

AIM: How did the philosophes influence political thought against absolutism?

DO NOW: Choose one quote from the list below. Copy the quote and write down what you think it means.

1. "God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."
2. "It is dangerous to be right when the government is wrong."
3. "Men are equal; it is not birth, but virtue that makes the difference."
4. "Prejudice is opinion without judgment."
5. "I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Q1: What is a philosophe?

The Enlightenment reached its height in France in the mid-1700s. Paris became the meeting place for people who wanted to discuss politics and ideas. The social critics of this period in France were known as **philosophes**.

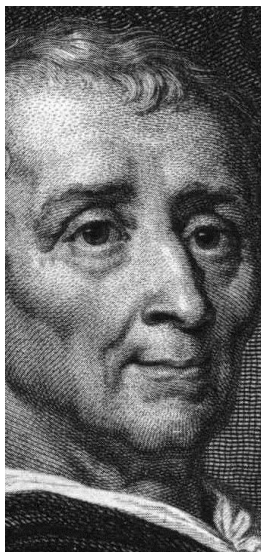


Q2: Who did Voltaire criticize? What freedoms did he speak out for?

Probably the most brilliant and influential of the philosophes was Francois Marie Arouet. Using the pen name **Voltaire**, he published more than 70 books of political essays, philosophy, fiction, and drama. Voltaire often used satire against his opponents. He made frequent targets of the clergy, the aristocracy, and the government. His sharp tongue made him enemies at the French court and twice he was sent to prison.

After his second jail term, Voltaire was exiled to England. There, he came to admire the English government much more than his own. After he returned to Paris, much of his work mocked the laws and customs of France. He never stopped fighting for tolerance, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech. He even dared to raise doubts about the Christian religion. The French king and France's Catholic bishops were outraged. In 1734, fearing another jail term, Voltaire fled Paris.

Q3: Why did Montesquieu believe in "separating" government powers?



Another influential French writer, the Baron de **Montesquieu**, devoted himself to the study of political liberty. Montesquieu believed that Britain was the best-governed country of his own day because it was balanced among three groups of officials. The king and his ministers held executive power. They carried out the laws of the states. The members of Parliament held legislative, or lawmaking power. The judges of the English courts held judicial power. Montesquieu called this division of power among different branches **separation of powers**.

Montesquieu proposed that separation of powers would keep any individual or group from gaining total control of the government. "Power," he wrote, "should be a check to power." Each branch of government would serve as a check on the other two. This idea would later be called "checks and balances." Montesquieu's book was admired by political leaders in the British colonies of North America. His ideas became the basis for the United States Constitution.

Document 1

Q: Why does Montesquieu believe that disobeying laws leads to a loss of liberty?

It is true that in democracies the people seem to act as they please; but political liberty does not consist in an unlimited freedom... We must have continually present to our minds the difference between independence and liberty. Liberty is a right of doing whatever the laws permit, and if a citizen could do what they [the laws] forbid he would be no longer possessed of liberty, because all his fellow citizens would have the same power. - BARON DE MONTESQUIEU, *The Spirit of Laws*



Q4: What did Rousseau believe was the best form of government?

A third great philosophe, Jean Jacques **Rousseau**, was passionately committed to individual freedom. In the earliest times, according to Rousseau, people had lived as free and equal individuals in a primitive “state of nature.” As people became civilized, however, the strongest among them forced everyone else to obey unjust laws. Thus, freedom and equality were destroyed. Rousseau believed that the only good government was one that was freely formed by the people. Under such a government, people agree to give up some of their freedom in favor of the common good. In 1762, he explained his philosophy in a book called *The Social Contract*. The book opens with the words, “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.” Rousseau’s ideas inspired many of the leaders of the French Revolution who overthrew the monarchy in 1789.

Document 2

Q: According to Rousseau, why should citizens be the authors of society’s laws?

I . . . therefore give the name “Republic” to every state that is governed by laws, no matter what the form of its administration may be: for only in such a case does the public interest govern. . . Laws are, properly speaking, only the conditions of civil association. The people, being subject to the laws, ought to be their author: the conditions of the society ought to be regulated . . . by those who come together to form it. - JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *The Social Contract*

Q5: How did Enlightenment ideas begin to spread around Europe?

The buzz of Enlightenment ideas was most intense in the mansions of several wealthy women of Paris. These hostesses held regular social gatherings called **salons** where philosophers, writers, artists, scientists, and other great intellects met to discuss ideas.



One of these salon hostesses helped finance the project of **Denis Diderot**. Diderot created a large set of books to which many leading scholars of Europe contributed articles and essays. Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* helped spread Enlightenment ideas to educated people all over Europe. Enlightenment ideas also eventually spread through newspapers, pamphlets, and even political songs. Enlightenment ideas about government and equality attracted the attention of a growing literate middle class.

