

The Enlightenment and Belief in God

The skepticism and relativism seen in our society today didn't just pop up out of nowhere. They received new life during the era of the Enlightenment. Rick Wade provides an overview of this important period.



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We are often tempted to think of our own day as truly unique, as presenting challenges that others have not known. Among other challenges, Christians in the West today have to deal with a foundational philosophical matter: namely, the question of the possibility of knowing truth. The mindset in our society today is either one of skepticism or of relativism. Skepticism says there is truth but we can't know it; relativism says there *is* no fixed truth. These mindsets affect all claims to truth, of course, but they are especially significant for Christians as we seek to proclaim the Gospel to others and hold onto it ourselves in these days of uncertainty.

Is the challenge of the loss of truth new? Not at all. There have been periods of skepticism throughout the history of the West. In this article we'll take a look at the era known as the Enlightenment, that period in the history of the West extending from the late 17th through the 18th centuries. What we'll see is that the very issues we're dealing with today were problems three centuries ago. Of particular concern to us will be the knowledge of God.[\[1\]](#)

Before looking at the Enlightenment itself, let's take a brief look at the mindset preceding this extraordinary era.

Prior to the Enlightenment, believing in God in the West was

like believing in the sunrise; the answer to all the big questions of life was God (whether a given individual was inclined to *obey* God was another matter). The Bible was the source of knowledge about Him, especially the Old Testament, for there one could learn, among other things, the history of humankind and the divine purposes. Even political questions were to be solved by the Old Testament.

Everything was understood to work according to God's plan. The events of history were not chance occurrences, but events that served to carry out God's will. The universe was fairly young, having been created by God about 4000 years before Christ, and it was kept in operation through God's immediate involvement. The earth was at the physical center of the universe; since man was the highest level of creation, clearly God's purposes were centered on him.

For some people this picture of the world made for a comfortable home: nice and neat and orderly. However, the world was a mysterious and sometimes frightening place. This, along with the generally held belief in "that Last Judgment where many would be called but few chosen,"^{2}

produced in some a pessimistic outlook. "Certainly there is no happiness within this circle of flesh," said Sir Thomas Browne, 'nor is it in the optics of these eyes to behold felicity.'^{3}

Although the various major landmasses of the earth were known, other civilizations were not. Europeans knew little about other cultures. It was easy to believe that theirs was the highest civilization.

With the rise of science and the discovery of other civilizations came a new way of thinking about "God, man, and the world." Let's look at these briefly.

A Shift in Thinking

Science

In the Renaissance era, the world started getting bigger for Europeans. Knowledge increased rapidly, and from it followed major changes in life. The various strands of change merged in the Enlightenment, culminating in a new way of looking at the world.

A major shift took place in the world of science with the development of the ideas of such people as Francis Bacon (1561-1627). Bacon, an English philosopher and statesman, abandoned the classical deductive way of understanding nature handed down from Aristotle, championing instead an experimental, inductive approach. He rejected the authority of tradition, and provided "a method of experiment and induction that seemed to offer an infallible means of distinguishing truth and error."[{4}](#)

Although science was later to become the source of confidence for people in the West, in the early days scientific discoveries were unsettling. For example, the invention of the telescope resulted in the overturning of Aristotle's theory of the universe in which the earth, and hence man himself, was the center. Aristotle taught that the universe was a series of concentric spheres, one outside the other. "Copernicus and his successors shattered this world," says historian James Turner.[{5}](#) Now man was understood to live on a tiny planet flung out into a space that had no center. It was a time of great confusion. In the words of poet John Donne, "'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence [sic] gone.'"[{6}](#) The discovery that we aren't at the center of the universe made people wonder if we are truly significant at all.

More disturbing than this, however, were geological discoveries.[{7}](#) It appeared that the earth was older than the current understanding of the Old Testament, which seemed to

some to say the world was created about 4,000 years before Christ. The Bible had long been the authority on such matters. Could it be wrong? To question the Bible was to question Christianity itself. Because Christianity provided Europeans' their basic worldview, such questions were extremely troubling. *Exploration*

Voyages of discovery had a profound impact on Europeans' view of their place in the world and of their Christian beliefs. Discoveries of other civilizations made Europeans wonder if their Christian civilization was truly any better than any others. China was a particular problem. It apparently predated European civilization, and possibly even the Flood! Like the Europeans, the Chinese saw *themselves* as the center of the world. And China wasn't Christian!

Other more primitive societies presented their own difficulties. For example, reports of how gentle and loving American Indians were made people wonder about the doctrine of "original sin." They wondered, too, if it could be that God would destroy such people as these in a Flood.

Furthermore, if other civilizations were able to function without Christian beliefs, maybe Christianity itself wasn't so significant, at least on the cultural level. Maybe it was just one religion among many.^{8} Norman Hampson concludes that "The intellectual challenge of non-European societies [were] a much more direct and fundamental challenge to traditional Christian beliefs than any which seemed likely to come from the scientists."^{9}

Thus, the discoveries of science and of voyages first disrupted Europeans' orderly world, and then made people doubt the significance of their religion itself.

The New Cast of Mind

Shift in Knowledge Let's look more closely at changes in thinking that developed during the Enlightenment.

In the early 17th century, French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) formulated a very rationalistic philosophy. His primary goal was to produce a logically certain argument for the existence of God. To do so, he employed what has come to be known as the *method of doubt*. Descartes believed we were to doubt any idea that wasn't "clear and distinct." The only idea he could hold in such a manner was that he himself existed. Hence the phrase, "I think, therefore I am." From there Descartes developed his philosophy in a logical, rational manner. He even approached nature from a deductive, rationalistic perspective. Beginning with general principles and known facts of nature, Descartes would deduce what the rest of nature should be like.

Although Descartes' way of looking at the world was overthrown by the experimental approach, his philosophy in general had a profound impact. He is considered by some to be the first modernist philosopher, for he looked for certainty in knowledge within the individual, not from an outside authority. Reason became more important than revelation.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was an immensely significant figure in the developing world of science. His discovery of the law of gravity showed that nature could be understood by man. Man would no longer be at the mercy of an unknown world. Newton's work was so significant for understanding nature that Alexander Pope was prompted to write, "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night, God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light."[{10}](#)

John Locke (1632-1704) was another major thinker in the Enlightenment era. Historian Norman Hampson says, "the new currents of thought all seemed to flow together in [him]".[{11}](#)

Locke believed that knowledge by experience is superior to that which is accepted by belief and trust – “the floating of other men’s opinions in our brains,” as he called it.[{12}](#) He rejected the theory of innate ideas taught by Descartes, believing instead that our minds begin as blank slates to which is added knowledge by experience. Locke carried this approach into the realm of human nature and morality. He believed that “moral values arose from sensations of pleasure and pain, the mind calling ‘good’ what experience showed to be productive of pleasure.”[{13}](#) Although Locke was a Christian, he set the stage for a naturalistic understanding of morality.

New Optimism

This new way of looking at the world, of listening first to experience rather than to tradition and the church, was a major characteristic of the Enlightenment. James Turner calls this a “new cast of mind.” No longer were people to be dependent upon the Church to tell them about their world. Now they could learn about it in other ways.

In time the unsettling first wrought by scientific discovery was replaced by an “unprecedented optimism” based on the confidence in man’s ability to “shape his material and social environment.”[{14}](#) There was “a gradual and complex shift in the intellectual climate,” Norman Hampson says. “As science seemed to establish itself on an impregnable basis of experimentally verified fact, doubt and confusion eventually gave way to self-confidence, the belief that the unknown was merely the undiscovered, and the general assumption—unprecedented in the Christian era—that man was to a great extent the master of his own destiny.”[{15}](#)

Secularization and the Church

The findings of science had profound effects on people’s thinking about God and their religion during the Enlightenment. However, science wasn’t alone in this. Other

forces were at work pushing Europe into a new secularism.

The Beginnings of Secularization

As temporal rulers consolidated their power in Europe, the political power of the Church waned. Fragmented feudal kingdoms began to merge together into nation-states and assumed more power over the people. The Reformation sped up the secularization of politics as governments distanced themselves from the warring churches to maintain peace.

Capitalism and technology furthered the separation as they weakened the hold the Church had on the populace. Before the printing press was invented, for instance, the Church heavily influenced the flow of information in society. But now “the printing press effectively ended church regulation of learning.”[\[16\]](#) Other secular institutions arose taking up more of people’s lives in areas not governed by the Church. Trade, for example and all it involved— travel, the establishment of businesses, banks and stock exchanges- -added more institutions that were outside the control of the Church. As James Turner says, “The church’s words, though still formidable, competed with a widening range of alluring voices that . . . did not have the church’s vested commitment to defend Christianity.”[\[17\]](#)

Secularization didn’t *necessarily* undermine Christianity, however. People might actually have developed a firmer faith as a result of being able to read about and discuss the faith. It could be that “with worldly ambitions curtailed and legal powers short, the churches exercised deeper spiritual influence.”[\[18\]](#) Nonetheless, in society the voice of the Church grew weaker.

The Church

The new experimental cast of mind had profound effects on religion and the Church. Religion now came under the same scrutiny as other areas of thought. Doctrine drew greater

attention since it suited the new concern with rational and orderly thought. Mystery was downplayed, and tradition lost significance. The new intellectual mood called for individuals to think matters through for themselves, and as a result, people began to divide over doctrinal differences. If “clear and distinct” ideas were what should be believed, as Descartes taught, then the individual person took on an authority previously held by tradition or the Church.

The Protestant Reformation played a major role in the fracturing of the Church and its loss of power. According to Norman Hampson, rival claims to leadership in the Church contributed most to the decline of its intellectual authority in society. If church leaders couldn't agree on what was true, who could? Although cutting edge thinkers were satisfied that traditional attitudes and assumptions should no longer prevail, they were not able to come up with clear alternatives. “The picture,” says Hampson, “was one of a confused *mêlée*.”[{19}](#)

Church leaders began “revising belief to fit the new intellectual style. . . . The very meanings of ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ began subtly to change . . . during the Middle Ages religion involved not so much assent to doctrines . . . as participation in devotion, particularly communal ritual. Religion was more a collective than an individual affair and collectively it came closer to a system of practice than a parcel of tenets, while individually it meant more a person's devoutness than his adherence to a creed.”[{20}](#) In the Enlightenment, however, doctrines became more important than practice for some, and the result of doctrinal debates was the breakup of the Protestant Church into multiple denominations.

The Bible itself was subjected to the new way of thinking. First, since all texts of antiquity were now open to question, the Bible too became subject to rational scrutiny. Which parts were to be accepted as historically accurate and which rejected? Second, since scriptural teachings were no longer to

be accepted simply on the basis of authority, specific matters were brought up for debate – for example, the matter of the reality of hell.

Frenchman Richard Simon (1638-1712) subjected the Old Testament to such scrutiny. His book, *Critical History of the Old Testament*, was the first to examine the Bible as a literary product. He treated “the Old Testament as a document with a history, put together over time by a variety of authors with a variety of motives and interests, rather than a divinely-revealed unity.”[\[21\]](#) Although his work was condemned across many Christian denominations, the die was cast, and others continued the same kind of analysis.

Political separation from the Church, new means of learning, the loss of tradition, dissension in the churches, doubts about Scripture—these things and more served to turn attention more to the secular than to the sacred.

Belief in God

Nature and God

All of this – the findings of science and exploration and the new experimental way of thinking, along with doubts about the validity and significance of Church teaching – took its toll on belief in God.

One concern was the relationship of God to nature. Newton believed God had to be actively involved in nature because the laws he discovered didn't seem to work uniformly throughout the universe. God had to keep things working properly.[\[22\]](#) For those like Newton, the findings of science were exhilarating; they saw them as God's means of ordering His world. “Even those few minds who had entirely given the universe over to orderly natural law,” says Turner, “still needed to assume God's existence. For natural laws themselves presupposed a divine Lawgiver.”[\[23\]](#)

Nonetheless, a distance developed between God and nature since nature was now understood in terms of natural laws that were comprehensible to men. René Descartes had believed that nature was to be understood in terms of ultimate realities. Thus, he kept science, theology, and metaphysics together. The new experimentalism of Bacon and Newton, however, separated them. "The modern conception of the natural world, understood as clearly distinguished from and even opposed to an impalpable spiritual world, was being invented," says Turner.[{24}](#) God was withdrawn more and more "as nature came to be understood . . . as governed by God through secondary causes."[{25}](#) He didn't disappear; He just adopted a new mode of operation. A mechanistic strain in science suggested a more impersonal Deity. God began to be thought of as a "divine Engineer."[{26}](#) Thus, scientists stopped concerning themselves with metaphysical answers. They looked to nature to explain itself.[{27}](#)

Now that God didn't seem to be necessary to the operation of the world, some began to doubt His reality altogether. Prior to the Enlightenment, atheism was a "bizarre aberration" for well over a thousand years in the West. One writer said that, "As late as the sixteenth century, disbelief in God was literally a cultural impossibility."[{28}](#) One couldn't explain the world without God. Growing vegetation, intellectual coherence, the orbits of the planets, the existence of life itself, morality—these and other issues all found their roots in God. With science now able to explain how the world worked, however, doubts about God began to rise. Belief in His existence now rested more on the idea of Providence, the beneficial acts of God on our behalf. It was believed that the earth was made for man's happiness, that there was a morally meaningful order to things, and there had to be a God to explain this.

However, with time there developed a more pessimistic view of nature, which lessened the force of Providence. Nature

produced poisonous plants and dangerous animals as well as good things. In the words of the poet William Blake:

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?[{29}](#)

While there was obviously no wholesale abandonment of belief in God, the foundations for belief seemed to be eroding. And when God's existence became debatable, says Turner, "the center fell out of Western intellectual life. If divine purpose did not undergird the cosmos, then whole structures of meaning collapsed and new ones had to be built up, brick by precarious brick."[{30}](#)

Natural Religion—Deism

Norman Hampson notes that, with the splintering of the Church in the Reformation, and with the pressure of looking at everything in terms of the new cast of mind, churches began making concessions in their teachings. "When the churches were prepared for so many concessions, and seemed encumbered rather than sustained by such dogma as they retained, there was a tendency for the educated to drift by easy stages from Christianity to natural religion."[{31}](#) Natural religion, or Deism, was religion divorced from the supposed "superstition" of revealed religion such as Christianity. Human reason unaided by revelation, it was thought, could lead thinking men to the truth of God. Deism was a very basic, not highly elaborated theistic belief. God was "a kind of highest common denominator of the revealed religions." In fact, some thought all the major religions worship the same God![{32}](#) Natural religion was the religion of all mankind. It was centered on man, and it bound all men to a common moral law. Living right counted more than right doctrine. As Pope said,

For Modes of Faith let graceless zealots fight;

He can't be wrong whose life is in the right. [{33}](#)

Apologetics

The need to prove the truth of Christianity would scarcely have crossed the mind of a medieval preacher. [{34}](#) “The known unbelievers of Europe and America before the French Revolution,” says Turner, “numbered fewer than a dozen or two.” [{35}](#) Now the possibility of an intellectually grounded atheism was very real. Fear of unbelief prodded Christian apologists into action.

There were four possible responses to problems created for belief by the many new ideas: to be ignorant of them, to firmly reject new ideas, to accept the new thinking but keep religion autonomous, and to recast Christian beliefs in terms of the new ideas. The latter was the route Deists and others took. “Reason and observation gave always the most certain knowledge of any reality that lay outside our minds,” says Turner. “Belief for its own good must therefore be fitted to the new cast of mind.” [{36}](#)

Some, like the Quakers, believed that belief in God eluded rationality. “On the contrary, the rationalizers insisted, belief in God was entirely reasonable and plausible,” says Turner. “And they trimmed it accordingly where its reasonableness seemed shaky. They played down creeds in general and mysterious doctrines in particular. Truth could not be obscure. They repudiated the metaphysical flights of scholasticism, both Catholic and Protestant, in favor of common-sense arguments grounded in palpable reality. Truth must be plain to see. . . . The use of science soon became a phenomenally popular apologetic tool.” [{37}](#)

Morality assumed greater importance as a test of the truth of the faith. As secularization pushed religion more to the private sphere, “emphasis fell increasingly on inner religiousness rather than externalities of ritual. Cultivation

of a clean conscience, then, seems to have become a more common test of inward sanctity, a measure of how close one stood to God.”{38} Religion grew more preoccupied with everyday behavior.

This was important in apologetics, because it allowed an escape from concerns about divisive doctrinal concerns and the uncertainties of new philosophy. It had universal appeal. Human nature and conscience worked like natural law: they revealed the moral law in us as natural laws showed God’s rational wisdom in nature. Turner comments:

Ethics and physics confuted the atheist and confirmed the reasonableness of Christianity. The rational man demonstrated God and everything essential to religion . . . through the marks that Deity had left in this world, ready for reason and observation to discover. Only the fool stumbled into the pit of atheism or the mumbo-jumbo of mystery. . . . Good morals and a small clutch of plain, rational beliefs kept the Christian safe from unbelief and guided him to eternal reward.{39}

This attitude shaped the thinking of subsequent generations of apologists. Perhaps they did stave off atheism for a while. Turner tells us, “These believers . . . had come to terms with modernity and had refitted belief to sail in its waters. With much of the incomprehensibility and mysterious taken out of it, belief in God was now based more solidly in morality and rationality; that is, in tangible human experience and demonstrable human knowledge. Confusion and uncertainty, apologists might rationally hope, would now give way to a new confidence in reasonable and moral religion.”{40}

Conclusion

In the Enlightenment, people were shaken by a new way of thinking that challenged the simple acceptance of tradition and religious authority, but their confidence was restored

through science and technology. Today, people are shaken by the loss of *this* confidence. We are seeing now that putting our confidence in our own ability to understand our world and fix it provides a shaky foundation. The need today is for both a reminder that truth *can* be known—ultimately through God’s revelation in Christ—-and modesty in our knowledge, which recognizes that we do not now, and never will, know everything.

Notes

1. For an overview of the shift in thought from the premodern to the postmodern, see Todd Kappelman, “The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge,” Probe Ministries, 1998, available on Probe’s Web site at www.probe.org/the-breakdown-of-religious-knowledge/.

2. Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (New York; Penguin, 1968), 21.

3. Quoted in Hampson, 21.

4. Hampson, 36.

5. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 14.

6. John Donne in Turner, 15.

7. Hampson, 25.

8. Cf. James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 15-16.

9. Hampson, 27.

10. Pope, quoted in Hampson, 38.

11. Hampson, 38.

12. Locke, quoted in Hampson, 40.

13. *Ibid.*, 39.

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. *Ibid.*, 35.

16. Turner, 11.

17. *Ibid.*, 13.

18. Ibid., 12.
19. Hampson, 31.
20. Turner, 23.
21. Byrne, 11.
22. Hampson, 77.
23. Turner, 27.
24. Ibid., 38.
25. Ibid., 37.
26. Ibid., 36.
27. Hampson, 76.
28. Turner, 2.
29. William Blake, quoted in Hampson, 94.
30. Turner, xii.
31. Hampson, 103.
32. Ibid., 104.
33. Alexander Pope, quoted in Hampson, 105.
34. Turner, 8.
35. Ibid., 44.
36. Ibid., 29.
37. Ibid., 29-30.
38. Ibid., 31.
39. Ibid., 32,33.
40. Ibid., 34.

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