

The Enlightenment and Western Civilization

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw an important shift in outlook among the intellectuals mainly in Europe, but also in America. It was a movement whose ideas about the powers of man's reason and its relationship to God, nature, man, and society eventually bloomed into an alternative and comprehensive worldview; we now call that movement the Enlightenment. The importance of the ideas that spread throughout the European and American cultures and even to the Church, can hardly be overemphasized. We are today, in part, the children of the Enlightenment.

This essay will briefly define the Enlightenment and discuss important factors which help explain why the shift occurred, examine some of the important impacts this shift had on Western civilization, and discuss the influence of the Enlightenment on the contemporary Church. I will argue that three main factors, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the wars of religion worked together to initiate the movement. I will argue that the ideas of the Enlightenment radically undermined the ideas of medieval Christianity mainly through their impact on epistemology, that these radical ideas "trickled" down so as to affect a cultural shift in worldview among the intellectuals of nineteenth century Europe and America, and that this has thoroughly affected Western civilization. Finally, I will argue that the contemporary Church on the whole has not really understood the subtlety of this attack and has therefore been ill-prepared to respond to it; despite this, there are current reasons for hope.

Immanuel Kant is usually credited with the first use of the term Enlightenment to characterize this period and movement.

Factors Which Influenced the Shift

In this section I will offer a definition the term Enlightenment and consider three important influences which brought it about: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the wars of religion. The Enlightenment, in general terms, was a movement of beliefs and ideas among the European intellectuals during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Interrelated concepts about the role of reason and man's ability to understand God, nature, and human nature formed a new worldview which tended to undermine the medieval biblical, theistic worldview. In a relevant sense, some theists influenced by the Enlightenment tried to ground their belief that God exists on reason alone and not on revelation; but enlightened thinkers concluded that no such grounding could be accomplished. The sum of this was to produce a tendency among important thinkers to adopt an empirical worldview on pragmatic grounds rather than on purely rational grounds. As a result the supernatural was "played down," reason was elevated (even deified in southern France), and the focus of life shifted from the eternal to the temporal.

The Enlightenment movement didn't evolve out of a vacuum. One of the roots of the Enlightenment can be traced to the Renaissance. The Renaissance, or literally "rebirth," was a renewal of interest in classical knowledge from the ancient Greco-Roman texts preserved by the monastics during the Dark Ages. There had been at least two previous awakenings of interest in classical antiquity similar to this--the Carolinian Renaissance of the ninth century and a proto-Renaissance in Italy during the twelfth century. What distinguished the fifteenth century Renaissance in Italy were two important factors. The first was the fall of Constantinople in 1453 which sent scholars and their classical books from that city to Italy; the second factor, occurring at approximately the same time, was the invention of the moveable type printing press in Germany. The latter provided for a veritable explosion of the classical ideas of Greece and

Rome to be spread across Europe. The important thing to see about this development from the perspective of its influence on the Enlightenment, is that it allowed a whole new way of observing and thinking about the world to be broadly disseminated in a relatively short amount of time. Instead of thinking about such subjects as man in terms of what God had revealed in Holy Scripture, many Renaissance humanists began to adopt a purely secular approach to their projects.

A second important influence on the Enlightenment was the Reformation. The Reformation, which started at the beginning of the sixteenth century with Martin Luther in Germany, was in some ways a rebellion against the authority of the Church. It quickly spread to Switzerland with Calvin and Zwingli, and then through a great deal of northern Europe. The Reformation itself is somewhat indebted to Renaissance humanism and to the growing independence of the European monarchies of that century. The challenges of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others played an important role in questioning Church authority, which was one of the legacies the Reformation left to the Enlightenment. The Reformation questioned the Magisterium's teaching authority-- unthinkable in some previous ages, but an idea welcomed by the growing number of independent minds that were influenced by the Renaissance.

The European scene of this period was also unstable in the sense that ideological groupings of power with both national and dynastic interests were emerging. This led to a third contributing factor to the Enlightenment--the religious wars. It was the reaction to these distasteful conflicts, punctuated with assaults on the Huguenots in France, Inquisitions, and struggles for power that gave a new opportunity for justified criticism of religion. The

Adler, Mortimer, ed. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Volume IV, (Chicago, Illinois: 1987), p. 744. the printing press spread like the wind. It reached Italy by 1467, Hungary and Poland by the 1470s, and Scandinavia by 1483. By 1500 the presses of Europe had produced some 6,000,000 books!

Reformation forces backed by Protestant princes in England and Germany fought with the Counter-Reformation corps of Spanish and papal troops. Even after the Peace of Augsburg in 1562, France endured religious wars intermittently for 36 years. The mean-spiritedness of these conflicts provided a forum to vent hostility towards religion in general.

In summary, the influence of the Renaissance with its provision of a sophisticated and secular outlook, the irreparable damage to medieval religious authority by the Reformation, and the ensuing periods of religious wars which gave opportunity for legitimate criticism, contributed significantly to setting the stage for the coming Enlightenment period.

The Impact on Western Civilization

In this section I will discuss the impact of the Enlightenment on philosophy, on science, and to some extent on the eighteenth and nineteenth century church. The most important shift during the Enlightenment occurred in that branch of philosophy called epistemology. Epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge; it asks the question, how do you know what you know? A key figure in the development was Descartes. He is considered by many as the first modern philosopher in that he attempted to use reason (in the form of doubt) to establish his own existence (an innate idea) and, by deductive extension and the use of God as a prop, to provide a basis for trusting our sense experience. In a similar way John Locke started with sense experience, rather than innate ideas, as his foundation for deducing his system. The point to grasp is that each philosopher thought he had arrived at his conclusions through the use of reason alone. However, two important philosophers undermined their view in important ways. David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) were philosophers whose ideas became the watershed for these matters. Hume argued convincingly that neither reason nor experience is a sufficient ground for a knowledge of the way things are. He argued that our supposed

knowledge of these is not a matter of reason but of instinct, habit, or custom. Kant, after reading Hume, extended this further. He said that philosophers in the past had argued that a person's mind must be conformed to the external world in order to know. But Kant argued that it is the other way around. In order to be known, whatever is external to us must be known through the categories and forms (in the Platonic sense of forms) within our minds. The upshot of both of these perspectives was to undercut the rational foundations of Christianity. At the most fundamental level, the possibility for the knowledge of God was undercut. The focus of attention after this was placed on things as they "appeared to me" (phenomena) rather than the "thing in itself" (noumena). The effect of the Enlightenment on science was seen as scientists began to develop theories along the lines of completely secular or materialistic considerations. The old worldview was caricatured and undermined. As a result a whole new cosmology emerged which increased the damage to the authority of the Church.

The Church of that age did not escape the influence of this revolution in thinking. The ancient, classical and secular worldview had been resurrected in a newer and more virulent form. As intellectuals were "converted" by this new worldview at universities in Europe, it began to "trickle down" to the highly educated in the protestant Church. It began to influence theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768--1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889). Both of these were influenced by Hume's and Kant's analyses. There was a shift among many of the religious intellectuals from theism to deism; eventually many ended up as merely materialists. The Bible became no longer as authoritative; it was merely useful. The most important thing to see is that this shift in the view of the Bible was not primarily due to alleged errors and discrepancies in the Bible. From the earliest days of Christianity they had been observed and harmonized. What had happened is that the shift in worldview based on Hume's and Kant's analyses had made the

knowledge of God impossible. The Bible was then seen as an anachronism for it assumed that knowledge of God was possible.

In summary, the Enlightenment shift was at its foundation an epistemological shift. The early modern philosophers like Descartes and Locke thought they could justify the knowledge of God through reason or experience, but their project failed in light of the counter-arguments of Hume and Kant. The power and effectiveness of this thinking is seen by its influence in culture and on some of the Church leadership of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who began to retreat from the historically high view of the Bible.

Impact on the Contemporary Church

The results of the Enlightenment shift affect today's Church in many ways. Because of length considerations, I will focus on its impact on the Church in America through higher education and its impact on the mainline protestant denominations of the twentieth century. It has been argued that each society has what sociologists call a "plausibility structure"-- certain beliefs and practices that society accepts as being reasonable. The university, which is the highest institution of reflective thought in America, has remarkable influence on American society because it educates nearly all of its leaders and influencers. The faculty and the books they produce set the ideological pace for all of the other secular institutions of the society and, in many cases, affect the Church-related schools and institutions as well. In effect they create and establish the "plausibility structure" in which the Church lives and breathes. The net effect is that Christian students at the university often fall prey to the Enlightenment arguments in

Leslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), p. 8. Newbigin explains that we need to attend to what the sociologists of knowledge teach about the social conditioning of belief. Referring to the work of Peter Berger, he explains that each society depends for its coherence upon a set of beliefs and practices which are accepted by society--this is called the "plausibility structures."

philosophy and, even more subtly, in the humanities, which implicitly assume as their starting point many of the Enlightenment perspectives.

The Enlightenment's influence is still making a difference in Christianity today. In mainline denominations like the Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, and American Lutheran, less than twenty-five percent of their ministers believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. This is largely the result of the intellectual heritage of Humean and Kantian skepticism because ultimately their ideas led to skepticism of the possibility of propositional revelation. A lower view of inspiration and inerrancy followed. Evangelicals have been intimidated in the market place of ideas partly due to their Puritan and Pietistic heritage that avoided or withdrew from the challenge of the Enlightenment. On a brighter note, God seems to have raised up a remnant of Christian philosophers who have taken on the challenge of Enlightenment ideas. More than 500 professional philosophers are members of the Society of Christian Philosophers. I do have some hope that the coming generation of evangelical Christians will not only understand the Enlightenment challenge, but will be able to speak intelligently and powerfully to refute it.

Summary and Conclusion

The roots of the seventeenth and eighteenth century shift in worldview are to be found in the ideas of the Renaissance, in the challenges to the authority of the Church during the Reformation, and in the negative reaction to the religious wars of that time. The core of the impact of the Enlightenment on Western civilization was the theory of knowledge which shaped

Unpublished class notes from Denver Seminary Systematic Theology I, Lecture #8, p. 2;
Professor: Dr. Bruce Demarest.

For a brief but valuable account of the influence of the Enlightenment on theology see Ronald Nash, The Word of God and the Mind of Man (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1982).

the worldview and "plausibility structure" of educated society from then on. The Church of that age did not escape its influence in that key leaders such as Schleiermacker, influenced by the ideas of Kant and Hume, introduced destructive approaches to the understanding of Christianity. The contemporary Church is not much better off. Many protestant denominational leaders are unfamiliar with the underlying influence of Enlightenment ideas and are either ensnared by them, or they ineffectively challenge them. The good news is that a growing number of evangelical philosophers has begun to suggest an epistemology tutored by the insights of Augustine which is adequate to meet the challenge. My own opinion is that in this last decade of the second millennium there is cause for some optimism. We live in an age of communication explosion where good ideas can be quickly disseminated. It is my prayer that we will yet win the day.