

The Roots of the Enlightenment

Enlightenment thinkers wanted to examine human life in the light of reason. Rational understanding, they felt, would lead to great progress in government and society.

These thinkers believed they were making a major break with the past. Like all people, however, they were influenced by what had come before them. In this section, we'll first look at some of the roots of the Enlightenment. Then we'll consider ways in which the new ideas of the Enlightenment clashed with old beliefs.

The Scientific Revolution Enlightenment thinking grew out of the Scientific Revolution. In science, observation and reason were revealing laws that applied throughout the physical world. The thinkers of the Enlightenment wanted to apply this approach to human life. They asked questions like these: What natural law governs the way people should live? How well do our institutions agree with natural law? Does natural law give all people certain rights? What is the best form of government?

Philosophers did not always agree about the answers to these questions. For example, some of them defended the right of kings to rule. Others argued that people should have more say in their own government. What they all shared was a way of thinking about such questions. Like scientists, they placed their trust in reason and observation as the best sources of understanding and progress.

The Renaissance and the Reformation The Enlightenment also had roots in the Renaissance and the Reformation. The humanists of the Renaissance questioned accepted beliefs. They celebrated the dignity and worth of the individual. During the Reformation, Protestants rebelled against the Catholic Church. They put individual conscience ahead of the authority of the church. Enlightenment thinkers went even farther in

rejecting authority and upholding the freedom of individuals to think for themselves.

Classical and Christian Influences Like the humanists of the Renaissance, many Enlightenment thinkers were inspired by classical culture. Trust in reason, for example, goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks. So does the idea that people should have a say in their government. Philosophers who argued for this idea could point to the democracy of ancient Athens or the republic of ancient Rome.

Christian ideas also colored Enlightenment thinking. Enlightenment philosophers preferred rational understanding to faith based on the Bible. Yet most of them continued to believe in God. They saw the laws of nature as the work of an intelligent Creator. They saw human progress as a sign of God's goodness. Often their approach to moral problems reflected Christian values, such as respect for others and for a moral law.

New Ideas Versus Old Beliefs The thinkers of the Enlightenment prized reason over authority. They questioned the basis of religion, morality, and government. Everything, they said, must be examined anew in the light of reason. This outlook led to many clashes with accepted beliefs.

Christian faith, for example, was based largely on trust in the Bible as God's word. Enlightenment thinkers believed that humans were perfectly able to discover truth for themselves. Some of them even questioned the existence of God. Others sought a "natural religion" based on reason. To these thinkers, the order in the universe was proof enough of an intelligent Creator. There was no need to base belief in God on revelations in holy books. Similarly, ideas about right and wrong should be based on rational insight, not on the teachings of religious authorities.

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Enlightenment thinkers also criticized accepted ideas about government. Some questioned the long-held belief in the divine right of kings to rule. Many stressed individual rights that governments must respect. Toward the end of the 18th century, these ideas played a major role in revolutions in both America and France.

The Enlightenment helped to shape modern views of human nature, society, and government. Let's take a closer look at five thinkers whose ideas were influential during the Enlightenment.

Questions

- 1: What is an important similarity between the way scientists were thinking during the Scientific Revolution and the way philosophers were thinking during the Enlightenment?
2. In what ways did the Renaissance and the Reformation influence the Enlightenment?
3. What is a similarity between early Christian beliefs and the ideas of the Enlightenment?
4. The new ideas of the Enlightenment clashed with some previously held ideas. What were some of those old ideas?