

## **Age of Enlightenment**

The **Age of Enlightenment** was an 18th-century intellectual movement in Europe to make people more aware about science rather than religion and tradition. It was heavily influenced by philosophers like Locke, Voltaire, Diderot and Kant. It was also known as the **Age of Reason**. The Enlightenment grew partly out of the earlier scientific revolution and the ideas of René Descartes.

### **Ideas**

The Enlightenment's most important idea was that all people can reason and think for themselves, so people should not automatically believe authority. People do not even have to believe the teachings of churches or priests. That was a very new idea at the time.

Another important idea was that a society is best when everyone works together to create it. Even people with very little power or money should have the same rights as the rich and powerful to help create the society they live in. The nobility should no longer have special rights or privileges.

Those were very new ideas at the time. They were also dangerous thoughts for the people in power. Many Enlightenment philosophers were put in prison or were forced to leave their home countries.

### **Effects**

Many of the Founding Fathers of the United States believed in the Enlightenment's ideas. For example, the idea that a government should benefit all of a country's people, not just the people in power, was very important to them. They created the idea of a government "for the people", one of the most important parts of the new United States Constitution and the new American government.

The Enlightenment's ideas were also important to the people who fought in the French Revolution, which started in 1789.

In some countries, kings and queens took some of the Enlightenment's ideas and made changes to their governments, although they kept power for themselves. Such kings and queens were called "enlightened despots." Examples include Catherine the Great of Russia, Frederick the Great of Prussia, and Gustav III of Sweden.

During the Age of Enlightenment, as more and more people began to value reason, some began to disagree with the idea that God created the world, which caused conflicts and later, war.

Many ideas that are important today were created during the Enlightenment such as the following:

- Freedom, democracy, and reason should be the most important things in a society.
- Everybody in a society should have the same rights, and they should be promised by a contract in every government.

- People should solve problems with rationalism and the scientific method, instead of looking for answers from religion.
- Writers and philosophers should be free to look for the truth even if they disagreed with the ideas of people in power, such as the aristocracy.
- There should be freedom of religion. People should be allowed to choose their religion, and people should accept others who follow different religions.

The Enlightenment's ideas about thinking with reason, having personal freedoms, and not having to follow the Catholic Church were important in creating capitalism and socialism.

Important figures

Important people in the Enlightenment came from many different countries and shared ideas in many different ways. Here are some of the best-known Enlightenment figures, organized by home country:

### English

- **John Locke** (1632-1704): An English philosopher, known as the Father of Modern Empiricism and the Father of Liberalism, had ideas that were very important to Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers in the United States Declaration of Independence. Locke's interesting ideas about people's rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" were especially important, and appear in the Declaration of Independence.
- **Thomas Paine** (1737–1809): A writer, deist, radical republican, and polemicist who most famously wrote a pamphlet called *Common Sense*. It stated that England should not be allowed to control the colonies in America. Paine also wrote *The Age of Reason*, a criticism of the Bible, and *The Rights of Man*, which defended the French Revolution.

### French

- **Voltaire** (born François-Marie Arouet) (1694-1778): A philosopher, writer, playwright, and deist who opposed the Catholic Church and the French government. His opposition to the Church and the government got him imprisoned and exiled from France. He wrote many different books about philosophy, plays, and histories. His ideas played an important role in the French Revolution. Many people considered the 18th century to be *le siècle de Voltaire* ("the Century of Voltaire").
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778): A Swiss-born French philosopher, writer, and teacher who had some of the most powerful criticisms of the French government of his time. In his book *Émile, or On Education*, he wrote about many of his opinions on education. He is also a figure of the Counter-Enlightenment.
- **Baron de Montesquieu** (1689-1755): A political thinker who famously wrote about the separation of powers. Today, his idea is very common and is part of many constitutions all over the world.

- **Denis Diderot** (1713–1784): A philosopher, art critic, and writer who wrote the *Encyclopédie*, which included 28 different books. In these books, he wrote about all different kinds of learning.

### American

- **Thomas Jefferson** (1743-1826): An American statesman, political philosopher, and deist who was a Patriot and fought against Britain during the American Revolution. He helped write the United States Declaration of Independence (1776).
- **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790): A statesman, author, scientist, and poet who was also a Patriot during the American Revolution and helped write the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution (1787). He was the first person to understand lightning and worked as a civil servant in Philadelphia.

### German

- **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804): A Prussian (German) philosopher, writer, and physicist who was one of the most important figures of the German Enlightenment. Between 1781 and 1790, Kant wrote three important books in the history of philosophy: *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgement*.
- **Gottfried Leibniz** (1646-1716): A Saxon philosopher and mathematician who created calculus and was another leader of the German Enlightenment.
- **Christian Wolff** (1679–1754): A Silesian philosopher who continued Leibniz's work.

### Scottish

- **David Hume** (1711–1776): A Scottish historian, philosopher, and economist who had ideas that were important to Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith.
- **Adam Smith** (1723–1790): An economist and philosopher who wrote *The Wealth of Nations*. In this book, he argued that wealth is not money, but instead comes from capital and labor. He is sometimes thought to have created laissez-faire economic theory. His books brought many changes to the Western world.

### Spain

- **Benito Jeronimo Feijoo** (1676–1764): A Galician monk who wrote essays to spread Enlightenment ideas and to show that some myths are false.
- **Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos** (1744–1811): An Asturian statesman who wanted land to be used by normal people and not kept by churches or the nobility.

### Swedish

- **Emanuel Swedenborg** (1688–1772): A Swedish natural philosopher and theologian who tried to figure out how the soul works in the body.

**Suggested Readings:**

1. Clough, Shepard B.- Brandenburg, David J.- Gay, Peter- Pflanze, Otto (1969), **A *History of the Western World 1715 to the Present***, D. C. Heath & Company, Lexington, Massachusetts.