

ENLIGHTENMENT 1. The Age of Enlightenment / Age of Reason were 18th century stages in Western philosophy. **T**he Enlightenment is linked with the scientific revolution. The period emphasised science, rationality and reason. Inspired by the upsurge of knowledge initiated by Galileo and Newton - and disaffected with repressive rule - Enlightenment thinkers believed that sensible, analytical thinking might be applied to all areas of human activity. **T**he Enlightenment overturned the then accepted beliefs that religious revelation was the primary source of wisdom. **I**n view of the status quo in world affairs - which is fraught with fundamentalism, fanaticism and irrationality - it is apparent the world needs a new Age of Enlightenment. **T**hen - once tradition is not allowed to impact government, once religion is removed from politics and patriotism is purged of excessive emotionalism - good sense, logic and not least enlightened compassion shall bring us peace.

The French philosopher René Descartes (1596 - 1650) dubbed the 'Father of Modern Philosophy' and of 'Cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am) fame, was a major figure in rationalism and is often regarded as the first modern thinker to provide a philosophical framework for the natural sciences and the Enlightenment.

Voltaire (1694 - 1778) was an Enlightenment writer and philosopher known for his defence of civil liberties and freedom of religion; but he directed criticism towards the Bible and the Catholic Church. Voltaire deemed Indian civilization to be the ancestor civilization to Western culture and Hindus to be the first philosophers.

The 'Father of the Enlightenment' was Spinoza (1632 - 77), who is considered one of Western philosophy's authoritative ethicists. He was a great rationalist, who laid the groundwork for modern biblical criticism and held the position that nothing is intrinsically good or bad - it is just perceived to be that way by the individual.

Deism is a philosophy of the Enlightenment that differs from theism in that God does not interfere with human life and the laws of the universe. Deists - like Voltaire - reject miracles, prophecies, divine revelations and holy books. They hold that beliefs must be founded on reason and observed features of the natural world.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 78) was another philosopher of the Enlightenment who also contended man was neither inherently good nor bad when in the state of nature (the condition humankind was in before the creation of civilization and social order), but is corrupted by society (Religion? Tradition? Nationalism?)

This phrase embodies the Enlightenment spirit: "I disapprove of what you say - but I will defend to the death your right to say it." These words were written by Evelyn B. Hall in her book The Friends of Voltaire to summarise Voltaire's outlook - but her saying has been mistakenly attributed to Voltaire as a quotation.

In a letter to Frederick II, King of Prussia, dated 5 January 1767, Voltaire wrote about Christianity: "Our religion is assuredly the most ridiculous, the most absurd and the most bloody religion which has ever infected this world. Your Majesty will do the human race an eternal service by extirpating this infamous superstition."