

Did the philosophy of the Enlightenment do away with religious belief?

The Enlightenment was a period of great social change within Europe, and religion was not unaffected by the changes in contemporary thought. An important concern of the Enlightenment was the search for a perfect society, which it was felt could best be achieved by “critical and constructive reason” (Yolton, 1995, p1). In their reassessment of the world and its perceived problems, the philosophes wrote without obligation to any form of authority, whether from the crown or church. Much of the practical thought debunked myths, and it is in this area that Enlightenment thinking began to encroach on Christian doctrine. Kant’s catch phrase of the time, borrowed from the poet Horace, was (in translation) “dare to know”, suggesting that people should question what they had previously just accepted, and challenge the didactic authority often found in the pulpit.

The quest of the Enlightenment for a more ordered world inevitably encompassed many scientific advances. Initially, scientific discoveries were made to provide solutions to problems, such as improving the navigational aids to assist traders, as any advantage made a great difference to mercantile interests, and in turn to the prominence of a country on the global stage. Advances in physics and mathematics from Newton onwards proving the inherent order of the universe led scientists to want to establish order within all natural areas. The production of the *Encyclopaedia* in France (until it was suppressed in 1759) was symptomatic of the age, as it set out to hold the sum of man’s knowledge, in an arrogant assumption that knowledge was finite and that its editors had succeeded in categorising it all. Although the unrealistic goal of many Enlightenment thinkers to attain a perfect society could never be achieved, a fact some people seemed to acknowledge at the time, the *Encyclopaedia* successfully disseminated the ideals of the spirit and intellect of the age.

One important element of the scientific method was the concept of making deductions from observation, known as the Cartesian method which had been established by Descartes; in adopting this technique, the laws of nature used since Aristotle were abandoned. As part of the move from Aristotelian thought, the

idea of any divine intervention in the world was questioned, and the spheres of science and religion moved further apart. It should be stressed that the division between science and religion was not a new phenomenon. The Roman Catholic Church had wanted Galileo to stop defending the Copernican position which contradicted the church's teaching of the Earth being the centre of the universe as early as 1616 to protect their "right to make pronouncements about reality" (Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, Basinger, 1998, p237). By the same token, it should be noted that Copernicus had been put to death for his heretical beliefs about the solar system in 1543. The church's bid to protect their control over academe was harmed further by the development of the printing press, as it gave people the ability to spread their own thoughts and beliefs as Galileo had tried to do before submitting to house arrest by the Inquisition.

Christian ideology had risen out of Roman culture where there was a need for personal salvation within the powerful Roman Empire. Christianity was a solid foundation of society throughout the Middle Ages, but it was during the Renaissance that it suffered its first justified criticisms. The Reformation compounded this undermining of Christianity, and was responsible for damaging the church as a whole: Christians were subdivided into Roman Catholics and Protestants, and there was considerable infighting within the church. All of these changes only served to weaken the church, and to impair its authority. From a political view point, the weakened position of the church meant that a country's reigning monarch no longer had to rely on the church to support their rule, rather the church came to rely upon the monarch to maintain it as the country's chosen religion.

This already fragmented concept of religion as a whole was regularly challenged during the Enlightenment, when a common claim was that people started religions only in the interest of self-promotion, a claim still frequently made today against cult leaders. Conforming to the Cartesian system, evidence such as Tacitus's *Histories* (book five) was often cited:

"In order to secure the allegiance of his people in the future, Moses prescribed for them a novel religion quite different from those of the rest of mankind"
(Wellesley, 1964, p272)

John Trenchard suggested that religion only existed because of the gullibility of mankind preferring superstition to reason, and d'Holbach argued that "religion was a form of social pathological disorder" (Yolton, 1995, p.448). Despite these views of religion, Europe was still a religious continent, although the prevailing attitude varied between countries. The greatest difference between countries was due to the pietism movement emphasising religious experience, rather than just accepting and adhering to the cerebral theologies dictated in the church by preachers and ministers.

The Enlightenment thinkers were confident that by rejecting ancient authority, and by the clergy stopping perpetrating their theology in favour of the knowledge of the enlightened mind, the future would hold more material and moral societal advances. It was also felt that Enlightened thinking would provide the foundations for a Christian belief system avoiding the earlier religious wars, while offering more to, and benefiting both the individual and society.

In a slightly surprising way, despite the increase in scientific knowledge, the existence of a God was still widely accepted as the creator of the magnificence of the natural world, and as the writer of the laws on which it operated. Indeed God's existence was used by Newton to explain away the scientific shortcomings of his work on planetary movements. Although commonly encountered, this deistic view was not as popular as the Christian belief in God. Early in his life, the deist Voltaire had hoped to acknowledge the existence of a "rational, benevolent God to be regarded as the author of the Newtonian universe, and revered as the guarantor of justice and mortality amongst men" (Porter, 1990, p34) as part of a belief system of natural religion. However, an earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 which "destroyed thirty thousand persons in six minutes" (University of Chicago) lead him to question the concept of a "Benign Intelligence he hoped he had seen behind nature" (Porter, 1990, p34), and later provided material for his philosophical work *Candide*. There were also small groups, such as the logical positivists, who would only accept anything they could observe empirically, that denied the existence of God on such scientific grounds.

The complete denial of the existence of God, atheism, was very rare in Europe, and the wide variety of religious beliefs can be seen through examples of religious tolerance throughout Europe, ranging from the 1689 Tolerance Act in England, to Joseph II's tolerance of Catholics in Austria from 1780, after their persecution by Maria Theresa during her reign. Hobbes, although personally an atheist, argued for religion as a useful "propaganda machine for the state, as it was the entity most capable of reminding the ignorant masses of their role and their duties" (SparkNotes). Using religion as a means of control seems a far cry from the Roman idea of personal salvation, but it again indicates the change in approach to religious attitudes. In the same way, the more elitist the deist beliefs became, the less religion was able to offer to those who sought the solace and salvation, originally an important facet of religion, from the church.

The concept of anticlericalism, in which one is opposed to the power of priests and the entire religious institution, was also promoted in the Enlightenment: Diderot and d'Alembert attacked the church's authority through articles in the *Encyclopaedia*. However, even having these opinions written in the compendium of knowledge did not stop the philosophes retaining their personal piety, and many "believed that decency required a certain outward conformity to the public ceremonies of the established church, whether one believed in them or not" (Porter, 1990, p35) reinforcing their desire to rethink the Christian doctrine rather than to do away with it.

In Christianity, Jesus's death and resurrection is central to the doctrine, however the concept of resurrection could not be accepted by Enlightened thinkers as a genuine historical event, in the same way that all of the miracles in the New Testament were treated with great scepticism. God's ability to forgive sins through Jesus's death also presented problems as it acknowledged the idea of original sin, which itself was seen as pessimistic and hindering social progression and thereby subject to Enlightened reinterpretation. To avoid the emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, Jesus's crucifixion was seen as a supreme moral example of beneficence to inspire similar dedication from other Christians. In doing this the resurrection is put aside to focus on the tenuous link to his moral teaching.

The New Testament portrays Jesus as a supernatural figure, another concept obviously ill fitting with Enlightened thought, however, if the consideration of him as a moral teacher is upheld, he can be seen as human thereby avoiding the potential mystery surrounding him. By default, treating Jesus as human made a nonsense of the Trinity, which in turn promoted the Unitarian doctrine of a single person deity. Although Unitarian ideas first appeared in the seventeenth century, adhering to them was dangerous, indeed the English 1689 Toleration Act explicitly excluded people who denied the Trinity. Despite this, the dissension of the eighteenth century led to an increased following and in 1774 the first Unitarian chapel was opened in England, and by 1800 this number had increased to nearly two hundred (Yolton, 1995, p533).

All of this change, and questioning of the Christian faith illustrates the way in which the Enlightenment thinkers were trying to mould a system of religious belief to fit in with the advances seen elsewhere in society. The attempts at reinterpretation, although dramatic, must be seen as a way of trying to rationalise the inexplicable, whereas moves to Unitarianism suggest a far more radical religious rethink. In the same way that religious leaders were criticised for founding religions for reasons of self-interest, the philosophes seem to be trying to take the voice of authority from the church for themselves.

Porter (1990, p71ff) suggests that the long-term effects of any of the philosophe's proposals are negligible, but that the overriding outcome of the Enlightenment was the move from sacred to secular. Contemporary scientific discoveries had removed many of the foundations of religion, and religion was no longer an essential part of culture. The failure of the Enlightenment thinkers to replace totally the religious world outlook with one based on rational reason can only be attributed to mankind's emotions. Reason is frequently paired with its opposite force emotion, and as people's emotional responses still cannot be explained today, philosophes would not succeed in applying reason to explain away willpower, or individuals' passions and desires.

This innate emotion was seen to pervade society towards the end of the eighteenth century as an age dominated by perceived rational thinking and logicity was replaced by the Romantic movement. It seems as if people acknowledged that reason could not explain away the variety of human nature, and in doing so an era where order, tradition, and discipline were overlooked in favour of individuality, irrationality, and an emphasis on the essence of the natural world was ushered in. From a historian's stand point today, the revolt against reason (it is no coincidence that it is most easily identifiable in the Arts) was an inevitable response to the Enlightenment.

By no means can the Enlightenment be seen to have done away with religious belief, but it was responsible for massive changes of religious systems. While the changes did not occur over a short time span, society was gradually shifted away from religious ideologies which had been dominant the world over since the establishment of Christianity many centuries earlier. Authority within society no longer came from the church: the secular had dramatically replaced the sacred, and religion had become, and has remained, a subculture, rather than the culture of the people.

(2015 words)

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