

[1968. In Encyclopedia of Christianity. Edwin A. Palmer, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education.]

ENLIGHTENMENT, THE, an 18th-century, largely French, anti-Christian, philosophical movement. The chief names are Voltaire, Diderot, d'Holbach, Condorcet, Rousseau, and the contributors to the French Encyclopedia. The English Deists may also be included in the same category. Their interests were political, scientific, and religious. In the political sphere they opposed the tyranny of RC government. England's Protestants had won at least a political if not an ecclesiastical victory in the 17th century; however, France had either murdered or exiled her Protestants. The result was Bourbon absolutism. J. J. Rousseau adopted a social-contract theory of the state and advocated popular voting. Nevertheless, even on this theory the people had to surrender all their rights to the government, which in turn, as Rousseau urged, would exile or execute anyone who disagreed with the new state religion.

In science, La Place extended the mechanistic views of Sir Isaac Newton, and unlike the English scientist found God a useless hypothesis. Even if there were a God mechanism made miracles impossible and special revelation a fantasy. De la Mettrie applied mechanism to man, who thus became a soulless machine; and Cabanis coined the phrase, "The brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile." Not all of these men were strict atheists, however. Voltaire, the most popular writer of the whole group, the wittiest, the most vicious in his attack, not merely on Romanism but on Christianity and the Bible, was a deist. The existence of the world presupposed a Divine cause, and morality required a righteous God. At the same time, the evil in the world showed that God, if good, could not be omnipotent. Voltaire therefore accepted a finite God.

None of these men was profound or original. Diderot, the general editor of the Encyclopedia, is full of disconnected ideas. Helvetius wrote in good literary style, but the content is second rate. Baron d'Holbach is less superficial. But though these men never attained stature in the history of philosophy, their influence among the people has been a large factor in producing widespread atheism in France to this day.

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