving the moral unity and character of society, religion also served as the natural ally and buttress of monarchy. To attack the church was to attack the crown, and thus to counter this double philosophic threat, anti-philosophes urged the two targets to unite. The logic of their discourse underscored the importance of the strategic alliance between throne and altar. This, at any rate, was the theory. In practice, this alliance was always more complicated than it seemed, and as a consequence one can detect from early on a certain ambivalence in anti-philosophe attitudes toward the state. Under the notoriously dissolute reign of Louis XV, for example, pious observers frequently grumbled about the absence of religion in the person of the king. And though Louis XVI's personal life was unimpeachable, enemies of the Enlightenment bemoaned his concessions to the Protestants and deplored his less than resolute stance against the philosophes. The note of strained exasperation in the National Assembly of the Clergy's 1780 mémoire, requesting action against the circulation of philosophic books (mauvais livres), is revealing: "It is time, Sire, permit us to say it with the apostolic candor of our ministry, it is time to put an end to this frightening and deplorable lethargy."

In the minds of many enemies of the philosophes, the throne was not holding up its end of the alliance.

Frustration of this sort, however, reflected more than simple dissatisfaction with the personal shortcomings of the monarch. On a deeper level, it belied the tensions inherent in a gradual but monumental transformation that was taking place in the overall character of the state. In a process that historians have come to call "desacralization," European governments were slowly shedding their religious and confessional skins, and in the quest for greater administrative efficiency and utility, political power was becoming increasingly secular. What is more, it was becoming stronger, often at the direct expense of religious institutions.

Perhaps the clearest case of this secular extension of the arm of the law was the European-wide expulsion of the Jesuits in the 1760s, an act that in itself engendered a great deal of lasting bitterness on behalf of men who were generally regarded as the philosophes' most able adversaries. If, as anti-philosophes widely believed, Jansenists and the philosophes ultimately lay behind the expulsions, European monarchs
had nonetheless condoned them. As Catholic opponents of the Enlightenment throughout Europe learned to their chagrin, the state could be their worst enemy. In the Spain of Charles III, the Tuscany of Peter Leopold, the Portugal of Pombal, and above all the Austro-Hungarian Empire of Joseph II, “enlightened” leaders pursued policies directly inimical to the interests of the church, extending secular power over Catholic jurisdictional autonomy and education, curtailing links to Rome, abolishing religious orders in the name of utility, scaling back the assiduously constructed edifice of Counter-Reformation piety, and in general taking an indulgent attitude toward the century’s new learning. Orthodox Catholics in many parts of Europe regarded such developments as depressing betrayal, a sign that philosophie had worked its way into the highest echelons of power. In certain instances, they were right, and in any case, their suspicion that the priorities of government were slowly departing from their own was well founded. Slowly but certainly the sacred and the profane were going their separate ways, pitting those who would have governments rule in the interests of God against those who would have them rule more in keeping with the interests of the public.

This was, to repeat, a gradual process, one that assumed the level of open conflict in France during the Restoration and that would continue to plague European states down through the nineteenth century. During the Old Regime, the conflict was less clearly defined, for officially the French monarch was the “most Christian king,” who ruled in the service and at the behest of God. But beneath the ideology of sacral absolutism, tensions simmered, creating for the anti-philosophes an awkward dilemma. Claiming to be the consummate defenders of throne and altar, they were, in truth, often less than pleased with the terms of the alliance and could even channel their dissatisfaction into a muted criticism of the throne from the Right.

Ambivalence of this nature can also be seen in a third constituent element of this nascent ideology: the self-conscious defense of tradition, convention, and historical prejudice. As the anti-philosophes repeated time and again, their enemies “denied all, doubted all.” “Avid for innovation” and “ardent to destroy what so many centuries had established . . . in the way of genius, taste, reason, knowledge, and experience,” the philosophes were quick to dispense with the heritage of the Christian past. They severed the great chain of being that connected all men and women to the first men and women, all humans to God. Their abstract individual was thus cut off from the past, their abstract society cut off from all that came before it. “We live in an irreverent century,” observed the Année littéraire. According to the views of a few
“modest philosophes . . . it seems that in order to think, the world had to await the arrival of these new prophets . . . They deplore the imbecility of our ancestors . . . disdain ancient establishments and usages, erode the foundations of society, destroy all, and put nothing in its place.”137 Well before Burke, observers in France were developing arguments for the inherent logic of prejudices and the need to respect “the collected reason of the ages.”138

But here again, one must be careful not to identify this nascent ideology too closely with conservatism, with a desire, that is, simply to preserve the status quo. Although the anti-philosophes defended ancient laws, customs, and institutions, they held that all these things—that France itself—had been deeply corrupted. They were, consequently, profoundly dissatisfied with many aspects of their culture and, as we have seen, spread a rhetoric of decline that emphasized the thoroughly degenerate state of the national character. It is a curious irony, in fact, that the anti-philosophes’ stress on the need to uphold virtue and the patrie; their tirades against luxe, sensuality, and egotism; and their constant lament for the decline of the family echoed motifs recurrent in classical republican thought. Yes, there were sound bases in Catholic theology for pursuing every one of these themes. Yet the overall emphasis on societal decline almost certainly owed something to other currents as well. In this respect, it is noteworthy that many anti-philosophes were frequently prepared to cite Rousseau in their behalf. Not only could they point to Rousseau’s insistence on the shortcomings of reason, but they could also cite a steady theme in his writings, from the Discours sur les arts et les sciences (1750) onward, that equated the advent of lumières with a decline in virtue and social corruption. His constant criticism of pride and egotism (amour propre), his denunciations of luxe and depravity, and his critique of materialism and atheism could be, and were, cited by Christian apologists and defenders of the throne to support their own agendas.

Such indulgence reminds us of the protean and contradictory nature of Rousseau, of the way in which he could appeal to the most reactionary, as well as to the most progressive, minds. It also points to an inherent tension in the notions of anti-philosophes themselves. Although they claimed to defend a social order in imminent danger of collapse, they undoubtedly, if unwittingly, contributed to its decline. By forever insisting on the moral decadence of France, the anti-philosophe discourse underscored the profound shortcomings of contemporary society. Just like Rousseau and even a number of the proto-Jacobin hacks of Grub Street, who also inveighed with great enmity against the philosophes on high, the anti-philosophes traded in the alleged social rot
of their century. Insistence of this kind did little to generate confidence in a sagging political regime and probably helped to undermine it.

Yet if the anti-philosophes shared themes with a broadly republican current in eighteenth-century thought, one should not exaggerate these similarities. Anti-philosophes might rail against the enervating effects of egotism and luxe and bemoan libertinism and the decline of the family, but they never spoke of the sovereignty of the people, nor did they conceive of virtue outside the guiding authority of the church. Moreover, unlike many of the “gutter Rousseaus” (the Rousseau du ruisseau) of the literary underground, the anti-philosophes refused to see the philosophes as the symptom of a wider social malaise, that is, as the product of a profligate aristocracy, a decadent monarchy, or a moribund church. Rather, they depicted the philosophes as the primary cause of these afflictions. To emphasize the point, they frequently alluded to a romanticized past before the onset of philosophie in which French men and women were pious, faithful, upright, and loyal to their king. For Rigoley de Juvigny, and as we shall see in subsequent chapters, for considerable numbers of anti-philosophes, this golden age was that of Louis XIV.

“What a most memorable century!” Rigoley pined—a halcyon epoch in which a devout king “loved, protected, sustained, and conserved religion, banishing error from his states.” During that great time, Gérard added, the “love of kings was spread amongst all hearts and minds.” Men were devout, moved by “valor, honor, patriotism,” and a spirit of self-sacrifice that consolidated France in “precious unity.” Today, however, “all these grand sentiments” are gone.

By invoking this mythic golden past—one far removed in time and character from the classical city-states so revered by republicans—anti-philosophes revealed signs of a romantic, quasi-utopian yearning for wholeness and social unity that would characterize a strain in far Right thinking for years to come. And although the example of an allegedly harmonious epoch—one in which a strong and pious king commanded the obedience and fidelity of reverent subjects—did reflect badly on the present regime, it nonetheless highlighted the anti-philosophes’ predilection for that regime’s institutions. The throne and altar might not be what they were; the people of France might be corrupted. But remove the canker, and France would flourish anew.

In their militant opposition to the status quo and their implacable hatred of the existing state of society, the anti-philosophes were genuinely radical. But their profound dissatisfaction with the present notwithstanding, it should also be apparent that enemies of the Enlightenment were violently opposed to any change that could be construed as a further concession to the corrosive spirit of the century. Although the posi-
ative propositions of their ideology were still amorphous and inchoate, anti-philosophes agreed on what they despised. In philosophie they found the perfect foil to channel their mutual hatred, one that drew them together in the face of a common enemy. If the philosophes assailed religion, then anti-philosophes must protect it. If the philosophes attacked the king, then his authority must be upheld. If the philosophes vaunted the individual, then the social whole must be defended. If the philosophes corrupted the family, then its importance must be reaffirmed. And if the philosophes advocated change, then anti-philosophes must prevent it—if not in defense of the world that was, then at least in the name of a world that could be.

Reactive, reductive, Manichean, this thinking was less noteworthy, perhaps, for its particulars than for its general form. It was precisely this tendency to view society as a battleground between opposing camps that stands as a hallmark of the bipolar, Right-Left model of politics so fundamental to subsequent European history. To anti-philosophes, as for the more mature French Right, cultural and political concerns were part of a zero-sum contest in which the entire social order was held in the balance. Dividing the world between good and evil, between the pious and the profane, anti-philosophes saw their struggle as a cosmic war in which the winners would take all. In the battle against philosophie there could be no compromise.

Such was the lens with which enemies of the Enlightenment viewed the France of the final years of the Old Regime and through which they observed and interpreted the initial events of 1789. Though they did not predict it, anti-philosophes greeted the Revolution as the perfectly natural outcome of over thirty years of philosophic success. And in keeping with the logic of their categories, they were inclined from the outset to assume the worst, seeing in even the mildest efforts at reform premonitions of horrors to come.