

## The Age of Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment (also known as the **Age of Reason**) was a period of intellectual change that took place roughly between the years **1500 to 1800 AD**. Simply stated the Enlightenment was a period where people understood reason to be the most reliable way by which people could come to understand themselves and the world. Ultimately, the **Enlightenment** promoted a more scientific or **rational** view of the world. This intellectual revolution continues to influence the disciplines of science, philosophy, and even theology. Enlightenment thinkers typically opposed the acceptance of superstitious beliefs at face value. Instead, these philosophers encouraged people to test beliefs using a combination of logic and experimentation.

The **printing press** enabled the rapid spread of ideas during the Age of Reason. Philosophers, scientists and theologians no longer worked in isolation from one another. Instead, they read one another's work, shared ideas and influenced one another's thinking. The consequence was an intellectual transformation of Western Europe. Western society during the Enlightenment was very different from the medieval one preceding it, e.g. whereas people used to satisfy themselves with mystical explanations during the Middle Ages people in the new society looked to more rational answers for the questions they had about the world.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment championed the cause of freedom, religious tolerance and human rights. (In fact, these philosophers were the first in history to speak of the existence of "**human rights**" or "**individualism**".) Both church and secular authorities frequently viewed Enlightenment philosophers as dangerous. This is because philosophers publicly questioned the wisdom of unquestioningly obeying the Church or following an absolute monarch; it is not surprising, therefore, that during the Enlightenment period there were two major revolutions—the **American Revolution** (1776) and the **French Revolution** (1789)—which saw the overthrow of monarchs and the establishment of democracies. These revolutions also resulted in the weakening of religious authority. In the case of the United States, the so-called "Establishment Clause" in the American *Constitution* forever separated church and state (government). In France, the Church's authority was destroyed and its property confiscated.

Although churches (Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic and Calvinist) resisted the pressure to change, many kings/queens eventually endorsed Enlightenment principles. These kings and queens became known as "enlightened despots" (dictators). **Maria Theresa** of Austria and **Frederick the Great** of Prussia were examples of enlightened despots. They both attempted to apply Enlightenment principles to the running of their own governments, e.g. allowing a limited freedom of speech to exist, protecting people from church authorities, etc. The Enlightenment ended around the year 1800 AD after which the emphasis on reason gave way to Romanticism—an intellectual movement emphasizing emotion.

## The Philosophes

The **philosophes** (French for "philosophers") were the intellectual leaders of the 18th Century Enlightenment. Philosophers from America like Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826 AD) or David

Hume (1711-1776 AD) from Scotland were influenced by the intellectual environment of France. The *philosophes* were not just strictly intellectuals. Instead, they applied **reason** to the study of many areas of learning including history, science, politics, economics and social issues. They provided criticism of governments and wrote about ways life could be improved. These thinkers strongly supported the idea of progress, tolerance, and a distrust of organized religion and feudal institutions. Philosophers like **Voltaire** (1698 to 1794 AD) believed society could be improved through **education**. He argued educated people thought more clearly. The Enlightenment was in many respects a very optimistic movement, in that, it was believed if people were better informed they'd make better decisions.

The *philosophes*, like the ancient philosophers of Greece, were public intellectuals dedicated to solving the real problems of the world. They wrote on subjects ranging from current affairs to art criticism, and they wrote in every conceivable format. The Swiss *philosophe* **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778 AD), for example, wrote essays, a treatise on the benefits of a liberal education, constitutions for Poland and Corsica, and an analysis of the effects of the theater on public morals, a best-selling novel, an opera, and a highly influential autobiography. The *philosophes* wrote for a broad educated public of readers who snatched up every Enlightenment book they could find at their local booksellers, even when rulers or churches tried to forbid the reading of such works. In 1784, the German philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804 AD) summed up the spirit of the Enlightenment period in two Latin words: **sapere aude**, "dare to know—have the courage to think for yourself." The *philosophes* used reason to attack superstition, bigotry, and religious fanaticism, which they considered the chief obstacles to free thought and social reform. Voltaire considered religious fanaticism his chief target: "Once fanaticism has corrupted a mind, the malady is almost incurable....The only remedy for this epidemic malady is the philosophical spirit."

Enlightenment writers did not necessarily oppose organized religion, but they strenuously objected to religious intolerance. They believed that the systematic application of reason could do what religious belief could not: improve the human condition by pointing to needed reforms. Reason meant critical, informed, scientific thinking about social issues and problems. The *philosophes* believed that the spread of knowledge would encourage reform in every aspect of life, from the grain trade to the legal system. Chief among their desired reforms was intellectual freedom—the freedom to use one's own reason and too publish the results. The *philosophes* wanted freedom of the press and freedom of religion, which they considered "natural rights" guaranteed by "**natural law**." In their view, progress depended on these freedoms.

**Natural Rights:** are rights not contingent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and therefore universal and inalienable, e.g. the rights to life, liberty and happiness.

**Natural Law:** the natural law is the rule of conduct which is prescribed to us by the Creator in the constitution of the nature with which He has endowed us.