

LESSON 7

THE ENLIGHTENMENT: PART I

Introduction

The "Enlightenment"¹ was defined by Immanuel Kant in 1784 as "man's coming of age from the state of infancy which rendered him incapable of using his reason without the aid of others."² In reality, it is the name of a very special period of western history in which certain intellectual leaders exerted fervent efforts upon their world to make reason the "absolute ruler of human life."³ Certain intellectual "breakthroughs" in the seventeenth century, humanistic in origin and empirical in method, made it possible for the eighteenth century to be one of the most pivotal periods of all the history of the West, perhaps of the world. This period was fostered and promoted by the English, German, French and Dutch philosophers of the times.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727)

Sir Isaac Newton followed the opinions of Roger Bacon (given in the thirteenth century) about observation and experiment in science and about such revolutionary ideas as those concerning locomotives, flying machines and the circumnavigation of the earth. He gave his generation a *theory of universal gravitation* and the *laws of motion*. His masterpiece was entitled *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687). He believed in absolute space, time and motion. He spoke of absolute and relative space.⁴ "Space is the sensorium of God and locus of God's knowledge."⁵ He believed that the existence of God was to be observed in the order of the universe, as in the solar system, in human organs and the behaviour of animals. Newton's writings encouraged the agnostics and gave the world something similar to a clock as a basic model for its thinking. As complicated as his science must have seemed to his contemporaries, Newton's world view was much too simple and inadequate.

Deism

Newton's model of the created clock gave rise to a support for the disinterested, reserved and almost inactive god of Deism, which was *not* the God of revealed religion. It could almost be called the convenient god of the worship of Reason. Deism was also a worship of nature which

¹*Aufklärung* in Germany.

²Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1967), p. 92.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 141.

⁵*Ibid.*

State in your own words a brief description of what is known as "The Enlightenment."

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Identify Sir Isaac Newton.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The god of Deism is disinterested, reserved and almost _____.

(inactive)

seemed to exclude traditional supernaturalism. Thomas Jefferson, a Deist, exemplified the religion of the Deists in his "Jefferson's Bible." He sought to cut out anything in the Bible except the exact words of Jesus. Essentially what remained are the words that are sometimes printed in red ink in a Red Letter Edition of the New Testament. Context and revealed commentary are rejected and lost to whatever faith a Deist might have in the Bible. Prayer became a neglected, if not lost, activity.

Toland, Collins, Tindal and Voltaire are some of the more famous Deists. Not all Deists were as extreme as these.

Because these philosophers were reacting to what they considered to be the failure of the Christian faith to meet man's spiritual and intellectual needs, there were many of them, called the "free-thinkers."

The French were the more sarcastic of the "enlighteners." Descartes' doctrine of the "clear and perspicuous ideas," Spinoza's critical attitude toward religion, and Leibniz-Wolff's "reasonable thinking" prepared the way for the philosophy of P. Boyle, Ch. Montequieu, F. M. Voltaire and J. J. Rousseau. Some of those who contributed to the positive side of the French movement were Diderot, D'Alambert, Helvetius, Holbach and J. L. Lagrane.⁶ They and others published the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, arts et métiers*, twenty-eight volumes on the new philosophy and new theology of their times.

These were the theoreticians; but Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Paine put their theoretical philosophy to the test in the revolutionary, newly-formed United States of America.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was Germany's greatest seventeenth-century philosopher. He was a jurist, mathematician, diplomat, historian and theologian of extraordinary abilities.⁷ He was a personal friend of Arnauld (a disciple of Descartes), Newton, Boyle and Spinoza. His writings show a "deep disappointment with the Reformation and the bloody religious wars among Christians"⁸ whom he accused of having forfeited the confidence of mankind. He led the new philosophers of Germany to greater heights than ever before.

German philosophy basically rejected English sensism (Hume) and French scepticism (Rousseau and Voltaire). In fact, Kant's magnificent *Critiques* were basically his reaction to Hume. Germany's best thought for that period is expressed in the writings of Kant and Goethe.

In this short chapter it is worthwhile to examine the English and the French thinkers of the Enlightenment, mainly those of the eighteenth century, by a deeper study of their works. Some of them merit more study than others because of the lingering influence of their thought in the twentieth century. German thinkers will be treated in Lesson 8.

Name some of the more famous Deists.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

⁶Dagobert D. Runes, p. 92.

⁷Ibid., p. 166.

⁸Ibid., p. 92.

The English

George Berkeley (1685-1753)

George Berkeley was born in Ireland. He was a brilliant student and soon became a lecturer in Greek at Trinity College, his alma mater, in 1712. He moved to London where he began to attack the deistic philosophers.⁹

Vanessa (Esther Vanhomrigh) had been an admirer of Swift "but had revoked her will in his favour and instead left half of her money to Berkeley."¹⁰ In an effort to finance a plan for the conversion of the Indians, Berkeley arrived at Rhode Island in January, 1729, but his plan failed. Here he wrote *Alciphron* in which he attacked scepticism and sought to prove the existence of God.

Berkeley returned to England in 1731, and in 1734 he was made the Bishop of Cloyne. In 1752 he went to Oxford. He died in January, 1753, on a Sunday afternoon while his wife was reading 1 Corinthians aloud.¹¹

Berkeley had written his most important books before he was thirty years old.¹² Like John Locke, he was a nominalist and believed that only particular things exist.¹³ He denied the reality of abstract things and insisted upon an empirical philosophy. Therefore, he laid extreme importance upon the sense experience in acquiring knowledge. For him there were no innate ideas in the human mind. He denied the Pythagoreans the importance and reality they claimed for numbers, because he believed that numbers are framed and affirmed in the mind of man arbitrarily.

For Berkeley, knowledge is simply mental activity. His proof for God's existence is that by experience we see God in all of nature, as we see others through their bodily presence, but this is perceived by a mental process. "Berkeley was really an objective idealist."¹⁴

David Hume (1711-1776)

David Hume was born to an upper, middle-class family. His father died early in his life, and his mother raised him. She was extremely ambitious for him. In the University of Edinburgh he became fond of philosophical studies. While living in France, he wrote *Treatise of Human Nature* in three books. The first book was an epistemology. The second was on man's emotions or passions. The third dealt with the principles of morality.¹⁵ Hume exerted a powerful influence upon religious thought of his later years and to a greater or lesser extent on present, contemporary thinking. He openly attacked religion and regarded it as superstitious, fanatical and intolerant.¹⁶ The

⁹Frederick Mayer, *A History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: American Book Company, 1951), p. 199.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 200.

¹²See *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* and *The Principles of Human Knowledge*.

¹³Frederick Mayer, p. 201.

¹⁴Albert E. Avey, p. 148.

¹⁵Frederick Mayer, p. 212.

¹⁶George F. Thomas, *Religious Philosophies of the West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 198.

George Berkeley was a brilliant student and became a

_____ in _____.

(lecturer, Greek)

In New England Berkeley attempted a plan to convert the _____.

(Indians)

List the philosophical ideas of Berkeley.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Berkeley believed one can see God in all of _____ by _____.

(nature, experience)

David Hume was born to an upper _____ family.

He became fond of philosophical studies at the _____ of _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Hume openly attacked _____ and regarded it as _____.

(religion, superstitious)

religion he observed was a product of "the Age of Reason." It was based on the intellectual model of Isaac Newton and the strange mixture of hyper-Calvinism and deistic interpretations of that contemporary world. The Cartesian Occasionalists left a lasting impression on him about how one can know his world. Hume believed that the source of knowledge is the impressions of sensation and the reflection upon these impressions. Every simple idea is taken from simple impressions and is simply a copy of the impressions. Real knowledge for Hume is derived from a comparison of ideas. "There is no mind, only a succession of perceptions, a heap or collection of perceptions united by certain relations" which have no relation to personal identity.¹⁷

When one reads the powerful arguments of Hume one sometimes wonders whether Hume is arguing what he believes as unvarnished truth—or whether Hume is presenting an argument which is the most effective tool within his reach to refute the doctrines of the hated Christians.

Hume is better accepted in empirical circles now than he was by his own contemporaries. Perhaps his influence on the thinking of Immanuel Kant accounts for some of the universal recognition he now receives.

Adam Smith (1723-1790)

Perhaps it is indispensable to mention Adam Smith who wrote a number of books, the most famous of which was *Wealth of Nations* (1776). He was primarily a professor of ethics and logic at the University of Glasgow. He is credited by some with having given the western world its basic thinking and justification for capitalism. It should be noted that he based his theories upon what is now called "the Protestant Ethic" of economics. The decay of the "Protestant Ethic" may account for the debilitating trends in western capitalism.

Although this has been a very brief description of the English contribution to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, it is representative of its thought. There are many more thinkers of the period worthy of mention if space would allow.

The French

Voltaire (1694-1778)

Voltaire was by far the most popular of the French writers of the Enlightenment. *Voltaire* was the pseudonym under which he wrote. His real name was François Marie Arouet. He was a dramatist and historian. In a world of Deism, he advocated what he called "Theism" and insisted that God was sensitive to justice, righteousness, social equity and sincere morality.

He was sarcastically sceptical of the religion of the

¹⁷Alvert E. Avey, p. 154.

According to Hume the impressions of _____
and the _____ upon these impressions
were the source of knowledge.

(sensation, reflection)

Some of the recognition Hume now receives no doubt
comes from his influence upon the thinking of _____

(Immanuel Kant)

Identify Adam Smith.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Of the French writers of the Enlightenment, the most
popular was _____

(Voltaire)

Voltaire was sarcastically _____ of the
religion of his time.

(sceptical)

times. He wrote the magnificent satire on Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" in his *Candide*. "He was one of the leading Encyclopaedists."¹⁸ He was dubbed an atheist because he was so caustic in his criticism of the Church. He insisted that Theism was the authentic religious position one should follow.

For all his popularity and literary charm Voltaire did not become the most influential French philosopher of the eighteenth century. He did cast a powerful influence on French revolutionists, but his criticism of Christian faith was received by a small minority of people like Thomas Paine and perhaps Ethan Allen. Most Americans were religious people enamoured with the "God-given right of freedom." To them, neither Voltaire, Diderot nor any other writer of the Enlightenment in France appealed except Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Jean Jacques Rousseau contributed several articles to Diderot's *Encyclopédie* on music and on political economy. However, his writings on the dignity of man captured the imagination of budding nationalistic patriots.

At the beginning of Rousseau's life the Protestant influence of his Huguenot ancestors must have shaped some of his opinions as well as their inept politics. He later became in turn a Roman Catholic and then a Deist. The Clock-Maker God, who had left His creation to run its own "scientific" and immutable principles, was really leaving it all to man to work out human life on this planet without any interference or even very much interest on the part of the "Watch Maker." Rousseau challenged the young men of his century to do just that. At the age of forty-two he wrote a *Discourse on the Causes of Inequality Among Men*. Six years later (1760), he wrote *New Heloise* or a plea for freedom of emotion.¹⁹

After Rousseau himself had sired five illegitimate children whom he consigned to an orphan's home, he wrote *Emile* or *On Education*. This was a philosophical romance based upon natural instincts free from the corrupting influence of society,²⁰ especially that of parents. Toy soldiers and church bells²¹ were to be forbidden. Emile must be brought up in the country, guided by a single private tutor. This tutor will encourage the development of his "natural instincts." It is very interesting to notice that the "Liberator" of the Bolivian States, Simon Bolivar, was educated exactly like Rousseau prescribed. His tutor was Simon Rodriguez and his textbook was *Emile*. "Rodriguez formed the future Liberator not by teaching but by training"²² as they toured Europe on foot or on horseback, occasionally stopping to enjoy the genteel hospitality of the

¹⁸Dagobert D. Runes, p. 333.

¹⁹Colin Brown, p. 82

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Gerhard Masur, *Simon Bolivar* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), p. 26.

Rousseau held to the view of the _____
_____ God.

He encouraged the youth of his day to accept the
_____.

(Clock-Maker, same)

Is the following statement true or false?

Rousseau wrote *Emile, On Education* to set forth a philosophy of education based on the development of "natural instincts." _____

(true)

friends of Bolivar's prominent family in the Court of Spain.

Rousseau published *The Social Contract*, or his theory of the state, the same year he published *Emile*. He denied the "divine right of kings." The only valid government that could possibly be must be based on the will of the people and produce freedom and justice in the interest of the majority. "The essay was a seminal work of modern, secular, democratic thinking."²³ Men like Thomas Jefferson were enthralled!

Rousseau popularized nature and natural religion far and beyond the reach of his English contemporaries.²⁴ Man is his central point of reference, and yet inconsistent with the practice of his life style, he advocates religion for man whom he esteems in an exaggerated fashion. Furthermore, it seems that Rousseau could never sincerely believe in Christ and the Christian revelation.²⁵ In his later years he lived and died at Ermenonville close to Paris.

²³Colin Brown, p. 83.

²⁴Ibid., p. 84.

²⁵Ibid.

Is the following statement true or false?

Rousseau strongly opposed government by the will of the people and earnestly supported the "divine right of kings." _____

(false)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. Define the expression "The Enlightenment."

2. What is meant by Deism?

3. Name some of the more famous Deists.

4. Summarize the philosophical ideas of George Berkeley.

5. What was Berkeley's proof for the existence of God?

6. Identify David Hume. What was his opinion on religion?

7. What was the source of knowledge to Hume?

8. Who was the most popular French writer of the Enlightenment?

9. What was Voltaire's outlook on religion?

10. What was Rousseau's outlook on religion?

11. What was Rousseau's philosophy on education?

12. What was Rousseau's political philosophy?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 60-86 in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. Define empiricism.
2. Hume was accepted as an historian rather than a philosopher. Was he an atheist or an agnostic? Explain. How was he related to Rousseau?
3. Hume's scepticism distinguished his thought. Who really made him famous?
4. Describe Deism's God. Upon what model of thought was it based?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. What did John Wesley think of philosophy? Upon what did Wesley and Whitfield base their theology and practice? With what effect?
2. What was the French philosophical contribution to the Enlightenment? What philosophers contributed extended thought to English Deism? What were their presuppositions about man? about nature? (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, page 84.)
3. What was the thrust of *The Social Contract*?
4. Describe Voltaire's career as a playwright and a social companion of nobility. Describe his concept of the Theist. How does he differ from Deism?

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the naturalism of French scepticism in religion, education and politics.
2. What is revivalism? How does it affect religion?
3. Do most empiricists allow for the historicity of basic Christian doctrines such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus? Why?