

OVERVIEW: THE ENLIGHTENMENT

When historians discuss the “Enlightenment,” they are usually referring to 18th-century Europe (France and England in particular), although other parts of the world (especially the U.S.) are often included as well. The Enlightenment was a period of intellectual ferment that gave rise to a range of new theories about society, government, philosophy, economics, and religion. However, the period produced more than just abstract theorizing: it offered a whole new way of conceptualizing the world and one’s place in it. This change in perception in many ways marks the beginning of the modern era, as institutions and traditions of the past began to shift—and even crumble—in the face of new ideas and approaches.

The Enlightenment grew largely out of the Scientific Revolution. Enlightenment thinkers greatly admired many of the Revolution’s leading figures, but the work of Isaac Newton provided the greatest inspiration. Newton’s approach to scientific research stressed gathering facts through observation and experience, then applying reason and logic to analyze those facts. A key assumption about Newton’s method provided the general basis for the intellectual exploration of the Enlightenment: if this method worked for finding scientific truth, why couldn’t it be applied to social sciences as well so that truths about society itself could be discovered?

There was also a cultural side to the Enlightenment. Many leading Enlightenment figures gained notoriety for their participation in the *salons* in France, which set the standards for high culture in Europe at the time. These thinkers came to be known as the *philosophes* and included among their number notables such as Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. They gained fame in the *salons* not so much for their adherence to the scientific method and the theories they came up with as for their general questioning of established institutions and social attitudes.

The Enlightenment introduced a new secularism into society, and the established church became one of the major targets of criticism. Enlightenment philosophy emphasized experience and reason, while the Church asked worshipers to accept its

principles on faith, so in some ways a conflict here was inevitable. Enlightenment thinkers generally did not abandon their belief in God, but instead formulated a theory known as *deism*, in which God was seen as the “great watchmaker” whose creation—the universe—operated as smoothly as a fine Swiss watch. The task, as Enlightenment thinkers envisioned it, was to try to discover the principles that governed the functioning of this “watch.” *Deism* thus centered around a belief in a God who operated according to reason and whose existence could be seen in the natural order and logic of all that He had created. Although *deism* affirmed the existence of God, it discarded virtually all Church traditions and practices as irrational and unnecessary, a fact which led many to criticize the *philosophes* as anti-Christian, or even to portray them as atheists.

The influence of Enlightenment thinking can be seen from the 18th century up even to the present day. Many of the ideals of the American and French Revolutions drew heavily upon Enlightenment thought, as did many similar uprisings in the 19th and 20th centuries. Our institutions of government incorporate many of the ideas first espoused by Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. Many of the humanitarian principles that people hold today also can be traced back in part to ideas from the Enlightenment. By presenting people with a new perspective from which to view the world—and also by showing them how to make sense of what they saw—Enlightenment thinkers laid the groundwork for modernity.