

Enlightenment: The Age of Reason
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During the 18th century America experienced a drastic shift in its relationship with England. This shift could be seen in the rapid growth of the American economy and population and the maturation of American political institutions. There were also significant changes taking place in the area of religion and culture. In fact during the 18th century there was a resurgence of religiosity and an increase in church membership. At the same time, however, the Protestant roots of Anglo-American culture nourished an increasingly secular society. For the first time during the 18th century, the colonial society began to take on an a style and character that looked distinctly American.

Although there were a number of factors that contributed to the development of the American character, there were two forces that perhaps exerted the greatest influence on the thoughts, values, attitudes and behavior of the American people during the 18th and 19th centuries. These movements were the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening.

These two movements in many respects struck very different chord.

- The Awakening sparked a revival of religiosity and faith, the Enlightenment simulated the human intellect.
- The Awakening stressed the experiential, the Enlightenment the rational.
- The Awakening exalted the power of God, the Enlightenment the potential of man.
- The Awakening thrived mostly among the lower and lower-middle classes, the Enlightenment stirred the colonial elite and upper class.

Yet in other respects the movements were strangely similar.

- Both drew their origins and inspiration from Europe.
- Both challenged existing institutions and looked for a better, more ideal society.
- Both appealed to the notion of individualism within Anglo American culture.
- Both, in spite of different ideas and directions provoked and fostered notions about God, nature, man and society that reinforced America's peculiar Protestant view of its past and future. That fact, in and of itself, contributed to the march toward independence in the 1770s and sense of nationalism at the turn of the 19th century.

In Immanuel Kant's words, "the Enlightenment was the liberation of man from his self-caused state of minority." Enlightenment was protest against traditional reliance on authority in religious and secular life. Enlightenment asserted man's ability to understand the universe without supernatural revelations. Enlightenment thought assumed the origins or the original worth and dignity of all men and it challenged the comfortable to eliminate the harsh lives of the impoverished and ignorant masses and victims of irrational and inhumane social conditions. Those who were followers of the enlightenment were memorized by Newton's concept of the harmonious law-governed universe, a rational system ruled by the mathematical laws of cause and effect.

The basic assumption of the enlightenment was that man, as a part of the rational universe could, through reason, understand that universe. Religious doctrine had to be constantly challenged and be in accord with the great design of the natural universe as comprehended by man's mind. To the true followers of the enlightenment, the only religion validated by mathematics, logic and scientific observation and experiment was deism, a philosophy conceiving of the Deity as an architect who planned and set into motion our harmonious and self-regulating universe.

The philosophy of the enlightenment: Human nature was not predetermined by an arbitrary deity, but rather, it was the natural result of the environment that molded it. Man possessed no innate ideas, his mind was a product of his experiences, good and bad. Total depravity and predestination were mere religious fictions invented by the priest, i.e., clergymen to reinforce their control over the masses. If human nature contained elements of evil, these were simply the result of natural causes, irrational conditions, and an authoritative type of training. (Consider the concept of Natural rights as discerned by John Locke.) Man had the power to improve his own nature by improving his environment through science and education so that it would be in accord with reason and natural laws. Enlightenment, thus, viewed man's i.e. human nature in optimistic terms. Political, social and economic theories no longer rested on supernatural revelations, but on natural laws.

The ancient theory of contract under natural law was evoked to explain the procedure by which man had built society from the original state of nature in which individuals existed like so many atoms. Thus, the state and society were not organic but mechanistic. The state and society were merely artificial entities. The only ultimate reality was the individual whose natural rights of life, liberty, property, and the

pursuit of happiness could not rightfully be eliminated or ignored by the state.

If the state violated the natural law of the universe, by *not* recognizing these rights, then in the interest of reason and justice, men could and should resort to revolution. Since man could test institutions by reason and reform them accordingly, the world was infinitely perfectible. The heavenly city was here on Earth. And man was to achieve it through his own rational powers. Belief in these powers constituted a new religious faith.

The ideas of the Enlightenment were deeply rooted in the growth of secularism and science that had been transforming wrestling Europe since the late middle ages and since the Renaissance. During the late 17th century and early 18th century, the Enlightenment was extremely popular. This was particularly true in the case of 18th century North America where the ideas were deeply rooted in the American experience. The ideas of the Enlightenment answered new needs resulting from new ways of life. The rising middle class needed ideas quite different than those that had served the priestly and feudal classes of Europe. Natural science was more useful in guiding the colonists in their mercantile enterprise than the revealed word. The pursuit of commerce called for religious tolerance, civil liberties,

respect for property and the security of property from **arbitrary taxation**. The middle class needed **individual freedom** for enterprise. They needed release from the hampering economic doctrines that a religious and feudal society had imposed against taking interest and undue profits; they required not an organic regulatory state, but one invested with mere police power. They needed an environment that allowed for personal freedom so necessary to commerce and trade, an environment that came to be regarded as the natural environment, the one in harmony with mathematical laws of the universe. A philosophy of **free will** rather than **predestination**, one that **recognized that reason and natural laws enabled man to control his environment and mold his destiny**. Optimism and faith in progress was high on the scale of values of the American middle class. Enlightenment provided this class with ideas compatible with their interest.

The Enlightenment held out the hope that humanity, through science could create a better world—a kind of heaven on earth. **Reason was the source of progress**. Without reason there could be no progress. In commenting and writing on government and society Enlightenment thinkers used their discovery of natural law governing the affairs of humankind to give the theory of progress a new and radical dimension. It was possible, the Enlightened thinkers reasoned,

to think not only of material progress through science but social progress as well.

In the late 17th century, thinkers such as Newton and Locke emphasized the themes of rationality, harmony, balance, order and above all regularity of God's universe. In the mid 18th century, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Hume speculated further on Enlightenment notions and developed the concepts of **empiricism** (the doctrine that all knowledge derives from experience) and **pragmatism** (the doctrine that content of a concept consists only in its practical application---action or policy dictated by the practical consequences rather than by theory.) At the end of the 18th century the writings of Rousseau and Thomas Paine saw the Enlightenment as the dawning of a new age, an age in which people would abolish the relics of the past and would build new societies that would ensure their well-being and happiness. These writers expressed their belief in the individual's potential to improve and in the innate goodness of humanity.

Disciples of the Enlightenment were optimistic about the New World as a giant laboratory waiting experimentation by advocates of the new thinking—an environment full of all kinds of possibilities and opportunities. They saw the New World as an uninhabited, unspoiled space just waiting for the application of new theories. John Locke, for

example had America in mind when he described the progress of humanity from the "state of nature" to the state of society and the natural rights of man.

Enlightenment theories profoundly effected many Americans. Some became Deists (believers in a benevolent, rational God—a supreme creator of the universe whose thoughts and wishes were comprehensible to rational people). The Deist and their notion of the power of human reason would later oppose the Great Awakening which emphasized a capricious (thoughtless) all powerful God. Other thinkers sought to unlock the secrets of the natural world and corresponded frequently and eagerly with natural scientists in Europe.

A premium was placed on "useful knowledge"----knowledge that could improve the condition of humanity. This idea struck a chord among the educated minority in America for it corresponded with the traditional American emphasis on moral virtue and hard work.

Benjamin Franklin brought these ideas together in his Autobiography and in Poor Richard's Almanac when he argued for the self made man. He argued that America with all its opportunity and open class structure was an ideal place for the virtuous man to apply himself and seek success. (Note the keys to the American Dream: hard work,

individual effort, honesty, thrift and good Christian manner).

Franklin's life served as an example of useful theory. Taking advantage of the opportunity available, Franklin conducted experiments in electricity, developed the Franklin stove and was influential in the founding of the first lending library in Philadelphia. In various ways throughout his life he promoted the creation and dissemination of useful knowledge.

The Enlightenment encouraged the practical, work-oriented, success oriented strain in the American character. It accepted the notion of the powers of human reason and hinted at the unlimited possibilities for human and social progress in America. Franklin's life was an example of how Enlightenment theories could be adapted to the traditional theories of American uniqueness and its potential for humanity's salvation. In many ways it serves as the impetus for a kind of secular religion—a religion that suggested that America might become a "redeemer nation," (savior of the world) leading the backward, corrupt societies of Europe to a better world through spiritual and moral progress.

To many, the fact that America evolved out of the wildness seems to support Locke's argument that individuals existed in a state of society which was opposite of the state of nature. Many theorists in

Europe saw the practical applications of the **social "contract"** in America. Some Americans saw themselves as a part of a grand social experiment. They believed they were social scientists testing and disproving old assumptions while devising new forms of social and political organizations. They found and applied "useful knowledge" to the structure of their own society for the betterment of all people. They moved easily and quickly to what was called, by historian Henry May, "revolutionary" Enlightenment with its emphasis on the creation of a new order of things.

To many the ideas of Enlightenment seemed heady and even **arrogant—yet the documents of the American Revolution era contain all the components of the America Enlightenment ideas—reason, progress, "useful knowledge", social and political engineering----** **America—the formation of a unique place in human history and human affairs.** To many the **War of 1776** announced the creation of a new social, political and moral order. It **proclaimed the triumph of reason, progress and social engineering over a feudal heritage based on ignorance and superstition. . . .**