

Consequences of Ideas

Lesson 6: Ideas of the Enlightenment

I. Introduction

- a. If the Middle Ages were like a garden plot that has been tilled and prepared for planting, the Renaissance period would be like the springtime sprouting of all that had been planted and the **Enlightenment** is the subsequent fruit of summer.
- b. What happened during the period we call the Enlightenment (roughly the mid-1600's to the early 1800's) is the root stock of all that has **shaped** Western politics, science, religion, economics and philosophy for the past 400 years.
- c. The development of the Enlightenment was like a field of blossoms opening **simultaneously** in Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Portugal.
- d. The impact of the ideas of the Enlightenment can not be **over stated** and are clearly seen as expressed in our Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. It is here that the idea of Natural Rights emerges as a dominant notion.
- e. **Natural Rights** are rights which are not contingent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs of a particular society or polity. Natural rights are thus necessarily universal, (inalienable) whereas legal rights are culturally and politically relative.
- f. In order to understand the consequences of the ideas of the Enlightenment **woven** into the fabric of our American culture we need to review the most prominent ideas emanating from this period.

II. Values of the Enlightenment

- a. A basic list of these **values** would include the following:
 1. A deep commitment to **reason**,
 2. A trust in the emerging modern **sciences** to solve problems and provide control over nature,
 3. A commitment to the idea of progress in material wealth and in human **civility**,
 4. A belief in the essential **goodness** of human nature,
 5. An emphasis upon the **individual** as master of his fate and fortune, and
 6. A belief in the right to open and **free** public discourse and participation in public matters and policy.
- b. In short, the Enlightenment thinkers believed in the **powers** of humankind and saw themselves as part of a revolutionary development that would replace superstition and tired rituals and corrupt traditions with reason and productive energy.
- c. Perhaps the best way to grasp the Enlightenment project clearly is to identify what these thinkers were **rejecting**.
- d. They saw the culture as emerging from the **darkness** of superstition, ignorance, and intolerance -- much of that associated with the Medieval Catholic Church and with Feudal monarchy; this was rejected.
- e. Rejected also were spiritual mysteries and the corporate authority of the **church** that were seen to have restrained individual endeavor and innovation.
- f. For humankind to advance, people had to **develop** their individual powers of reason and reject their reliance on emotion and abandon their reliance upon superstitious belief.
- g. Just as Sir Isaac Newton discovered the basic **laws** of physics that revealed the structure of matter in motion, thinkers in diverse fields, it was hoped, could discover the fundamental structures of politics, psychology, poetry, etc.
- h. Such potential discoveries in **every** area of life would help us understand how things were truly meant to be and to enable men to produce them for the greater good of all.
- i. Relying on reason, which provided a **universal**, cross-cultural, shared foundation, the promise of the Enlightenment was a world of shared human action and thought. In this view man holds all the answers for his every problem.
- j. They rejected the old power and authority of nobility who were **privileged** by birth and station alone. The new paradigm granted legitimate power and authority to those who were talented and educated.

III. Towards Utopia

- a. They believed that human beings -- once freed from superstition, **irrational** religious and cultural heritage, and from material poverty -- could express their true good nature, seek cooperation and achieve mutual assistance.
- b. Similarly, they believed they could construct a social order that would respect fundamental human rights based upon the **dignity** of individuals and their freedom to pursue their own happiness as they saw fit.
- c. Enlightenment thinkers believed in human productivity and personal property rights. They reasoned that if each individual sought his fortune, then not only would that individual prosper but that the greater good would be achieved **for all**.
- d. Since reason is a universal force and not limited to any particular culture or to special **geniuses** or anointed ones, all human beings can participate in the broad public discussion concerning all topics, and especially politics.
- e. This idea was a significant departure from the previously held belief that only the elite were **qualified** to discuss and to rule on matters of the general good.
- f. From this flows the notion that the public discussion of ideas would allow all of us to **sharpen** our private understanding and to adjust our personal opinions to that which would promote the general good.
- g. Of course, human beings must have the occasion to improve themselves through education and especially through exposure to the great **philosophers**, who can assist the present age in learning to think, speak, and write clearly.

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- h. Unreasoned or ill-informed private opinions were seen as a **threat** to the intelligibility that was needed in order to form clear understandings with others and to reach a consensus on the overall good.

IV. Deism of the Enlightenment

- a. A key feature in the Enlightenment was the refashioning of religion. While many of these thinkers mention God, they most often meant the force for good rather than the **biblical Lord**.
- b. Many of these writers were **Deists**, which meant that they believed that a great force had fashioned the world, once and for all and perfectly, but who was not available for personal appeals and miraculous interventions.
- c. Deism is in reality a belief in which God is made in the image of man, and is actually a **repudiation** of biblical Christianity. Deists believe in rewards and punishments administered by God based upon good works of the individual.
- d. God is seen as The Great **Watchmaker** who had fashioned a perfect world and then left it to us to discover its perfection and model ourselves upon the basic structures of goodness by which we were blessed.
- e. The faith of the Enlightenment was that everything in creation was regulated by reason and that God had done such a good job of construction that the laws of nature and the laws of mind were the **same**.
- f. All that was needed to unravel the deepest mystery of nature was the **application** of reason in a concerted and programmatic way. When we had applied ourselves sufficiently we would find that Nature was intelligible and coherent.
- g. Deism helped to strengthen the idea of the omnipotence of the **state** because the state was seen as a natural outgrowth of a sovereign people collectively agreeing upon who should be elected to lead.
- h. Rulers were seen as **responsible** to the people to such an extent that if they failed to govern properly the people retained their right to change or to replace them.
- i. It follows under such an arrangement that the state, subject to a sovereign people, is viewed as **supreme** in all areas of life because it represented the will of the people and the establishment of the common good for all.
- j. This elevated and optimistic view of the natural goodness of man including his **perfectibility**, logically leads to the assumption that succeeding generations would evolve and progress toward a more perfect order on earth.
- k. **Modern** political liberalism and Statism have their fundamental roots deep in the religious philosophy espoused by Deists.
- l. Several other modern **philosophies** have their origins in the Enlightenment period including: materialism, black theology, the social gospel, liberation theology, Marxism and communism etc.

V. Departures From Historic Christianity

- a. If one were to **adopt** the ideas and thinking of the Enlightenment (including its religion) one would end up with a very different view of God and the subsequent relationship of man to God.
- b. Under the Deist view, since God is not a personal God and man can not personally **know Him**; the existence of the Holy Spirit is denied and any influence that The Spirit would have upon the individual is eliminated.
- c. If the fundamental concepts of Christianity are rational, there would appear to be no need for divine **revelation** because the rational mind is able to learn for itself those things that are needful.
- d. The Bible requires **justification** by human reason rather than being the self-authoritative revelation of God to man. No longer were thinkers willing to accept the old dogmas merely on the basis that they belonged to the received system of church doctrine.
- e. It follows then, that biblical statements could no longer be **automatically** accorded the status of scientific or historical truth.
- f. The possibility of miracles, mysteries of faith, and any teaching that is not compatible with the intellectual sensibilities of the typically educated individual were categorically denied. I.E.: If science could not validate it, **it did not happen**.
- g. Dethroned from his lofty position at the **center** of creation, man, likewise, lost his status as a special creation of God standing above the rest of the created order. Man was viewed as another animal with no special hierarchical position in creation.
- h. It became the prerogative of the scientist, not the theologian, to inform mankind of the **origin** of the universe and how it functions. Hence, the publishing of the "Origin of the Species" demonstrated this primacy of "science" over revelation.
- i. The Enlightenment rejected the notion of a **fallen**, corrupt human nature. If there is no original sin, if humanity is not fallen, there is no need for redemption. And if there is no need of redemption, no need of a divine redeemer.

VI. Application

- a. Many Christian-sounding ideas emerged from the Enlightenment period. But what we discover upon closer scrutiny is that non-Christians who use this terminology most often do not mean what we Christians think they mean.
- b. The only defense against embracing these deceptive ideas is the knowledge of the TRUTH and the exercise of excellent discernment. To what extent are you discerning of ideas that you hear every day?