

The Age of Enlightenment

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The Enlightenment owes its substance to the thought of a relatively small group of eighteenth-century philosophes who came from many countries but were centered in France. Although they often argued among themselves, there was a set of approaches and propositions upon which most of them agreed. In the following selection Lester Crocker analyzes what unified the philosophes.

Consider: How the primary sources support or contradict Crocker's interpretations; why the philosophes were so concerned with Christianity and the Church; the elements of this outlook that make the most sense to you for today's world.

What we call the Enlightenment gradually took shape in individual minds, over several generations, before it became conscious of itself as a movement during the late 1740's. The principal galvanizing forces were Voltaire's ceaseless efforts in propagandizing and in whipping up "party" spirit, and the prolonged battle over the *Encyclopédie*, which served to unite many of the *philosophes*, as we call the writers who were engaged in furthering the goals of the Enlightenment. The *philosophes* were more often than not at odds among themselves on the answers they proposed to various questions or problems. Their solidarity lay in their awareness of a common foe—the *status quo*, and those who supported it, particularly Christianity and the Church. It lay also in their agreement on what the questions and problems were. The *philosophes* held certain ideas and aims in common. Among these were religious tolerance (belief in toleration of all ideas as well as personal tolerance was not universal among the *philosophes*); the conviction that human life can be improved through the improvement of society, since men are (more or less) shaped by laws and government; the idea that the enlightened group should influence those who govern, both directly and through public opinion. Their stance rested on a base of secularism and humanism. Regardless of their varying religious beliefs, all the *philosophes* held that the proper business (if there was any) of organized churches was the salvation of souls. Science, government, economic policy, even (many thought) moral values and personal morality had to be freed from the dead hand of Christian authority. The Enlightenment was for unfettered critical reason, for social experience to indicate what course men should take in meeting the challenges involved in ameliorating human affairs. God, if he existed, had no influence on these—Bayle had demonstrated that, before the end of the seventeenth century. To the *philosophes*, churches were what we would now call "power groups" and, like all such groups, interested primarily in themselves.

Revealed religions were fantasies or downright frauds. Christianity, especially, was hostile to the demands of human nature and pretended (the critics claimed) to direct men away from their self-interest in this life to a mythical paradise in a nonexistent life beyond. Reaction against the Christian world view and religious control of thought had been the very origin of the freethinking (*libertin*) movement in the seventeenth century. The *philosophes* were united by the conviction, above all else, that man must control his own destiny for the sole purpose of a better life on earth and that he must do everything possible to enlarge that control.