

## REDESIGN Religion, Society, and Politics during the Enlightenment

**\*Remember, the *philosophes* were people who sought to apply the rules of reason and common sense to nearly all the major institutions and social practices of the day. Fundamental to this application of rationality to social institutions was the idea that change was possible (as well as desirable). Since many aspects of 18<sup>th</sup>-century European society were seen as irrational by the *philosophes*, they criticized social institutions and promoted reform.**

### III. The Enlightenment and Religion

- A. Many *philosophes* considered the church (and religion) to be one of the most irrational institutions...they thought that churches (both Catholic and Protestant) hindered the pursuit of a rational life and the scientific study of humanity and nature
  1. taught that humans were basically depraved, becoming worthy only through divine grace (i.e., incapable of change here on earth)
  2. criticized science
  3. promoted intolerance and fanaticism which led to division and war
- B. Three Responses of the *Philosophes*
  1. Toleration: though a fairly conservative response, toleration promoted the idea that life on Earth and human relationships should not be subordinated to religion
    - a. Voltaire (*Treatise on Tolerance*)
    - b. Gotthold Lessing (*Nathan the Wise*): toleration of not only different Christian sects but also of religious faiths other than Christianity (Judaism and Islam) and felt they deserved full rights of citizenship regardless of their religion.
    - c. -- in the 18<sup>th</sup> century favored a new acceptance of Jews and denounced persecution of Jews but made no attempt to hide their hostility and ridiculed Jewish customs. Example: Diderot said that Jews had “all the defects peculiar to an ignorant and superstitious nation”
    - d. \*Many Europeans favored the assimilation of the Jews into mainstream of society, but only by the conversion of Jews to Christianity as the basic solution to the “Jewish problem.” This was not acceptable to Jews.
    - e.
  2. Deism: a more moderate response, some *philosophes* called for an alternative to contemporary religions...a religion without fanaticism and intolerance
    - a. Two major beliefs of Deists:
      - 1) God exists: this could be empirically justified by the contemplation of nature
      - 2) life after death
        - a) because nature provided evidence of a rational God, the deity must also favor rational morality
        - b) promoted a virtuous lifestyle because rewards and punishments would be meted out according to the virtue of the lives people led on earth
    - b. Deists hoped their new religion, because of its simplicity, would end religious strife, promote toleration, and remove the need for priests and ministers (who they felt were responsible for fomenting religious differences and denominational hatred)
  3. Criticism and Atheism: some *philosophes* went beyond promoting religious tolerance and the formulation of a rational religious alternative and attacked the

churches and the clergy in an attempt to undermine Christianity...very few embraced positions similar to aetheism

#### IV. The Enlightenment and Society

**\*The *philosophes* believed that the application of human reason to society would reveal laws in human relationships similar to those found in physical nature. They hoped to end human cruelty and improve the human condition by discovering these “natural laws” and making people aware of them. In that sense, the Enlightenment was a precursor to the social sciences.**

##### A. Laws and Prisons

1. Cesare Beccaria (*On Crimes and Punishment*)
  - a. wanted to make laws both affective and just
  - b. believed that positive law should conform to natural law
2. the purpose of law was to secure the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number of human beings (not to impose the will of God or some other ideal of perfection)

##### B. Economic Freedom

1. *Physiocrats*: economic reformers in France who spoke out against Mercantilism, the regulation of labor, and guilds
  - a. wanted economic freedom to allow the operation of natural social law
  - b. felt that the primary role of government was to protect property and to permit owners to use it freely
2. Adam Smith (*Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*)
  - a. believed that economic liberty was the foundation of a natural economic system
  - b. spoke out against Mercantilism
    - 1) believed that mercantilist policies (navigation acts, bounties, tariffs, special trading monopolies, and domestic regulation of labor and manufacturing) hindered the expansion of wealth and production
    - 2) did not believe the earth's resources were limited and that the only way a nation could acquire wealth was at the expense of others
  - c. Basic Principles of Smith's Economic System (Capitalism)
    - 1) allow individuals to pursue their own selfish economic interest
    - 2) marketplace: self-interested individuals would seek to enrich themselves by meeting the needs of others
    - 3) competition would not only expand the economy, but actually benefit consumers
    - 4) resources (water, air, soil, and minerals) were unlimited and meant for the enrichment of humankind...sustained economic growth was possible and human beings should exploit nature's infinite bounty for their benefit
    - 5) *laissez-faire*: economic thought and policy which favors a limited role for the government in economic life

##### C. Slavery

1. Club called *Friends of the Blacks* advocated for abolition of slavery, which was achieved in 1791. In 1794, guided by equality, government abolished slavery in the colonies.
  - a. Slave rebellion in Saint-Dominique (Haiti) influenced by ideals of French rev.
  - b. White plantation owners/families killed, burned buildings. Whites retaliated with equal brutality.

- c. Toussaint L'Ouverture, son of African slaves, seized control.
- d. In 1802, Napoleon reinstates slavery and captured L'Ouverture. He died in French dungeon within a year.
- e. In 1804, now called Haiti, announced its freedom based on French revolutionary ideals.

## V. The Enlightenment and Political Thought

**\*The *philosophes* had the greatest impact on political thought and theory. Arguably, political institutions needed the most reform, especially on the Continent. They were not, however, in agreement on what was the ideal political system. Their solutions ranged from direct democracy to absolute monarchy.**

- A. John Locke (17<sup>th</sup> century): forerunner of the enlightened thinkers
  - 1. believed in natural rights (“life, liberty, and property”) and in the government’s duty to protect those rights
  - 2. according to the “Social Contract”, people have the right to overthrow a government or replace the ruler if...
    - a. the government or ruler is oppressive or unfair
    - b. the government or ruler does not adequately protect (or violates itself) the people’s natural rights
- B. Voltaire
  - 1. believed in an absolute monarchy with a fair and just king
  - 2. people were unqualified to govern themselves
  - 3. was, however, a strong proponent of free speech
- C. Montesquieu (*Spirit of the Laws*)
  - 1. believed that no single set of political laws applied to all peoples at all times and in all places
  - 2. the type of government (whether democracy or monarchy) depended on a country’s size, population, religious customs, economic structure, etc. (Political Variables)
  - 3. division of power in government
    - a. authority should be wisely separated among different branches: legislative, executive, and judicial (as in Great Britain)
    - b. “checks and balances” to preserve the rights of the people
- D. Rousseau: was very critical of the society in which he lived, especially of the new commercialism and industry
  - 1. *Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences* (1750)
    - a. contended that the process of civilization and enlightenment had corrupted human nature
    - b. seemed impossible for human beings living according to contemporary commercial values to achieve virtuous lives
  - 2. *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1775): blamed much of the evil in the world on the uneven distribution of society
  - 3. Political Theory (*The Social Contract*—1762): outlined the political structure that Rousseau believed would overcome the evils of contemporary society
    - a. suggested that society is more important than its individual members
    - b. individuals are who they are only because of their relationship to the larger community
    - c. promoted the idea of a direct democracy
      - 1) binds the individual to the community

- 2) the general will is moral and right...obeying it makes one free
- 3) saw people not as independent individuals but as creatures enmeshed in necessary social relationships...loyalty to the community should be encouraged

**\*Rousseau was launching an assault on the 18<sup>th</sup>-century cult of the individual and the fruits of selfishness. He questioned the very foundations of social thought and actions.**

VI. Women in the Thought and Practice of the Enlightenment

- A. Salons: wealthy or well-connected women helped to promote the careers of the *philosophes* (e.g., Marie-Therese Geoffrin, Julie de Lespinasse, Claudine de Tecin, and the marquise de Pompadour) by organizing gatherings where the ideas of *philosophes* were circulated

**\*Still, the *philosophes* were not strong feminists. They generally urged a better and broader education for women, but, for the most part, displayed rather traditional views toward women and advocated no radical changes in the social condition of women.**

B. Two Views on Women

1. Montesquieu
  - a. believed women were not inferior to men
    - 1) was aware of the kinds of personal, emotional, and sexual repression European women endured and condemned the restrictions on women in European society
    - 2) sympathetically observed the value placed on women's appearance and the prejudice women met as they aged
  - b. recognized that the status of women was the result of climate, the political regime, culture, and the woman's physiological nature
  - c. still, he retained a traditional view of marriage and family and expected men to dominate those institutions
2. Rousseau (*Emile*—1762): the most radical of all Enlightenment political theorists urged a very traditional and conservative role for women
  - a. "Two Spheres"
    - 1) women were relegated to the domestic sphere
      - a) they were subordinate to men except in the capability to feel and give love
      - b) portrayed women as weaker and inferior to men in virtually all respects
      - c) portrayed the domestic life and role of wife and mother as a noble and fulfilling vocation
    - 2) men were relegated to the world of citizenship, political action, and civic virtue (this was no place for women)

C. Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—1792)

1. accused Rousseau and others after him who upheld traditional roles for women of attempting to narrow women's vision and limit their experience
2. used reason to portray Rousseau's view as irrational
  - a. confining women to the separate domestic sphere because of supposed limitations of their physiological nature was to make them sensual slaves to men
  - b. women are victims of male tyranny and they can never achieve their own moral or intellectual identity

- c. denying women a good education impedes the progress of all humanity
3. demanded for women the kind of liberty that male writers of the Enlightenment had been championing for men for more than a century