



# LIGHT OF REASON, LIGHT OF FAITH

*Posted on February 1, 2021 by Maurice Ashley Agbaw-Ebai*



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*In this excerpt from [Light of Reason, Light of Faith](#) - Father Maurice Ashley Agbaw-Ebai, a native of Cameroon, has written a fresh, exciting new study of the lifelong engagement of Josef Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, with the German Enlightenment and its contemporary manifestations and heirs. Contemporary European disdain for organized religion and the rise in secularism on that continent has deep roots in the German Enlightenment. To understand contemporary Europe, one must return to this crucial epoch in its history, to those who shaped the European mind of this era, and to a study of the ideas they espoused and propagated. These ideas, for good or for ill, have taken hold in other parts of the modern world, being incarnated in many minds and institutions in contemporary society and threatening to enthrone a disfigured rationality without faith or a sense of Transcendence.*

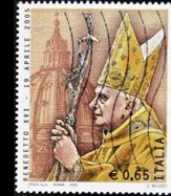
*Father Maurice masterfully positions Ratzinger correctly in the history of ideas, and exhibits why Ratzinger will be remembered as one of its main players. Pure rationalists and true believers are equally indebted to him.*

[Light of Reason, Light of Faith](#) is forthcoming from St. Augustine's Press.

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## **The Peculiarities Of The Aufklärung**

The *Aufklärung*, as the German strand of the pan-European Enlightenment movement, marked a conclusively irrevocable change in the political, religious, and social life of the old continent. Europe was taken over by the ideas of liberty, fraternity, and equality, which translates into individual freedom, religious toleration, and the equality of citizens before the law. Europe witnessed the flowering of culture and polite society in the eighteenth century. As a philosophical system, the *Aufklärung* marked "the attempt to establish the authority of reason in all walks of life, whether in the state, the church, the universities, or society at large." The *Aufklärung* also reflected an optimism in the belief in social progress. But this optimism regarding human potential was not blind, for even in the positivism and optimism that characterized the *Aufklärung*, Europe was still conscious of the potentials of debasement rooted in the human heart. As Nicholas Till points out:



# Light of Reason, Light of Faith

JOSEPH RATZINGER AND THE GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT

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**MAURICE ASHLEY AGBAW-EBAI**

FOREWORD BY **EMERY DE GAÁL**

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*"The philosophers and the Aufklärer were certainly believers in progress; but while one eye of the Enlightenment was always focused gladly on the bright future, the other eye was trained uneasily on the recent past. For the Enlightenment had been born in the shadow of the disintegration of social order which had occurred throughout Europe in the seventeenth century, following what seemed like an almost total collapse of political and religious authority. Civil war on a scale hitherto unknown had riven nations and overthrown established political powers; religious doubt had come to assail those not possessed and consumed by the new fanaticisms; status and property no longer offered security and certainty. The unrest of the mid-seventeenth century forced a fundamental reappraisal of the principles of social order, which led people to ask whether the traditional bounds could ever again be adequate."*

Given this atmosphere of socio-political and economic uncertainties, the *Aufklärung* as a pan-European movement sought to offer new interpretations of human nature, of society and of the moral life, in an otherwise uncertain Europe. One can therefore read two sides regarding the *Aufklärung* coin: on the one hand, the awareness that the medieval social order which saw a harmony between throne and altar was no longer sustainable became a position held by large sectors of the intelligentsia class. On the other hand, there was an eagerness or optimism to forge a new basis for the social order that had to emerge from the ruins of the collapsed medieval order. Thus, both pessimism and optimism characterized the emergence of the *Aufklärung* spirit across Europe.

Added to this sense of social change as a contributory factor to the development of the *Aufklärung* was the rise of capitalism in early modern Europe. In the medieval period, Till writes:

*Most people had been borne into a predetermined social position that defined them throughout their life, and placed them within a network of hierarchies and institutions understood to be part of the divine, unchanging order: a person was inseparable from his or her role in society; he or she was a peasant, an artisan, a knight, and not an individual who happened to have this or that occupation; and the medieval person's role carried with it a number of pre-ordained obligations such as those of kinship or feudal duty. Binding this multiplicity of institutions and hierarchies together was the authority and power of the Church.... The stability of medieval society was undermined from within by the dynamics of economic growth—the opening-up of markets, the widening circulation of commodities, the accumulation of wealth by a new class that derived its power from money rather than status. This in turn forced into being another class without status obligations, which sold its labor in exchange for a wage. Thus, the demands of economic activity gave rise to some of the basic ideals of the Enlightenment itself: individual freedom, legal equality, religious toleration.*

One can therefore make the case that the *Aufklärung* was a rejection of socio-economic determinism. People were eager to move upward in the social strata of society. People felt hard work had to be rewarded and the sense of a privileged economic class eschewed. And with free markets came newfound wealth for the masses, and with wealth came the desire for power, in this case, political power, which inevitably meant the discarding of monarchical and royal power, in what one might consider a clash of irreconcilable wills. The emerging socio-political order that came into being with material prosperity was articulated via the language of equality, and sustained by the spirit of freedom, liberty, and fraternity amongst the emerging business class.

Underlying all of Europe in terms of characterizing the *Aufklärung* was what Ernst Cassirer described as the *libido sciendi*, that is, the lust for knowledge, which, as Cassirer claims, “theological dogmatism had outlawed and branded as intellectual pride.” The eighteenth century saw the search for knowledge as a prerogative of the soul, and the *Aufklärer* largely felt that it was his duty to defend this right of every person to knowledge, without any censors. A proof of this was the emergence of the *Encyclopedia*, championed by the French thinker Diderot, which Diderot saw not only as a source of a body of knowledge, but more importantly as a tool meant to change the way people thought about all of reality. And this is quite understandable, for it would have been meaningless to champion the usage of reason without allowing for an unbridled access to all knowledge, especially in the broad sense of reason that the concept took in the mind of the *Aufklärer*.

Notwithstanding these pan-European orientations, the *Aufklärung* had its own peculiar German character that distinguished it from its French and English counterparts, some of which we can identify to be the following.

### **The *Aufklärung*'s Alertness To Christianity As A Religious-Cultural Phenomenon**

Firstly, unlike the French Enlightenment, the *Aufklärung* cannot be assessed as specifically an anti-religious or anti-Christian movement:

*The Church was much more than its institutions and doctrines, and it was impossible for reformers to conceive of their culture as divorced from its religious context. There persisted the belief in the possibility of a harmony between the civil and religious authority—the concordia sacerdotii et imperii—in which the sum was greater than its parts. This is evident, first of all, in the reformer's interest in ecclesiastical and religious history.*

Thus, the *Aufklärung* showed a keen interest in the religious dimension of the German society, albeit with a critical and reformist orientation.

In this sense, “the theologians of the *Aufklärung* were concerned to reformulate Christian doctrines upon the basis of premises more justifiable upon rational grounds, either by reducing them, reinterpreting them, or eliminating them.” In other words, the *Aufklärung*, particularly in its initial stages of the eighteenth century, was not representative of an adversarial and confrontational relationship

between faith and reason, philosophy and theology, Church and State, even if it tended to subordinate faith to reason, theology to philosophy, and called for a healthy autonomy in the intertwining relationship between Church and State. Alister McGrath explains that the reason for such a benevolent attitude toward faith and hence toward the Church was owed to the conviction that "God is the ontological principle or being which determines what exists, and the structure of existence." *Aufklärung* thinkers therefore saw reason, faith, and the institutional Church through a harmonious lens, albeit maintaining that revelation, faith, and the practices of faith as put forth by the Church had to be judged on the basis of reason, which occupies the first place in the grand scheme of things.

The bottom line at this point, in terms of the relationship between Christianity and the *Aufklärung*, on the part of the latter is that "truth is not something which can be regarded as mediated to man from outside (for example, on the basis of a recognized authority), but something which arises within man on account of its conformity with his rationality." McGrath thus concludes based on this subsequent parting of ways between faith and reason, that, even with Kant, Hegel, and perhaps Heidegger, "it will therefore be evident that there was an inherent tendency within the *Aufklärung* to regard the concept of supernatural revelation with suspicion." How so? I think because of the sense of the historical vis-à-vis revelation that eventually emerges with the *Aufklärung*. And at the center of this dialectics between history and revelation stands the question of the historical verifiability of religious truth claims.

### **The Aufklärung And The Sense Of The Historical-Religious Experience**

In effect, as the spirit of the *Aufklärung* further developed the disconnecting of reason from faith it raised the question of whether the concept of divine revelation was historically defensible, especially under the claims of autonomous rationality. In this light, and as McGrath points out, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) applied the *Aufklärung* insights to the nature of truth and history, with very astonishing results for the claims of Christian faith. In effect, the *Aufklärer* called into question the historicity and accuracy of the life of Christ as presented in the Scriptures. They argued for the insufficiency of the events recorded in Scripture, particularly the New Testament, even if they were eyewitness accounts. As McGrath points out, "The origins of the 'Quest of the Historical Jesus' may be seen in the *Aufklärung* conviction that the gospels contained material concerning Jesus which was unacceptable (because it was immoral, or supernatural) and which thus required correction in the light of modern thought." The real Jesus was clearly different from the Jesus of the gospels. As McGrath maintains, the *Aufklärer* "attempted to evolve methods of internal and external criticism by which an historical re-evaluation of dogma might proceed, leading ultimately to the exclusion of doctrines which

were considered to be irrational or morally indefensible." An example of such a doctrine will be the divinity of Christ, which was often reinterpreted in purely moral terms. And even when other truths of revelation such as the Incarnation of Logos in Christ were accepted, they were represented as a recognition of the fact that spiritual truths can take palpable and historical forms. Thus, one must note the distinction between the concept acceptable to the *Aufklärer*, and the content that was subjected to a radical historical criticism. A good example of this is Kant's treatment of the Gestalt of Jesus in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in which the supernatural claims of Christianity were rationalized and reduced to categories of rationality.

Albert Schweitzer offers a trenchant analysis of the salient points in his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Given that this reading of the figure of Jesus and the Church marks the monumental shift of the assumptions and presuppositions of hitherto unquestionable orthodox Christological dogmas, and granted that these positions are largely engaged by Ratzinger albeit with the intent of rebuttals, we can state the salient points here as captured and enunciated by Reimarus. With Reimarus, we find a rational presentation of Jesus as a Jewish prophet within the Jewish messianic history of expectation of the breaking forth of the kingdom of God, in the life of Israel. From the extant fragments or writings of Reimarus, Schweitzer points out that for Reimarus' historical reading, the starting point was the content of the preaching of Jesus, which is markedly different from the teachings or preaching of the apostles. Jesus preaching might be synthesized in this proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." This "kingdom of God" must be understood in a completely Jewish sense, given that neither John nor Jesus himself bothered to explain it in their preaching. The assumption is that their audience knew what it meant. Jesus is therefore an eschatological preacher of the kingdom of God. Owing to this "kingdom" character of Jesus' preaching, the assumption was that under the leadership of Jesus, the promised Messiah was about to be brought in—messianism understood here in the political sense.

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Put differently, Jesus did not intend to found a new religion. His was an ardent desire to bring about the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God, and this is the spectrum through which one has to read the events in Jerusalem that culminated with his death. Jesus wanted to forcefully bring about the messianic prophecy of Zechariah in Jerusalem. The cry of Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is a glaring pointer to Jesus’ realization and acknowledgment that God had not aided him as he had hoped. The cry shows that Jesus had not intended to die, but to politically liberate the Jews from Roman oppression. With Jesus’ death, all the sensual hopes of messianism on his part and on the part of his disciples came to an unexpected end. In order to earn a living—given that they had abandoned their trades when they accepted to follow Jesus—the disciples took on the second strand of Jewish messianism in a supernatural sense. They offered a spiritual interpretation of Jesus’ death, hence, the necessity of the Resurrection motif. Armed with this spiritual messianism explainable thanks to the Resurrection, the Parousia became the next logical step.

In this sense, the second coming of Jesus offered the disciples the content which they could preach to a gullible first-century Palestinian audience. The Parousia was therefore a creation of the early Church to explain away the failure of Jesus to bring about the kingdom of God, a failure of Jesus the eschatological prophet. The Parousia was a product meant to sustain hope, rather than a teaching of Jesus. Owing this, Christianity is therefore built on a false premise. Christianity is a fraud because it is a creation by Jesus’ disciples for the sole purpose of ensuring their usefulness, after the mistaken and failed project of their teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. To put it more precisely, “inasmuch as the non-fulfilment of its eschatology is not admitted, our Christianity rests upon a fraud.” In sum, Jesus is a failed prophet whose understanding of Jewish messianism landed him into a premature and unexpected death, over and against his wishes and expectations.

This is certainly not the place to evaluate these claims and positions advanced by Reimarus, as spelled out by Schweitzer. But it suffices to say that while one must certainly acknowledge, to Reimarus’ credit, a strong sense for the historical and a keen attention to exegesis, it must be stated, as Schweitzer does, that overall, Reimarus saw eschatology from a wrong perspective, namely, the political. Reimarus can



only read Jesus as the son of David, nothing more. And not only that, Reimarus' assumption that the eschatology was earthly and political is not only restrictive, but in pursuing this narrow reading of eschatology, Reimarus largely ignored the account of other New Testament texts such as the Gospel of John. And such a reductionist reading of Jesus does injustice both to any historical reading of the figure of Jesus and the Christological confession erected on such a history.

On this basis, therefore, McGrath points out, the *Aufklärung* poses three Christological challenges: Firstly, the traditional two natures of Christ were called into question, following the naturalistic and rationalistic logic of the *Aufklärung*. Modern reason could jettison this "relic" of the early Church without much controversy. Secondly, if following the logic of the *Aufklärung*, Christ's significance had to be conceived in purely naturalistic terms, how would the Church represent the unicity of Christ? The *Aufklärung* generally presented Christ as a moralist, a teacher of the good life whose superiority over other moral teachers is based upon the supremely moral character of Christ's teachings. As McGrath points out, "there seemed to be no way in which his uniqueness could be established without resorting to a discredited supernaturalism." Such a view during the *Aufklärung* of Christ as an ethics teacher would naturally be a concern to someone of a spiritual and intellectual temperament like Joseph Ratzinger. Thirdly, another Christological challenge of the *Aufklärung vis-à-vis* the Christian faith has to do with the certainty of our knowledge of Christ. How can we be sure about the Christ of the gospels when, following the dialectics of history, one cannot ascertain with objective certainty that what we read in the Scriptures is true?

### **The *Aufklärung* And The Duel Between Divine And Human Rational Supremacy**

McGrath maintains that "the ultimate foundation of the theology of the *Aufklärung* may be regarded as the doctrine that the natural faculty of human reason is qualitatively similar to (although quantitatively weaker than) the divine reason." The world of the *Aufklärung* is in essence a rational cosmos in which the human being works out his or her own moral perfection by conforming the self to the moral structures of the cosmos. Moral activity is therefore the highest destiny of the human being, and reason is the only practical guide to this destiny. This rationality of the *Aufklärung* is best summarized in these three propositions: firstly, all reality is rational; secondly, the human being has the necessary epistemological capabilities to unearth the rational *Ordnung* of reality; and thirdly, the human being is adept at acting upon this cognition of reality in order to achieve his or her rational destiny by acting morally. In this light, the human being is capable of attaining morality without any external assistance, and revelation and the authority of God was perceived to be such an extrinsic assistance. In other

words, unaided reason was capable of bringing about a just and moral society. In this world-view, religious faith as a source and sustainer of morality was no longer essential, for one could be moral or ethical without being religious.

Such a view of the *Aufklärung* naturally runs contrary to the Christian orthodoxy that, over the years of observation, reflection, and pondering the actions of the human being vis-à-vis the moral law, had come to discern in revelation the woundedness of human nature in the doctrine of original sin. While not rejecting the value of human rationality in discerning and arriving at moral truths, Christianity recognized as well the place of God's revelation in the moral landscape. The orthodox position, following Augustine, has been that on account of original sin, the human intellect is blinded and the will is weakened, so much so that the human being cannot function as an autonomous moral agent. As fallen creatures, therefore, God's moral law in historical revelation purifies and strengthens reason's natural reflections and discernments. In the eyes of the *Aufklärung*, this doctrine of original sin certainly posed a conceptual obstacle to moral perfection and even smacked of Manichean dualism. The doctrine clearly had become obsolete and warranted abandonment. Therefore, in order to counteract doctrines like original sin, the science of the development of dogma emerged from the *Aufklärung* movement. In this sense, it was not sufficient to simply believe what the Church teaches as doctrine. A critical understanding of the formulation and historical evolution of a given doctrine was as essential as the doctrine itself.

The [\*featured image\*](#) shows, *"Garrisonkirche und Breite Brücke mit Blick auf das Stadtschloss"* ("Garrison Church and Wide Bridge, with View to the City Palace"), Potsdam, by Carl Hasenpflug, painted in 1827.

