CHAPTER 25 - THE BIRTH OF MODERN EUROPEAN THOUGHT

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter surveys the intellectual developments of the late nineteenth century, a period in which the European mind took on many of the characteristics that mark it today. Its changes arose from earlier patterns of thought. The Enlightenment provided a heritage of rationalism, toleration, cosmopolitanism and respect for science. Romanticism placed a high value on the feelings, imagination, national identity and the experience of the artist. By 1900, thinkers had drawn new conclusions for traditional problems. Christianity underwent the strongest attack in its history. Scientists made major changes in the Newtonian picture of the physical world. Darwin and Freud challenged the special place the West had assigned to humankind. A new aggressive nationalism replaced the humanitarian ideals of liberalism and socialism. Though more daring than ever, Europe's intellectuals were less certain and less optimistic.

The social context of intellectual life changed during this period. For the first time, Europe had a mass reading public, with literacy improved by proliferation of state-financed education. The expanding literate population generated a vast explosion of printed matter including the first cheap mass circulation newspapers.

In science, the experts of 1850, as in Newton's day, regarded the physical world as rational, mechanical and dependable. Their views, however, were to undergo great challenges. In 1859, Charles Darwin published The Origin of Species which explained evolution according to natural selection: only those organisms best adapted to their environment survived. Because of its great prestige, science became the model for work in other fields. The British philosopher Herbert Spencer and others based their ethical models on Darwin's "struggle for survival," a phrase Spencer used before Darwin. In literature, the movement of realism owed much to science's emphasis on observation and experiment. Writers such as Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, Henrik Ibsen and G.B. Shaw rejected romantic idealism of nature, the poor, love and polite society. The realists also undermined belief in human freedom, portraying it as subject to great physical or historical forces of determinism. Art & the West focuses on Calvinism and the paintings of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

The progress of science was only one of the intellectual developments that undermined Christianity. Historical scholarship questioned the veracity of the Bible. Philosophers (especially Nietzsche) cast doubt on the morality of Christianity. The church also came under attack from the secular state, primarily because of government's expanding role in education. In spite of its enemies, however, Christianity experienced a religious revival. Most striking was the resilience of the papacy led by Pius IX who declared the doctrine of papal infallibility when speaking on matters of faith, and Leo III who addressed the great social issues of the day, condemning socialism but urging improvements in the condition of labor.

European intellectual affairs in general underwent a fundamental reassessment between 1875 and 1914, a period that was the crucible of contemporary thought. New concepts and technology challenged the basic presuppositions of science, rationalism, liberalism and bourgeois morality. The discovery of X-rays in 1895 and the exploration of radioactivity at the same time destroyed the comfortable world of "complete" nineteenth century physics. Max Planck, Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg followed with revolutionary theories that threw into doubt theories earlier deemed unquestionable. In philosophy, the adequacy of reason itself was being questioned. Nietzsche exemplified this new attitude. In psychology, Sigmund Freud instituted a revolution. His theory of psychoanalysis has been the single most important idea whereby twentieth-century men and women have come to understand themselves and their civilization. In political theory, major thinkers (such as LeBon, Durkheim and Weber) questioned the rational assumptions of liberalism. They each emphasized the role of collective groups in politics rather than the individual.

In wider terms, an aggressive nationalism spread in the late nineteenth century, becoming, for the first time, a mass movement. This aggressive nationalism was often fueled by racial theories that would be used to justify the imperialism that ensued. The racial theories of Herbert Spencer and Count Arthur de Gobineau allowed Europeans to believe that they were somehow inherently superior to other peoples and cultures in the world. Such racial thinking fostered anti-Semitism and discrimination against other ethnic groups. Theodor Herzl's Zionist movement, which called for the establishment of a Jewish state, can be viewed as a reaction to the growing pressures on Jews experienced during the Dreyfus affair in France.

The chapter concludes with a section on the revival of feminist thought and action that continued to grow during the twentieth century.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The Origin of Species (1859): This work by Darwin has been of fundamental importance in the way humanity has been perceived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Darwin advocated a theory of evolution according to natural selection. This theory did not require the existence of God to explain the universe: it was totally mechanistic. Hence, it undermined the views of both Christianity and Deism. Moreover, it replaced the safe and fixed universe of the Enlightenment with a realm of flux and change. Darwin's suggestion that human beings too had evolved by natural
selection dealt a blow to the proud view of man as the special work of God. Darwinism is strongly condemned by many contemporary religious groups.

2. Nietzsche and Freud: Two thinkers who most exemplify the challenge to traditional thought and values were Nietzsche and Freud. The former attacked contemporary morality and called for the creation of new values. He praised the irrational and rejected the cooperative ethics of democracy and Christianity in favor of the heroic individual whom he called the Overman. Freud emphasized the importance of sexuality in the human mind. He argued that civilization depended on the sublimation of sexual energy. He also urged the importance of the human unconscious, that inner realm of the mind he divided among id, ego and superego.

3. Women and Modern Thought: The new ideas and intellectual movements in science, art, religion, and society, which occurred from the mid-nineteenth century to the opening of World War I, produced mixed results for women. Views of women and their roles in society often remained remarkably unchanged. But feminists at the turn of the century demanded a reevaluation of gender roles. They urged equal treatment of women under the law, and contended that the relationship of men and women within marriage and the family required rethinking. Women leaders such as Josephine Butler, Ellen Key, Karen Horney, and Virginia Woolf sought to tap the potential of women as active contributors to society and by doing so set the feminist agenda for the twentieth century.

4. Islam and European Thought: European scholars subjected the Qur’an to the same critical historical analysis as the Bible and generally dismissed Islam as a religion and culture opposed to new ideas and incapable of developing science. These views were directly contested by Jamal al-din Al-Afghani, an Egyptian intellectual who argued that Islam would eventually produce a culture as modern as those in Europe. Yet Christian missionaries reinforced anti-Islamic attitudes by blaming Islam for economic backwardness, mistreatment of women, and profiting from the slave trade. Even with the establishment of local schools, Christian missionaries made few converts. Within the Islamic world, Ottoman political leaders championed Western science and some religious leaders sought to combine modern thought with Islam. The Salafiyya movement supported religious reform and believed that Islam should cease imitation of the West and modernize itself. Other religious movements such as the Mahdist in Sudan and the Wahhabi in the Arabian peninsula rejected the West and modern thought completely.

SUGGESTED FILMS

* Darwin and Evolution*. McGraw-Hill. 28 min.


* Europe the Mighty Continent: Social Classes, 1900 - A World to Win*. Time-Life. 52 min.

* Civilization XIII - Heroic Materialism*. BBC. 52 min.

* The Impressionists*. International Film Bureau. 18 min.

* Van Gogh*. Pictura Films Corporation. 17 min.