

Chapter 3 -- The Age Of Enlightenment Sweeps Across Europe



Dates:
1517-1775

Sections:

- Prior Challenges To The Authority Of Church And Crown
- New “Enlightenment” Theories Take Hold

Time: 1517-1649

Prior Challenges To The Authority Of Church And Crown



Martin Luther (1483-1546)

As the monarchs of Europe and their church allies seek to extend their wealth and power through global wars of aggression, an “intellectual awakening” is occurring which will rattle the foundations of their rule.

This awakening is known as The Enlightenment or The Age of Reason. It begins early in the 17th century and reaches its zenith around 1800. Its effect is to cause common men to question and then to challenge the authority of the two traditional institutions that govern their lives – church and state.

Challenges to the church come first. They catch fire in 1517, when the German Catholic monk, Martin Luther, nails his 95 Theses on the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Saxony. The notion that man can purchase his way to salvation by paying indulgences to the clergy violates Luther’s basic religious convictions, so he protests publicly against the practice.

What follows Luther’s act is the great religious schism known as the Protestant Reformation.

This takes hold across the 16th century and intersects with affairs of state in 1527 when Pope Clement VI refuses to grant a marriage annulment to King Henry VIII. Exercising his “divine right” as monarch, Henry responds by banishing the existing priesthood and replacing it with his own Church of England. Thus ends the monolithic dominance of Catholicism in Europe.

Another cornerstone of despotic rule crumbles during the English Civil War of 1647. The villain in this piece is King Charles I who exercises his personal prerogatives by taxing the people at will and marrying a queen who is both French and Catholic. After almost 25 years of his affronts, a Parliatarian movement

rises up – under the Puritan leader, Oliver Cromwell – that ends with the beheading of Charles at Whitehall on January 30, 1649. Henceforth the voice of the people will be amplified in the minds of their monarchs.

Of course these events do not end the disproportionate sway held by church and crown over the destinies of men and nations. But they do open the door for a new breed of independent thought that will lead in large part to reshaping the destiny of the British colonies in America.

Time: 1700-1778

New “Enlightenment” Theories Take Hold



Grave of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Four leading philosophers of The Enlightenment argue the time has come for “absolute monarchies,” the global norm for centuries, to give way to new forms of government that respond to the will of the people.

The English philosopher and physician, John Locke (1632-1704), lives through the turmoil following Cromwell’s death in 1658 and the restoration of Charles II, whose reign includes the Black Plague, the Great Fire of London, and a deathbed conversion to Catholicism. When his son James II marries a Catholic, another popular rebellion places the Protestant William III of Orange and his wife Mary back on the throne. As part of the deal, the pair agree to a “Declaration of Rights” which limits the power of the crown over its subject.

In 1689, as William and Mary ascend, Locke publishes his “Second Treatise of Government” in which he argues on behalf of “classical liberalism” -- that the size and power of government should be limited in order to preserve and enlarge the freedom of the individual.

- The end of law... is to preserve and enlarge freedom.
- The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason is that law.
- The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth.
- All mankind, being equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.
- Men being by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent.

Locke’s preferred form of government is a monarchy, but he demands that it be “constitutional” in nature, with all property owners given the right to vote.

The Swiss writer and musician, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), grows up in a middle class family in Geneva, leads a bohemian lifestyle, and records his observations about the nature of man and society in a series of tracts that challenge conventional thought. He asserts that men are born free, equal and happy and then surrender these joys by entering into a destructive social contract based on property rights.

The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or cried out to his fellow men: "Do not listen to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!"

According to Rousseau, governments, especially monarchies, are typically dedicated to protecting the property rights of the haves at the expense of the have nots, who are left in chains. The only way around this are laws that balance out the score.

In truth, laws are always useful to those with possessions and harmful to those who have nothing; from which it follows that the social state is advantageous to men only when all possess something and none has too much.

The path to just laws lies in forming a government based on “pure Democracy” where decisions are arrived at in open debate, with full participation on all sides, and a final vote based on “majority rules.” In this regard, the English system – a “Republic,” where lawmakers are elected to represent their constituencies – falls short of Rousseau’s ideal.

The people of England regards itself as free; but it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing.

Needless to say, Rousseau is regarded as a dangerous radical by the establishment, and his works are banned in the Calvinistic canton of Geneva. Still, his populist views will fuel reformers on behalf of Democracy.

Two other Enlightenment thinkers also weigh heavily in the search for options to the absolute monarchies.

The Scottish essayist, David Hume (1711-1778), focuses on two essential ingredients – unfettered free speech and a written, formally approved Constitution. The French Baron and lawyer, Charles Montesquieu (1689-1775), calls for dividing government into separate branches to insure “checks and balances” on major decisions and to prevent concentrations of power.

But unlike Rousseau, both Hume and Montesquieu fear that “direct Democracy” will trample on the rights of minority interests. Protecting these interests, they feel, requires a “Republican” government, with elected statement using personal judgment and wisdom to guard against unbridled “majority rules.”

In the end, all four of the Enlightenment thinkers and writers will play a significant role in shaping America’s world view and its unique form of government.