CHAPTER 18 - THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

CHAPTER SUMMARY

From the perspective of Europe's future, perhaps the most important development of the eighteenth century was its leading intellectual movement, the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers, called philosophes believed that change and reform were both possible and desirable. Before 1700, a belief in innovation through rational criticism had belonged to only a few pioneering thinkers. With the Enlightenment, it came to characterize Western society.

In spite of their name, the philosophes were not so much philosophers as men who sought to apply reason and common sense to nearly all the major institutions and mores of the day. Leading philosophes disagreed on many issues, but shared a basic unity of thought. They all sought reform for the sake of human liberty. They provided a major source of ideas that could be used to undermine existing social and political structures. The philosophes drew on three main sources for their outlook. Intellectually, they were indebted to the physics of Isaac Newton, which emphasized empirical experience and the rationality of the natural world. They also profited greatly from the psychological theory of John Locke, who had argued that man's nature is changeable and can be improved by his environment. Politically, the philosophes admired Great Britain, which seemed to exemplify a society in which enlightened reform served the common good. By far the most influential of the philosophes, Voltaire, was an admirer of English government and Newton. France, on the other hand, with its decadent absolutism and political and religious censorship, seemed to prove the need for reform. Because many Frenchmen wanted to see changes made, France became the center for the Enlightenment.

The publication of the vast Encyclopedia in the mid-eighteenth century spread Enlightenment ideas throughout Europe. This ambitious enterprise, the collective effort of over one hundred authors, set forth the most advanced critical ideas of the day. The project aimed at secularizing learning and replacing the intellectual assumptions of the Middle Ages and Reformation. One of the major concerns of the encyclopedists and of philosophes, generally, was religion. They considered established churches, particularly Roman Catholicism, to be the chief obstacle to mankind's improvement and happiness. Instead, the Enlightenment offered its own religious creed, Deism, which favored a rational deity and a rational morality. Religious toleration was a positive contribution of the Enlightenment.

The philosophes, however, were primarily interested not in religion, but in humanity and secular values. Through reason, man would discover laws in human relationships similar to those of physical nature--an idea that would form the basis for social science in the nineteenth century. The philosophes hoped that by discovering social laws, they could remove inhuman practices and institutions. This attitude is reflected in the legal and economic works of the Enlightenment. Legal reformers such as Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham and the British economist Adam Smith (Wealth of Nations) challenged governmental policies, the latter challenging mercantilist doctrine as selfish and unnatural. The full complexity of the Enlightenment is best revealed in its political thought. The philosophes agreed on the need for reform, but not on its methods. The contrasting philosophies of Montesquieu (aristocracy) and Rousseau (democracy) are here discussed. The chapter then details the influence of women during the Enlightenment and focuses on Mary Wollstonecraft. The philosophes were generally not feminists and argued for the traditional role of women.

Most philosophes favored neither aristocracy or democracy as the solution to contemporary problems. Instead, they hoped that enlightened monarchs would reform society from above. The policies of such rulers as Frederick the Great of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia are detailed in the text; they actually appeared to be carrying out the hopes of the philosophes. But, in reality, the heroes of enlightened absolutism, as the phenomenon was called, did not wish to reform their countries for humanitarian or liberal purposes, but to strengthen them for future warfare.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. Enlightenment Religion: The philosophes attacked Christianity for its rejection of science, otherworldliness and belief in man's depravity. Deism, their creed, advocated that God's existence could be deduced from a contemplation of nature. The deists believed in divine reward or retribution in the afterlife for a man's good or bad actions on earth.

2. Montesquieu and Rousseau: Montesquieu and Rousseau agreed on a need for political reform, but disagreed as to the methods. Montesquieu advocated an enlightened aristocracy which could limit the power of the king and reform the system (Spirit of the Laws, 1748). Rousseau was an advocate of direct democracy in which obedience to the general will would ensure individual freedom (The Social Contract, 1762).
Islam in Enlightenment Thought: The philosophees generally portrayed Islam as a false and promiscuous religion. Indeed, because Muhammad had not performed miracles, he was considered to be a false prophet. Many Christian authors ignored the basic Islamic understanding of Muhammad’s mission and implied that he was divine, a blasphemous suggestion in Muslim eyes. Writers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu saw Muslims as religious fanatics whose political passivity subjected them to despotism. Yet others like John Toland, Edward Gibbon, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu argued for tolerance and even admired Islam’s imperial success and the brilliance of its architecture. Enlightenment philosophees, therefore, spoke with two voices regarding Islam.

SUGGESTED FILMS

*The Majestic Clock Work*. BBC Time-Life. Ascent of Man Series. 52 min.

*Voltaire Presents Candide: An Introduction to the Age of Enlightenment*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 34 min.

*Catherine the Great--A Profile in Power*. Learning Corporation of America. 26 min.

*Civilization X: The Smile of Reason*. Time-Life. 52 min.