

## Topic Page: [Enlightenment](#)

Definition: **Enlightenment, The** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

The name given to the general intellectual and literary trend in Europe between c.1690 and c.1790. In England it is more commonly known as the AGE OF REASON. It was characterized by steadily increasing philosophical and radical criticisms of the existing order. In the political sphere the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau are typical. It led to the growth of Deism (see THEIST), MATERIALISM and humanitarianism, as well as ideas of popular sovereignty and somewhat facile ideas of progress.

### Summary Article: **Enlightenment**

From *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*

As an intellectual catchword 'the Enlightenment' (*Aufklärung*, Age of Reason, *le siècle des Lumières*) names a historical epoch (broadly eighteenth-century Europe) as well as a set of philosophical tenets and moral sensibilities articulated within this era. First construed in the nineteenth century as a distinct period, the Enlightenment encompasses diverse thinkers with varied appeals to critical reasoning and to promoting human betterment. With antecedents in the seventeenth century among popular English deists, J. Locke's (1632–1704) advocacy of natural religion, and R. Descartes' (1596–1650) quest for a principle of human certitude, Enlightenment thought flourished in England, Scotland, Germany, and among the *philosophes* in pre-revolutionary France.

By the 1790s the movement had reached a turning point. I. Kant's critical philosophy brought the impasse between intellectual–moral autonomy and received religious teachings to a head, while the French Revolution led to rethinking the meaning of liberty, fraternity, and equality and called forth new paths of theological and moral reflection. Today the intellectual challenge of the Enlightenment extends to all aspects of life, including debates about multiculturalism (in contrast with a universal humanity), the cogency and place of religion (alongside natural science), the rise of secularism, and the origins of modernity and (if it indeed exists) of postmodernity.

C. Becker's (1873–1945) thesis in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) has generally been sustained. For Becker the Enlightenment 'climate of opinion' aims at the good life on earth for its own sake, with posterity replacing the classical 'heavenly city' of Augustine. With some exceptions (e.g., Baron d'Holbach (1723–89) in France, K. Bahrdt (1741–92) and J. Basedow (1724–90) in Germany, and D. Hume (1711–76) in Scotland), the movement did not foster materialism or naturalism. Thus, belief in God, virtue, and immortality, hallmarks of the Deism of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), informed the American founders' concept of God-given natural rights. The Pietists' emphasis on introspection also fed the self-discovering impulses of Enlightenment thinkers: it is no accident that Halle, the German university most closely associated with Pietism, also hosted the rationalist C. Wolff (1679–1754). The political liberalism of J.-J. Rousseau's (1712–78) *Social Contract* (1762) called for a public civil religion to supplant extant faiths, thus challenging traditional belief in God, Scripture, and religious doctrine. G. Lessing's (1729–81) *The Education of the Human Race* (1778) cast revelation as a progressive, rational unfolding of history, and J. Herder's (1744–1803) *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–3) enquired into the aesthetics that inform OT teaching. The early philological–historical criticism of J. Ernesti (1707–81), J. Michaelis (1717–91), and H. Reimarus (1694–1768) challenged received views

of the Bible.

Ever since its rise, the Enlightenment has been defined as much by its opponents as by its advocates. In the 1790s, to be an *Aufklärer* was to risk being viewed as anti-religious, whether that was justified or not. Amid this ferment, Kant's essay *What is Enlightenment?* (1784) remains emblematic. For him, freedom of expression is a prerogative of scholars, though our duties in civil society require subservience to authority. Kant's injunction to knowledge ('Dare to know') was thus incomplete, and his tract, correspondingly, distinguishes between a present 'age of Enlightenment' and 'an enlightened age' yet to unfold. Anticipating the stance of S. Kierkegaard, writers like J. Hamann (1730–88) and F. Jacobi (1743–1819) criticized Kant's moral–religious philosophy in the name of faith and inner religious experience. While in an attempt to fulfil the legacy of the Enlightenment, G. W. F. Hegel and other figures of German Idealism set forth a philosophical rationalism that marks the apogee of western philosophy's attempt to reconcile reason with nature, the human self with history, society, and deity.

Recent critics of Enlightenment rationality like A. MacIntyre (b. 1929) and R. Rorty (1931–2007) call attention to the limits of universal reason, while emphasizing the relative, deeply anchored, historical-truth perspectives within diverse communities. By probing the ambiguity of what J. Habermas (b. 1929) calls 'the modern project', critical theorists, feminists, and liberation theologians use the tools of social and political theory to plumb the un-emancipatory rationality of the Enlightenment (see *Feminist Theology*; *Liberation Theology*). Such critics implicitly build upon the revolt against rationalism of early nineteenth-century Romantics, who demanded that its teachings embrace the fullness of life, including human subjectivity. For the German Romantic theologian F. Schleiermacher rationality was radicalized, not diminished, by criticism; common moral assumptions were deepened, not eradicated, by individual subjectivity; and institutions were challenged, not overthrown, by the imperative to preserve human freedom.

Though a 'typical' Enlightenment thinker probably does not exist, eighteenth-century models of relating rationality to the claims of religious faith stubbornly persist amid the debates of contemporary philosophers, theologians, and historical–critical theorists. In its general anti-authoritarianism the Enlightenment still shapes the contours of our intellectual landscape.

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