**Background in Antiquity**

     To understand why this movement became so influential in the 18th century, it is important to go back in time. We could choose almost any starting point, but let us begin with the recovery of Aristotelian logic by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. In his hands the logical procedures so carefully laid out by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle were used to defend the dogmas of Christianity; and for the next couple of centuries, other thinkers pursued these goals to shore up every aspect of faith with logic. These thinkers were sometimes called "schoolmen" (more formally, "scholastics,") and Voltaire frequently refers to them as "doctors," by which he means "doctors of theology."

     Unfortunately for the Catholic Church, the tools of logic could not be confined to the uses it preferred. After all, they had been developed in Athens, in a pagan culture which had turned them on its own traditional beliefs. It was only a matter of time before later Europeans would do the same.

**The Renaissance Humanists**

     In the 14th and 15th century there emerged in Italy and France a group of thinkers known as the "humanists." The term did not then have the anti-religious associations it has in contemporary political debate. Almost all of them were practicing Catholics. They argued that the proper worship of God involved admiration of his creation, and in particular of that crown of creation: humanity. By celebrating the human race and its capacities they argued they were worshipping God more appropriately than gloomy priests and monks who harped on original sin and continuously called upon people to confess and humble themselves before the Almighty. Indeed, some of them claimed that humans were like God, created not only in his image, but with a share of his creative power. The painter, the architect, the musician, and the scholar, by exercising their intellectual powers, were fulfilling divine purposes.

     This celebration of human capacity, though it was mixed in the Renaissance with elements of gloom and superstition (witchcraft trials flourished in this period as they never had during the Middle Ages), was to bestow a powerful legacy on Europeans. The goal of Renaissance humanists was to recapture some of the pride, breadth of spirit, and creativity of the ancient Greeks and Romans, to replicate their successes and go beyond them. Europeans developed the belief that tradition could and should be used to promote change. By cleaning and sharpening the tools of antiquity, they could reshape their own time.

     Galileo Galilei, for instance, was to use the same sort of logic the schoolmen had used--reinforced with observation--to argue in 1632 for the Copernican notion that the earth rotates on its axis beneath the unmoving sun. The Church, and most particularly the Holy Inquisition, objected that the Bible clearly stated that the sun moved through the sky and denounced Galileo's teachings, forcing him to *recant* (take back) what he had written and preventing him from teaching further. The Church's triumph was a pyrrhic victory, for though it could silence Galileo, it could not prevent the advance of science (though most of those advances would take place in Protestant northern Europe, out of the reach of the pope and his Inquisition).

     But before Galileo's time, in the 16th century, various humanists had begun to ask dangerous questions. François Rabelais, a French monk and physician influenced by Protestantism, but spurred on by his own rebelliousness, challenged the Church's authority in his *Gargantua and Pantagruel,* ridiculing many religious doctrines as absurd.

**The 17th Century**

     René Descartes, in the 17th century, attempted to use reason as the schoolmen had, to shore up his faith; but much more rigorously than had been attempted before. He tried to begin with a blank slate, with the bare minimum of knowledge: the knowledge of his own existence ("I think, therefore I am"). From there he attempted to reason his way to a complete defense of Christianity, but to do so he committed so many logical faults that his successors over the centuries were to slowly disintegrate his gains, even finally challenging the notion of selfhood with which he had begun. The history of philosophy from his time to the early 20th century is partly the story of more and more ingenious logic proving less and less, until Ludwig Wittgenstein succeeded in undermining the very bases of philosophy itself.

     But that is a story for a different course. Here we are concerned with early stages in the process in which it seemed that logic could be a powerful avenue to truth. To be sure, logic alone could be used to defend all sorts of absurd notions; and Enlightenment thinkers insisted on combining it with something they called "reason" which consisted of common sense, observation, and their own unacknowledged prejudices in favor of skepticism and freedom.

     We have been focusing closely on a thin trickle of thought which traveled through an era otherwise dominated by dogma and fanaticism. The 17th century was torn by witch-hunts and wars of religion and imperial conquest. Protestants and Catholics denounced each other as followers of Satan, and people could be imprisoned for attending the wrong church, or for not attending any. All publications, whether pamphlets or scholarly volumes, were subject to prior censorship by both church and state, often working hand in hand. Slavery was widely practiced, especially in the colonial plantations of the Western Hemisphere, and its cruelties frequently defended by leading religious figures. The despotism of monarchs exercising far greater powers than any medieval king was supported by the doctrine of the "divine right of kings," and scripture quoted to show that revolution was detested by God. Speakers of sedition or blasphemy quickly found themselves imprisoned, or even executed. Organizations which tried to challenge the twin authorities of church and state were banned. There had been plenty of intolerance and dogma to go around in the Middle Ages, but the emergence of the modern state made its tyranny much more efficient and powerful.

     It was inevitable that sooner or later many Europeans would begin to weary of the repression and warfare carried out in the name of absolute truth. In addition, though Protestants had begun by making powerful critiques of Catholicism, they quickly turned their guns on each other, producing a bewildering array of churches each claiming the exclusive path to salvation. It was natural for people tossed from one demanding faith to another to wonder whether any of the churches deserved the authority they claimed, and to begin to prize the skepticism of Montaigne over the certainty of Luther or Calvin.

     Meanwhile, there were other powerful forces at work in Europe: economic ones which were to interact profoundly with these intellectual trends.

**The Political and Economic Background**

     During the late Middle Ages, peasants had begun to move from rural estates to the towns in search of increased freedom and prosperity. As trade and communication improved during the Renaissance, the ordinary town-dweller began to realize that things need not always go on as they had for centuries. New charters could be written, new governments formed, new laws passed, new businesses begun. Although each changed institution quickly tried to stabilize its power by claiming the support of tradition, the pressure for change continued to mount. It was not only contact with alien cultural patterns which influenced Europeans, it was the wealth brought back from Asia and the Americas which catapulted a new class of merchants into prominence, partially displacing the old aristocracy whose power had been rooted in the ownership of land. These merchants had their own ideas about the sort of world they wanted to inhabit, and they became major agents of change, in the arts, in government, and in the economy.

     They were naturally convinced that their earnings were the result of their individual merit and hard work, unlike the inherited wealth of traditional aristocrats. Whereas individualism had been chiefly emphasized in the Renaissance by artists, especially visual artists, it now became a core value. The ability of individual effort to transform the world became a European dogma, lasting to this day.

     But the chief obstacles to the reshaping of Europe by the merchant class were the same as those faced by the rationalist philosophers: absolutist kings and dogmatic churches. The struggle was complex and many-sided, with each participant absorbing many of the others' values; but the general trend is clear: individualism, freedom and change replaced community, authority, and tradition as core European values. Religion survived, but weakened and often transformed almost beyond recognition; the monarchy was to dwindle over the course of the hundred years beginning in the mid-18th century to a pale shadow of its former self.

     This is the background of the 18th-century Enlightenment. Europeans were changing, but Europe's institutions were not keeping pace with that change. The Church insisted that it was the only source of truth, that all who lived outside its bounds were damned, while it was apparent to any reasonably sophisticated person that most human beings on earth were not and had never been Christians--yet they had built great and inspiring civilizations. Writers and speakers grew restive at the omnipresent censorship and sought whatever means they could to evade or even denounce it.

     Most important, the middle classes--the *bourgeoisie*--were painfully aware that they were paying taxes to support a fabulously expensive aristocracy which contributed nothing of value to society (beyond, perhaps, its patronage of the arts, which the burghers of Holland had shown could be equally well exercised by themselves), and that those useless aristocrats were unwilling to share power with those who actually managed and--to their way of thinking,--created the national wealth. They were to find ready allies in France among the impoverished masses who may have lived and thought much like their ancestors, but who were all too aware that with each passing year they were paying higher and higher taxes to support a few thousand at Versailles in idle dissipation.

1. How did the Antiquity and the Renaissance influence the Enlightenment?

2. Describe changes in thought and the role of the Church in the 17th Century

3. Describe the Political and Economic Background of the Enlightenment