

The French Enlightenment and the Modernization of Christianity during this Period

Qian Wu

Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, China

Abstract

The European Enlightenment differed from country to country and was often shaped by local conditions and grievances. In France, the French Enlightenment began to take shape in the early 1700s, reaching its peak by the middle of the century. The French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century was a great intellectual movement started by advanced bourgeois thinkers in France before the revolution to inspire people to free their minds from the confinement of religious theology and feudal dictatorship. Politically, most of these philosophes concerned with two issues: how to understand and improve government and how to create a society based on reason, logic and merit. The objects of criticism ranged from the established church, judicial practice, freedom of speech, art, literature and manners in general, the role of the King, and economic reform. The French Enlightenment achieved a complete negation of the feudal autocracy and fundamentally denied the existence of theocracy, monarchy and privilege. The French Enlightenment thinkers used their pens as weapons to expose the hypocrisy of religious theology, unveil the mysteries of tyranny, and accuse the evils of social inequality. The French Enlightenment also promoted the modernization of Christianity. As a result of religious tolerance, non-believers were no longer discriminated and persecuted, and people of pagan faiths in various countries began to enjoy universal human rights. The principle of disestablishment was finally established as a constitutional principle. Although it pit modern society against religious faith, which brought negative influence, the French Enlightenment had the significance as a milestone. It broke up religious regulation and feudal tyranny, reconstructed the ontological order and the legitimacy of the social and political orders, and formulated a cultural and political program of modernity.

Keywords

The French Enlightenment; Reason; Christianity; Modernization.

1. Introduction

The 18th century French Enlightenment was a great intellectual movement, which lasted almost a whole century and produced a large number of Enlightenment thinkers creating a great era in French history. This essay introduces the background and process of the French Enlightenment, the characteristics and impacts of the French Enlightenment, and the modernization of Christianity during this period.

2. Background of the French Enlightenment

In the second half of the 17th century, the French feudal autocracy reached its peak and at the beginning of the 18th century, the French feudal economy was on the verge of collapse. King Louis XIV, the representative of the feudal ruling class, took various measures to strengthen the royal power, making the central authority stronger than ever. Abroad, he launched a series of wars of aggression. The continuous foreign wars sharply reduced the country's financial

resources. The state was in financial difficulties and the feudal economy began to disintegrate. At home, the king exercised a brutal and despotic rule over the country. Feudal ruling class had become corrupt. The church asserted the so-called "divine right of kings", which enshrined the feudal system as the manifestation of divine will and established the absolute authority of feudal kingship. It used all religious means to fool and deceive the masses, controlling and dominating social thoughts and culture. Engels pointed out that the church dogma was at the same time the political creed and the Bible have the force of law in every court. There was also heavy burden on the masses of peasants and city artisans. In the cities, handicraft production was still the dominant but the development of industry was unreasonably restricted in feudal society. The nobles and clergy did not pay taxes but they occupied all the important religious, military and political positions, exercised dictatorship over the third class such as the peasants. Therefore, the ruling class was in sharp conflicts with the third class.

Incompatible with the feudal economy and government, capitalist industry and commerce were developing rapidly in France at this time. In the cities, artisan workshops were widespread and mass production was increasingly prominent, such as Lyon, the center of silk weaving industry and Lorraine, the center of ironing industry. Foreign trade had been widely developed, not only with European countries, but also with countries in West Asia, North America, North Africa, the West Indies and so on. These conditions marked that the French capitalist economy had gradually developed and matured, and formed a relatively strong force.

However, the feudal dictatorship and the privileged hierarchy severely repressed it. The bourgeoisie had no political rights and were discriminated by the ruling classes in society. However, they were obliged to pay taxes. The bourgeoisie could no longer tolerate this economic bound and politically powerless position. In short, the contradiction between the feudal relations of production and the new productive forces was extremely sharp in France at the beginning of the 18th century.

The French materialist philosophy of the 17th century, especially the philosophy of Descartes and the political thoughts and philosophical theories of the English philosopher Locke, had a profound influence on the development of French Enlightenment thought. In addition, the new development of natural science in Europe in the 18th century had a direct impact on the formation of the French Enlightenment. Along with Newton's doctrines, it laid the scientific basis of materialist philosophy in 18th century France. The comprehensive development in natural sciences also provided a powerful weapon to thoroughly criticize theology.

To sum up, the 18th century France was on the eve of great social and political changes. Social ideas reflecting the demands of the bourgeoisie were gradually formed. Some advanced thinkers' criticism of the feudal dictatorship, their analysis of social theories and their advocacy of social innovation eventually converged into a huge intellectual trend. This was the French Enlightenment of the 18th century.

3. Characteristics and impacts of the French Enlightenment

The French Enlightenment made political, ideological, and theoretical preparation for the French Revolution, encouraged a struggle between the bourgeois revolution and the feudal forces, and had a far-reaching impact on modern world history.

There were several generations of Enlightenment thinkers, and each Enlightenment thinker had different class backgrounds and represented the interests of different groups in the third class. Thus, there were different opinions on many specific issues. Internal quarrels, divisions and even break-ups occurred constantly. However, we can find that this intellectual movement had distinctive historical characteristics.

Firstly, with the development of science, the power of reason has gradually strengthened in modern times. French Enlightenment thinkers used reason as a weapon of thought more

forcefully and put forward claims concerning various aspects in politics, economy and society. Montesquieu believed that general law is human reason and the laws of various nations are the application of human reason on special occasions. His theory excluded God and divine law from the study of reason, separated theology from the study of sciences such as politics, society, and law, and separated God from man, therefore shook the rule of the Church. Voltaire believed that the age of reason had come. Diderot believed that philosophers were to reason what Christians were to God's favor, and that Christians were inseparable from God's favor just like philosophers were all about reason. Rousseau believed that when natural society disappeared, man would have only reason to guide his life. In short, for the Enlightenment thinkers, reason was the standard by which everything was measured. They did not recognize any other authority, no matter what kind of authority it was. Religion, the view of nature, society, the state system, everything was criticized in the most ruthless way.

Secondly, the French Enlightenment achieved a complete negation of the feudal autocracy through the criticism of religion and theology. As the spiritual pillar of feudal monarchy, church and theological theory are the source of intellectual imprisonment and ignorance. Enlightenment thinkers started from criticizing church authority and theological theories. Montesquieu accused that the priests are evil hypocrites, the Pope is a magician, and the French King is the second largest magician, who suppress the masses with severe punishment. Voltaire was also abhorrent to the church. He exposed the deeds of Catholic Church and condemned the greed of the clergy and the deceiving sermons. Starting from materialistic philosophy, the Encyclopedia school exposed the cruelty of Magisterium, the ignorance of priests and the absurdity of religious dogma by propagating the knowledge of natural science. Holbach pointed out that the reason why people believed the deceit of God, religion and monks was due to ignorance and fear. Religion can only corrupt social morality. The Enlightenment thinkers' criticism of religious theology hit the crux of the feudal autocratic system, and fundamentally denied the existence of theocracy, monarchy and privilege. The French Enlightenment thinkers were far beyond the previous Dutch and British bourgeois thinkers in the degree of breaking with religious theology and the criticism of the feudal autocracy (黄淳 92).

Thirdly, as a movement in which the representatives of the bourgeoisie and the working classes and strata of the third class united to oppose the feudal forces, the Enlightenment has never deviated from its task in its development for nearly a century and consistently directed its struggle against the feudal dictatorship and the Catholic forces. This was due to the common philosophical basis for the doctrines of the Enlightenment scholars. Although most of them were natural scientists or historians, economists, industrialists, and even idealistic socialists and some religious scholars, the need to criticize Catholic theology and the metaphysics of 17th century idealism dictated that philosophy remained the major domain of the French Enlightenment.

What's more, the Enlightenment thinkers had not only the same philosophical ideas as their theoretical basis, but also a largely consistent political agenda. This feature can be analyzed from two aspects. On the one hand, the socio-political ideas of all Enlightenment thinkers were based on the prevailing natural law theory of the time. On the other hand, with the exception of the idealistic socialists, all the other Enlightenment thinkers shared the belief in the pursuit of the bourgeois principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Although there were disputes between the imitation of the British constitutional monarchy and the overthrow of the monarch to establish a democratic republic, it was only a difference of opinion about what kind of bourgeois regime to establish.

Finally, one of the basic features of the French Enlightenment was that this long-standing intellectual and cultural movement not only has a deep and broad mass base, but also is directly oriented to the masses, with the masses of people as its target. In terms of propaganda, the Enlightenment thinkers not only completed many specialized academic and theoretical works,

and published the Encyclopedia for the popularization of scientific knowledge. In addition, they published a large number of easy-to-understand articles and pamphlets for the masses, and made use of novels, plays, poems, and other literary forms in order to educate more people.

The French Enlightenment thinkers used their pens as weapons to expose the hypocrisy of religious theology, unveil the mysteries of tyranny, accuse the evils of social inequality. It reflected the demands of the times and thus won a powerful and persuasive support in France and throughout Europe. It shifted people's minds from theology to science, from superstition to reason, from the pursuit of puritanism to happiness. Materialism and natural theism became the creed of all educated young people in France.

4. Modernization of Christianity

In the course of the French Enlightenment, the Christian faith, one of the cornerstones of European society, also went through scrutiny from all levels and underwent one of the most severe strikes since the Reformation. The scientific revolution that began at the beginning of the 17th century provided the intellectual and methodological basis for the French Enlightenment. With the help of reason, mankind could measure all views and doctrines with the gained knowledge. They raised doubts against the traditional worldviews, views of nature, and views of human beings under the dominance of Christianity. As a result, the existence of God and the soul in religious doctrines was challenged by reason. The French Enlightenment was the origin to criticize the social function of religion.

With the introduction and study of non-Christian religions and the rise of Protestantism, the call for religious tolerance was deafening. After Christianity was established as the state religion of the Roman Empire, Catholicism or Protestantism became the dominant faith in Europe for more than a thousand years. Religious belief became the criterion for the obedience of masses. The great geographical discoveries of the 16th and 17th centuries reminded Europeans of other peoples' religious interpretations of the truth. However, the existence of non-Christian believers brought either mutual discrimination or bloody trials, religious persecution, religious conflicts, and religious wars (王兴64). During the French Enlightenment, Locke's "On Religious Tolerance" attacked religious disputes and fanaticism, and called for respect for religious diversity and equal treatment of all people. Later, Voltaire, Mendelssohn and other giants of the Enlightenment also advocated religious tolerance on the basis of different theories like morality and reason. Religious tolerance was also another positive influence brought about by the religious criticism of the French Enlightenment. As a result of religious tolerance, non-believers were no longer discriminated and persecuted, and people of pagan faiths in various countries began to enjoy universal human rights.

The French Enlightenment also led to anti-clericalism, and the principle of disestablishment was widely accepted. For more than a thousand years, church organizations in Europe were closely linked to political power. Religion and church were fully involved in secular affairs, especially in political events. This lack of separation between church and state brought about religious and political persecution and induced conflicts and wars between nations and peoples throughout history. Enlightenment thinkers questioned religious traditions and authority and called for restrictions on the interference of religious forces in secular affairs with ideas such as natural rights, freedom, equality, progress, and democracy. By the time of the French Revolution, the link between the secular state and Catholicism was destroyed, church property was confiscated, the clergy were transformed into civil servants paid by the secular state. The principle of disestablishment was finally established as a constitutional principle. This revealed the great achievements of the concepts of liberty, political equality, natural law and human progress in the Enlightenment era.

The implementation of religious tolerance and disestablishment led by the critiques and enlightened political theories of the French Enlightenment promoted introspection and reform in the church itself. Throughout history, the French Enlightenment did not inaugurate, but powerfully inspired, the desire to politicize religion. On the other hand, there was a trend to transform the religion into a faith, which was linked to the image of the state (吕西安·若姆, 马贺 291).

However, although the critique of religion by the Enlightenment and the French republican democrats had specific historical origins, the tendency to pit modern society against religious faith is a questionable intellectual legacy. Since the French Enlightenment, the French and the radical western thinkers had come to regard the Roman Catholic Church as the enemy of freedom. In 1789, not only did the masses of the lower clergy and believers support the revolution, the bishops and other senior clergy in the Councils also tried to reform the Church according to the revolutionary situation. The French Enlightenment spread the ideas of democracy and freedom more generally in French society, but pitted them against Catholic piety, which had a significant negative impact on French political situation (彭小瑜 101).

5. Conclusion

Above all, the French Enlightenment had the significance as a milestone: it was the end of history and the origin of modernity (戈士国 79). It broke up religious regulation and feudal tyranny, reconstructed the ontological order and the legitimacy of the social and political orders, and formulated a cultural and political program of modernity. They called for the sunlight of science and reason to expel the darkness of tyranny. They suggested replacing feudal privileges and feudal hierarchy with political democracy, equal rights and individual freedom.

Acknowledgements

Natural Science Foundation.

References

- [1] G.S. Guo: The Origins of Ideology: Enlightenment, Modernity and Conceptual Studies, Journal of Zhanjiang Normal University, Vol. 32 (2011) No.5, p.77-81.
- [2] C. Huang: The Rise and Characteristics of the French Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century, Thought Front, Vol. 1992 (1992) No.3, p.91-96.
- [3] L. J. Rom and M. He: The Religious Aspect of the French Revolution: Another Legitimacy - Reflections on the "Rebirth of Revolution" since 1789, Intellectuals Review, Vol. 2018 (2018) No.1, p.267-292.
- [4] X.Y. Peng: Leo XIII's Encyclical on Church-State Relations and Nineteenth-Century French Religious Politics, Journal of Peking University: Philosophy and Social Sciences, Vol. 2010 (2010) No.6, p.99-109.
- [5] X. Wang: Critique and Response - Religion in the European Enlightenment, Journal of Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications: Social Sciences Edition, Vol. 20 (2008) No.6, p.63-66.