

Theology and the Age of Reason

I. Philosophical Context

A. Introduction

1. “Enlightenment” & “Age of Reason”
 - a. Reason → Authority and source of all knowledge
 - b. Rationalism: There is always a reasonable answer.
 - c. Significance of term “Enlightenment”
 - 1) Claim of superior intellectual achievement
 - 2) Contrasts w/ earlier “ages of faith”
2. Advances in learning
 - a. Copernicus and Galileo: Earth not the center of the universe
 - b. Science is experimentation and verification (purpose of science is to gather and organize the results of research; reason-based)
 - c. Isaac Newton: Advances in physics so that nature appears to be almost a mechanism
 - d. Raises a “crisis of faith” that set religion vs. science

B. René Descartes

1. Background
 - a. French Catholic mathematician
 - b. Rationalism; use of reason in philosophy
2. Ideas
 - a. Began with doubt to get down to first principles
 - b. Reduces to self-existence: “I think, therefore, I am” (*Cogito ergo sum*)
 - c. Trust in our senses results from faith in God, therefore we trust the information we receive
 - d. Ideas (by which we understand reality) are innate

C. John Locke

1. Background
 - a. English political theorist and philosopher
 - b. Empiricism, use of experience in philosophy
2. Ideas
 - a. *Tabula rasa*: Mind a “blank tablet” on which experience writes, creating knowledge
 - b. Reliance on induction and sensory experience for knowledge
 - c. We know reality through experience

D. Common Sense Realism

1. Background
 - a. Response to “idea-based” philosophies
 - b. Founder: Scotsman Thomas Reid
 - c. Popularized in America by John Witherspoon, president of Princeton
2. Concepts
 - a. We know the real world directly, not through ideas
 - b. Appealed to “common sense,” that we inherently know that we perceive things directly and completely
 - c. Optimistic: One can find first principles of politics, science, morals, etc. by careful, honest study
 - d. Ultimately fails to reckon with the noetic effects of the fall

E. Immanuel Kant

1. Background
 - a. German philosopher
 - b. *Critique of Pure Reason*
 2. Ideas
 - a. Sensory experience is a source of knowledge in realm of time & space
 - b. The mind shapes & organizes sensory experience into knowledge
 - c. In realm of ideas (“things-in-themselves”), reason does not operate, because there are no “data” there
 - d. Source of morals: Categorical Imperative, a universal moral sense or conscience, how we would act if our behavior were to become universal rules for all mankind
 3. Ramifications
 - a. “Things-in-themselves”: Realm of faith and religion, where reason does not operate
 - b. Anything in realm of time & space is fair game for reason
 - c. One can subject the outward forms of religion (Scripture, history, etc.) to reason without affecting the truth of religion in the ideal realm
 - d. Reality
 - 1) We know reality through our senses with our minds organizing and shaping the “data”
 - 2) Realm of faith (things-in-themselves) is beyond the reach of reason and sensory experience
- II. “Reasonable Religion”
- A. Concept of “Natural religion”
 1. There is a religion revealed in nature
 2. Accessible to all through the right use of reason
 3. Revelation accepted only where it conforms to reason
 4. Not “I believe that I may understand” but “I will believe only what I can understand” (Olson)
 - B. Deism
 1. Popularly (if inaccurately) considered the religion of the “Clockmaker God” (God constructs the universe lets it run).
 2. Allowed only what is “reasonable”
 3. Fundamentals of Deism (Lord Herbert of Cherbury)
 - a. God exists
 - b. It is our duty to worship Him
 - c. The proper way to worship Him is to practice virtue
 - d. Men ought to repent of their sins
 - e. Reward and punishment will follow death
 4. Embraced by several American founding fathers
 5. Ultimately unable to prove its ideal of a universal rational religion
 - C. Unitarianism
 1. Unitarianism revived as a reasonable religion
 2. Trinity defied “rational proof,” so rejected by Age of Reason
 3. Forms
 - a. Arian form: e.g., some in the Church of England (e.g., John Locke)
 - b. Socinian form: Christ simply a great man

- 1) Grew among Nonconformists (e.g., some Presbyterians & Baptists in England)
- 2) In New England, Unitarians seized many Congregationalist churches
4. American spokesman: William Ellery Channing
5. Tenets
 - a. Originally “biblical,” i.e., interpreting Bible in rationalistic manner
 - b. Rejected the Trinity and deity of Christ
 - c. Rejected vicarious atonement
 - d. Ideal: Live a moral life to please God
 - e. Later became increasingly non-Christian and humanistic

III. Orthodox Responses

- A. Evangelical theologies (discussed later)
 1. Revival-oriented responses (e.g., Pietism, Wesleyanism)
 2. Jonathan Edwards’s engagement w/ Enlightenment
- B. Using Reason to Defend the Faith
 1. Apologetics—Use of rational arguments
 - a. Evidential apologetics: Arguing from existing data (available to all) & reasoning inductively
 - b. Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion* (argues that appeals to reason or revelation present equal challenges; good against Deism, not later schools)
 - c. William Paley, *Evidences of Christianity*
 - 1) “Designer” argument
 - 2) Reasoned constructively from data
 2. Hyper-Calvinism (“High Calvinism”)
 - a. In the spirit of the age
 - 1) Carries Calvinism to extremes by reason & strict logic
 - 2) E.g.: Election + irresistible grace + limited atonement = No offer of the gospel
 - b. Tenets
 - 1) No free offer of the gospel; present only to “awakened” sinners
 - 2) No duty-faith: Non-elect are under no duty to believe
 - 3) Later (19th cent.) some even say the atonement is *sufficient* only for the elect
- C. Countering Reason: “Enthusiasm”
 1. Claiming to receive impressions, leadings, even revelations from God
 2. Consistently denied by revivalists (Wesley, Whitefield)
 3. Example: Quakers