

The Enlightenment
AP World History
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Toward the middle of the eighteenth century a shift in thinking occurred. This shift is known as the Enlightenment or the “Age of Reason”. You have probably already heard of some important Enlightenment figures, like Rousseau or Voltaire. It is helpful I think to think about the word “enlighten” here—the idea of shedding light on something, illuminating it, making it clear.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment, influenced by the scientific revolutions of the previous century, believed in shedding the light of science and reason on the world, and in order to question traditional ideas and ways of doing things. The scientific revolution (based on empirical observation, and not on metaphysics or spirituality) gave the impression that the universe behaved according to universal and unchanging laws (think Newton). This provided a model for looking rationally on human institutions as well as nature.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), for example, began to question the idea of the divine right of Kings. In *The Social Contract*, he wrote that the King does not, in fact, receive his power from God, but rather from the general will of the people. This, of course, implies that “the people” can also take away that power! The Enlightenment thinkers also discussed other ideas that are the founding principles of any democracy—the idea of the importance of the individual who can reason for himself, the idea of equality under the law, and the idea of natural rights. The Enlightenment was a period of profound optimism, a sense that with science and reason—and the consequent shedding of old superstitions—human beings and human society would improve.

The idea of social contract came from two earlier scholars, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) believed that you formed a contract with your ruler which required you to obey that leader. John Locke (1632–1704) held that the contract required the government to uphold the natural rights of people. “Natural rights” were defined as life, liberty and property. Locke believed that people had the right to rebel against government if the contract was broken or if those rights were not upheld.

Once philosophers began debating about the basic concepts of government, discussions about the structure of government were not far behind. Charles Montesquieu (1689-1755) argued that no one branch of government should be allowed to get overly powerful. He argued that government should be divided into an executive, legislative, and judicial branch and those branches should check and balance each other. Notice that most Enlightenment philosophers did not reject government, just government that was corrupt or did not serve the people. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) believed that humans are born inherently good, but are slowly corrupted through civilization and society. Government was part of this corruption. People went into government with good intentions but were slowly corrupted by the power. Government, however, was a “necessary evil” because the alternative was anarchy.

You can probably tell already that the Enlightenment was anti-establishment and thus, anti-organized religion. Voltaire’s (1694 -1778) views led to major change in religion. Voltaire was an outspoken critic of religious intolerance and persecution within organized religions. Instead,

the scientist of the era and Enlightenment thinkers developed a way of understanding the universe called Deism—the idea, more or less, is that there is a God, but that this God is not the figure of the Old and New Testaments, actively involved in human affairs. He is more like a watchmaker who, once he makes the watch and winds it, has nothing more to do with it. In this way, logic, scientific discovery, and belief in a supreme power were all synthesized together.

The belief in deism is revealed in the writings of many Enlightenment writers. Like other Founding Fathers, Jefferson was considered a Deist, subscribing to the liberal religious strand of Deism that values reason over revelation and rejects traditional Christian doctrines, including the Virgin Birth, original sin and the resurrection of Jesus. While he rejected orthodoxy, Jefferson was nevertheless a religious man. Jefferson set his prodigious intellect and energy on the historical figure at the center of the Christian faith: Jesus of Nazareth. Jefferson became convinced that Jesus' message had been obscured and corrupted by the apostle Paul, the Gospel writers and Protestant reformers. While president, Jefferson took a razor to the Bible, cutting out portions of the Gospels that involved miracles and retaining his parables and ethical teachings. The resulting volume, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, affirmed his conviction that Jesus was not divine, but "a Teacher of Common Sense," primarily concerned with morality and ethical conduct. The end result of these debates was a society where logic and reason supplanted blind faith in truth revealed through scripture.

The rise of atheism in the 19th century was a result of some philosophers taking more common deist beliefs to the extreme. To the few atheists that gained prominence in the period, logic dictated that the existence of God could never be proved. The Baron D'Holbach (1723–1789) was the central figure of an atheistic philosophy salon he hosted in his Paris home. The salon has been interpreted as a meeting place for Parisian atheists. David Hume (1711–1776) was often seen as an atheist in his own day. His skeptical attitude toward religion in such works as "Of Superstition and Religion" earned Hume the reputation as a practicing atheist. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was one of the central guests of D'Holbach's salon. He attempted to solve the problems of how the cosmos could begin without a creator, and theorized about how life could come from inorganic matter.