

The Enlightenment

Although the intellectual movement called "The Enlightenment" is usually associated with the 18th century, its roots in fact go back much further. But before we explore those roots, we need to define the term. This is one of those rare historical movements which in fact named itself. Certain thinkers and writers, primarily in London and Paris, believed that they were more enlightened than their compatriots and set out to enlighten them. They believed that human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition, and tyranny and to build a better world. Their principal targets were religion (embodied in France in the Catholic Church) and the domination of society by a hereditary aristocracy.

The Enlightenment in America

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, many of the intellectual leaders of the American colonies were drawn to the Enlightenment. The colonies may have been founded by leaders of various dogmatic religious persuasions, but when it became necessary to unite against England, it was apparent that no one of them could prevail over the others, and that the most desirable course was to agree to disagree. Nothing more powerfully impelled the movement toward the separation of church and state than the realization that no one church could dominate this new state.

Many of the most distinguished leaders of the American revolution--Jefferson, Washington, Franklin, Paine--were powerfully influenced by English and--to a lesser extent--French Enlightenment thought. The God who underwrites the concept of equality in the Declaration of Independence is the same deist God Rousseau worshipped, not that venerated in the traditional churches which still supported and defended monarchies all over Europe. Jefferson and Franklin both spent time in France--a natural ally because it was a traditional enemy of England--absorbing the influence of the French Enlightenment. The language of natural law, of inherent freedoms, of self-determination which seeped so deeply into the American grain was the language of the Enlightenment, though often coated with a light glaze of traditional religion, what has been called our "civil religion."

This is one reason that Americans should study the Enlightenment. It is in their bones. It has defined part of what they have dreamed of, what they aim to become. Separated geographically from most of the aristocrats against whom they were rebelling, their revolution was to be far less corrosive--and at first less influential--than that in France.