

The Age of Reason (1648-1789)

Sources

Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason* (1990)

W. R. Ward, *Christianity Under the Ancien Régime* (1999)

Jonathan Hill, *Faith in the Age of Reason* (2004)

R. C. Sproul, *The Consequence of Ideas* (2000)

I. Context

A. Underlying Concepts

1. Human autonomy: Authority of human reason
2. Rationalism: There is always a knowable answer.
3. “Failure” of the Reformation
 - a. Did not bring unity
 - b. Reaction to religious violence

B. Revolutionary Ideas

1. Earth is not the center of the universe: Copernicus and Galileo (an impact on man’s view of his place in the universe).
2. Sure knowledge comes through scientific research: Francis Bacon & scientific method
3. Nature is a comprehensible “mechanism”: Isaac Newton

C. Climax: French Revolution (1789)

1. Overthrow of political, cultural, religious order
2. Rule of reason
3. Anti-religious (Cult of Reason)
4. Affirmed human sovereignty

D. Heritage of the Enlightenment: “Modernism”

1. Reason-centered, science-centered basis of modern Western thought
2. Challenged by Postmodernism, rejecting certainty for relativism

II. Impact

A. Philosophy

1. Introduction
 - a. Metaphysics: Nature of reality
 - b. Epistemology: Theory of knowledge—How do you know what you know? How do you know what is real?
2. René Descartes—“Pure” Reason
 - a. Constructing philosophy & worldview purely by reason
 - b. Doubt as the method of reason, using doubt to get back to first principles
 - c. Reduced to the statement “I think, therefore, I am” (*Cogito ergo sum*) and used self-existence as his starting point
3. John Locke—Role of Experience
 - a. Empiricism, use of experience in philosophy
 - b. We know reality through experiences to gain real knowledge
 - c. *Tabula rasa*: The mind is a “blank tablet” on which experience writes, creating knowledge.

B. Religion

1. Deism: Rational approach to *religion*
 - a. Religion of the “Clockmaker God” (God constructs the universe lets it run).

- b. Affirmed “reasonable” doctrines (existence of God, living a virtuous life, etc.)
 - c. Embraced by several American founding fathers (Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson)
2. Unitarianism: Rational approach to *the Bible*
 - a. Forms
 - 1) Socinian (“Christ is a great man.”)
 - 2) Arian (“Christ is a great creature”)
 - 3) Modalistic (“Christ is one mode of God’s existence”)
 - b. Rejected “unreasonable” doctrines (e.g., Trinity, blood atonement)
 - c. Made religion simply moralism
 - d. Later Development
 - 1) Took over many of the Puritan churches in New England
 - 2) Eventually abandoned “Biblicism” for total reliance on reason
- C. Conservative Responses
1. Reason warping religion: Hyper-Calvinism (“High Calvinism”)
 - a. Changes resulting from the spirit of the age
 - b. Carries Calvinism to extremes by reason & strict logic
 - c. E.g.: Election + irresistible grace + limited atonement = No offer of the gospel
 2. Revival-oriented responses (e.g., Pietism) discussed later
 3. Orthodox Apologetics → using reason to defend the faith
 - a. Evidential apologetics: Arguing from existing data (available to all) & reasoning inductively
 - b. Bishop Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion*
 - c. William Paley’s “designer” argument
 4. Subjective Systems
 - a. “Enthusiasm”: Claiming to receive impressions, leadings, even revelations from God
 - b. Quakers
 - 1) Founded by George Fox
 - 2) Leading by “Inner Light”
 5. Counterpoint of Jonathan Edwards
 - a. Knowledge not from reason alone but from the whole of human faculties (“religious affections”)
 - b. Not sole human causation in history but divine sovereignty (cf. Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)
 - c. Not a “clockmaker God” but “continuous creation” by God
 - d. Not innate human goodness but human depravity
 - e. Not human autonomy but the centrality of God’s moral government