

Chapter 22

The Challenge of New Thought

By 1650 the Catholic Reformation had lost some of its vitality. The lines had been drawn in doctrine and practice between the Catholics and Protestants. There were no real hopes for reunion. In centers of Christian thought much of the scholarship had become defensive rather than creative. New philosophical and theological concepts were difficult to debate and refine in an atmosphere where the Index of Forbidden Books and the Office of the Inquisition functioned as effective dampers on creative thought.

If the Christian churches could not provide an environment for progress in human thought, who could? The answer would be those political, philosophical and scientific thinkers which we now identify with an intellectual era known as “The Enlightenment” or “The Age of Reason”. These thinkers would reject tradition and authority in their particular fields of study -- philosophical, religious, scientific, or political -- and investigate a new world view based primarily on human reason and human experience.

Intellectually separated from ecclesiastical control and the traditional world view of Christianity, Enlightenment thinkers would create a new world view with a new interpretation of humanity, the cosmos, society, morals, history and often a new critique of religion. They would, in the end, create the foundations for a secular culture, perhaps the first in human history.

The response of the official Catholic Church was often condemnation, rather than dialogue. Therefore, the Enlightenment and the Church tended to go their separate intellectual ways. Those Catholic thinkers who attempted to participate with or engage in dialogue with Enlightenment thinkers on their own ground were often simply silenced.

The New Cosmology

A new cosmology, which would influence the Enlightenment, was made public by the Polish priest/scientist, Copernicus (1473-1543). He rejected the long held cosmology that the earth was the center of the universe. With some exceptions, like the ancient Pythagoreans, this earth-centered cosmology had been accepted by most intellectuals and common folk alike for some 2,000 years. It was based on the scientific worldview of Aristotle (4th century BC) and Ptolemy (2nd century AD). Cosmologists accepted it because it yielded accurate predictions of stellar events, common folk accepted because it seemed like common sense and the Church accepted it because it seemed to square with a literal reading of biblical accounts.

However, the scientific work of Copernicus set into motion the dissolution of this ancient, well accepted, Aristotelian- Ptolemaic worldview. While studying in Italy, Copernicus became acquainted with the heliocentric (sun-centered) proposals of the Pythagoreans which prompted him to reevaluate the Ptolemaic geocentric (earth-centered) system. In his work entitled, “*On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*”, (dedicated to Pope Pius III) Copernicus proposed a sun-centered (heliocentric) model.

He claimed:

- 1) The sun rather than the earth was the center of the universe
- 2) The earth rotated once every day and circled the sun once every year
- 3) The stars were further away from the earth than was the sun

Several things operating in these claims were new to the science of astronomy:

- 1) The views were based on observation rather than on an interpretation of ancient philosophical or scriptural texts
- 2) The authority of Aristotle had been challenged
- 3) The earth was displaced as the center of the universe

Technically, of course, he was wrong. The sun is the center of the solar system, not the universe. But what was significant for his era was that what he proposed defied the commonsense experience of humanity from time immemorial, challenged the venerable geocentric model of Aristotle and Ptolemy and seemed to contradict biblical accounts. Why did Copernicus make his claims? His answer: because it makes the mathematics of the universe simpler.

Because Copernicus' work was seen as confined to mathematics, it did not cause a great stir either in the scientific or religious community. It was not until about a half century later, ten years before Galileo, that the work of Copernicus was given serious scientific consideration by Enlightenment thinkers. It was Johannes Kepler, influenced by Copernicus and aided by the work of Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who published a heliocentric work, again, largely because it fit in with his mathematical conception of the universe. This time there was some reaction. Kepler met with opposition from his fellow Protestants and thus he sought protection from the Jesuits, who had a great respect for science.

Next came Galileo. While the present Pope, John Paul II, has recently admitted and apologized for the Church's mistake in the Galileo affair, it is interesting to note that even in the time of Galileo, the Catholic Church was willing to accept this new cosmology, *if it was true*, and reconcile it with Scripture. In the Galileo case, the Pope's theologian, Robert Bellarmine, conceded that if Galileo's theories were proven, there would be no objection to holding Copernicus's heliocentric theory. In that event, the relevant passages of Scripture would have to be interpreted in a non-literal way. Non-literal interpretations of Scripture were common, especially in the works of the early Fathers of the Church. However, if Galileo could not prove his theories, the literal interpretation of Scripture was to be preferred, for obvious reasons. The Copernican system could then be taught as a mathematical hypothesis, but it could not be taught that the earth actually moves. Galileo was unable to offer a definitive proof.

A more serious problem for the Church in the 16th century was that if this new cosmology destroyed the philosophy of Aristotle, the vast Church doctrine based on Aristotle's philosophical approach might be at risk. This was unacceptable. St. Thomas had "baptized" Aristotle's pagan philosophy, but the Church was not able to "baptize" the

new cosmology. That would come centuries later.

Finally, since the new cosmology was based on a scientific approach to knowledge based solely on reason, it would come to pose a serious challenge to Christian thought. If reason was the sole means for attaining truth, this would pave the way for what is now called “scientific materialism”, which would exclude religion from the world of true knowledge. This view is based on two assumptions or “beliefs” (1) the scientific method is the *only* guide to true knowledge and (2) matter and energy are the *only* fundamental realities in the universe.

The first assumption is about how we come to know reality. It implies that the path to true knowledge must begin with observations of empirical (sense) data. From these data a hypothesis is formulated and tested. A theory can then developed to explain the results of testing the hypothesis and predictions can be made based on the theory. The key here is the assumption that if knowledge does not come from sensible data that can be tested, then it is not true knowledge. Faith based on revelation is excluded from “knowledge”.

The second assumption is that matter and energy are the only fundamental realities in the universe. It claims that reality can be totally explained by an examination of its component parts. In this view all things in the universe including the human mind, love, religious belief, altruism etc. can be explained by an analysis of the workings of the atoms and molecules that make up the physical world. In other words, human existence is explained as “nothing but” physics and chemistry in action. There is no room for the supernatural.

The New Philosophy

Another intellectual challenge for the Church were new Enlightenment developments in philosophy. The most challenging development was that of “critical rationalism”. It began with Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes’ approach to knowledge was one of “methodical doubt”. All authorities, traditions and assumptions were submitted to doubt, until they could be proven. He criticized the blind acceptance of Aristotle and by extension (although he did not recommend it) the blind acceptance traditions of the Church. All previous knowledge could be and should be doubted. Later Enlightenment critics of the Church would use his approach to attack Church doctrines and traditions.

In 1678, a French priest, Richard Simon tried to apply this critical (scientific, historical) method to the understanding of Scripture. He investigated the authorship and historical nature of the Bible. His writings were quickly suppressed by the Church and it was not until the 20th century that such “critical” methods were approved by the Church for Catholic biblical scholars.

Religious Freedom

Constantine's adoption of Christianity in the 4th century and the medieval concept of Christendom inaugurated in the 9th century were based on the perceived need for a unity of religion within the State to preserve the social order. Church and State became welded together with Popes and civil rulers alternating as the final authority. As we have seen, Protestants like Luther and Calvin agreed, as did secular rulers down to modern times, that the ideal was a unity of Church and State. The concept of religious liberty developed very slowly and had little precedent in Christian thought.

Enlightenment thinkers were appalled by the thought that a religious commitment could be forced on an individual. Personal choice must be the essence of religious commitment. Others argued that if faith is a gift, one must wait until the gift is given. Forced belief resulted in either insincerity or martyrdom, neither of which promoted true religion.

In the Enlightenment view people should be given autonomy. This meant a real freedom to accept what the individual judged to be true, not what was forced upon him by an outside authority - either Scripture, the Church or the State. Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular had no tolerance for personal choice in matters of religion. The Christian Creed demanded acceptance or one was labeled a heretic and must repent or face dire consequences, e.g., death at the stake. The ideal expressed by the Church well into the 19th century was the union of Church - the Catholic Church - and State.

The most famous example of this Catholic view is found in the *Syllabus of Errors* promulgated by Pope Pius IX, in 1864. This document *condemned* some 80 propositions which included:

- 55. The Church should be separated from the State, and the State from the Church.
- 77. In our times it is no longer necessary that the Catholic religion should be the only religion of the State to the exclusion of all others whatsoever.
- 78. Hence it has been wisely provided by law that in certain regions, Catholic in name, immigrants shall be allowed the public exercise of their own forms of religion

This approach to religious liberty would be reversed by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's.

Ironically, it was in those countries like Germany and France that the inability of the various Christian churches to eliminate or dominate each other that would in time create the need for the modern secular State that did not embody any particular religious perspective. The religious wars had led to a standoff between Catholic and Protestant Churches and had inflicted great evils upon their lands and people, therefore tolerance guaranteed by a secular State would prove to be the most effective way to ensure peace.

Human Nature, Original Sin and the Enlightenment

The term “original sin” was coined by St. Augustine (354-430) in the defense of the need for infant baptism. For Augustine the human race stood condemned by the sin of Adam and only the free gift of grace could save it from damnation. The consequences of original sin are death and concupiscence, a yearning toward self-gratification that turns humans away from God.

Augustine’s concept would be modified by St. Anselm (Limbo) and St. Thomas Aquinas, but the very notion that human evil could be traced back to a single act of primeval parents was repugnant to Enlightenment thinkers. They viewed mankind as born naturally good and by use of reason able to establish a natural human happiness. Mankind was not held hostage to the single act of primeval parents, but was held hostage by ignorance and superstition which could be overcome by the proper use of reason.

Human Progress

The preachers in the Church had taught for centuries that in the beginning mankind had existed in Eden. It was a Golden Age when all was peace and tranquillity only to be shattered by sin. Since then mankind was trapped in sin and could only be saved by the intervention of God. There would be no hope of a complete restoration of the Golden Age on earth, that would have to wait for Heaven and a new world made possible by the Second Coming of Christ. Mankind was held hostage to sin in a world best described as a “veil of tears” and the only hope was the individual attainment of heaven. Heaven was obtained through faith for Protestants and through faith, works and the sacraments for Catholics.

Enlightenment thinkers saw it differently. Mankind had not fallen from Eden, but was in a gradual ascent to a Golden Age on this earth. This would be made possible by the wise use of human reason. This was already happening in science and industry. Copernicus and Newton had demonstrated the superiority of reason over the dogmatism and the unenlightened thinking of the Church. Human reason was bringing on a new age with the accumulation of personal wealth for personal fulfillment.

The Golden Age on earth for Enlightenment thinkers would be a time when superstition would end, wars would cease and all the evils due to religion and ignorance would be cured by the progress of science. This was a new secular faith which raised new questions about the meaning of life, the source of evil, individual rights of conscience and the nature of mankind itself.

Deism

When Enlightenment thinkers rejected revelation and placed their trust in human reason to explain the world and solve the problems of society, the question arose: What part does God play in all this? The Enlightenment answer was Deism. Deism took several forms, but in general it posited a “creator-deity” who set the world in motion, but had little, if any, further contact with the world or mankind, thus no Incarnation. Nor was any contact necessary. It was left to human reason to discover the mysteries of the world and

human life and to construct a workable human morality. This deity was something like the first cause or uncaused cause of Aristotle. Thus a remote and impersonal deity.

In England, Deism was supported as a natural religion that would bring an end to the religious wars that had plagued the western world since the Reformation. As a natural religion Deism would prove to be reasonable and as such accepted by reasonable people. No need for sectarian doctrines or special claims to revelation. Deism found its way into the Churches in the form of Unitarianism. However, the Anglican bishop Joseph Butler in his book *Analogy of Religion*, made a convincing case that Christian claims were more probable than those of the Deists.

In France, Deism found an effective proponent in Voltaire. Voltaire, who was educated by the Jesuits, attacked the Church on all fronts - doctrine, ethics, authority, traditions, clergy. His famous work "The Dictionary of Philosophy" has been called an anti-Christian summa. Voltaire used satire and wit to attack the Church and thus defenders of the faith found it difficult to argue with him.

Another influential Enlightenment thinker in France was Denis Diderot (d.1784). He published the *Encyclopedia or Explanatory Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Occupations*. It consisted of 55 volumes and represented the thoughts of some 60 Enlightenment thinkers including Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau. It was intended to address all human knowledge and was based on rationalism, Deism and natural religion. Articles denied such Christian doctrines as the divinity of Christ and original sin.

It was opposed by the Church and the monarchy. However, the ideas expressed in the *Encyclopedia* were accepted by many intellectuals and helped form the intellectual basis for the French Revolution and paved the way for the secularization of French and European culture.