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The Literature of the Enlightenment

THE ENLIGHTENMENT, generally connoting the era of rational scientific discovery, philosophical inquiry, and social criticism that stretched roughly from the closing decades of the seventeenth century through the first decades of the nineteenth century, has always been a term without any very precise meaning. When contemporaries used it, they certainly meant to include the great discoveries and writings of the Englishmen Newton and Locke and their eighteenth-century philosophical heirs and revisers, ranging from the idealist George Berkeley (1685–1753), whose most important work was his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge** (London, 1710), to the materialist David Hartley (1705–57), whose reputation rested largely upon his *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty and His Expectations* (London, 1749). Among other English writers, it also usually referred to several categories of religious authors who used the new science and philosophy to question religious orthodoxy.

These included four groups. First were the latitudinarian proponents of a natural religion compatible with the self-interested behavior of the new market society. The most important of these were the Anglicans John Tillotson (1630–94), whose most popular *Sermons* were collected in eight volumes beginning in 1671; Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), whose *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God** (London, 1705) and *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity** (London, 1712) remained popular throughout the eighteenth century; Joseph Butler (1692–1752), whose most significant work was *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed** (London, 1736); and

the Presbyterian Philip Doddridge (1702–51), whose numerous published works included *Sermons on the Religious Education of Children* (London, 1732) and *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (London, 1745). Second were liberal Anglicans who de-emphasized the importance of revealed religion such as William Wollaston (1660–1724), whose most influential work was *The Religion of Nature, Delineated** (London, 1722).

The third and fourth groups of religious writers were, respectively, the freethinking or Deist exponents of rational Christianity, whose influence waned markedly over the course of the eighteenth century, and the much younger devotional writers and moralists, who became enormously popular in both Britain and America between 1760 and 1800. The most influential freethinkers were Matthew Tindal (1653?–1733), author of *Christianity as Old as Creation* (London, 1730) (Logan); John Toland (1670–1722), whose principal work was *Christianity Not Mysteriorious* (London, 1696); and Anthony Collins (1676–1729), who wrote *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London, 1724). The most popular devotional writers were the prolific Hannah More (1745–1833), whose best-known work by far was *A Search after Happiness: A Pastoral Drama** (London, 1762), and William Paley (1743–1805), author of *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy** (London, 1785).

Still other British eighteenth-century secular writers who fell outside the intellectual traditions already discussed were prominent contributors to the Enlightenment. These include especially the great Scottish philosophers and historians, who will be taken up in the next section; the skeptical historian, Edward Gibbon (1737–94), whose *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire** (London, 1776–88) moved beyond the traditional civic humanist analysis of Roman history by refusing to draw close parallels between the corruption of the republic and the state of contemporary Europe; and the radical political writer Thomas Paine (1737–1809), whose most important work before the late 1780s was his timely plea for American independence, *Common Sense** (Philadelphia, 1776).

For most modern historians, however, the Enlightenment found its fullest and most prolific expression not in Britain but on the Continent, especially in France. Among the many important works to come out of the Continental Enlightenment were the *Encyclopedia** (Paris, 1751–65) by Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717–83) and Denis Diderot (1713–84); physiocratic advocacies of freer trade, including *The Oeconomical Table** (Versailles, 1758) by François Quesnay (1694–