Understanding the Enlightenment Reading & Questions

The word Enlightenment refers to a change in outlook among many educated Europeans that began during the 1600s. The new outlook put great trust in reason as the key to human progress. In the 1700s, this way of thinking became widespread in Europe. Enlightenment thinkers were inspired by the example of scientists such as Galileo and Newton. Scientists used observation and logic to understand the physical world. Their methods were rapidly overturning old beliefs. Now, political thinkers wanted to take a similar approach to problems of human life and politics. Forget the teachings of the past, they said. A new age of reason is dawning. In this new age, governments and social institutions will be based on rational understanding, not the “traditions and superstitions” of earlier times.

Enlightenment thinking grew out of the Scientific Revolution. In science, observation and reason were revealing laws that applied throughout the physical world. The thinkers of the Enlightenment wanted to apply this approach to human life. They asked questions such as: what kind of laws do we need, what rights should people have, and what is the best form of government? These political philosophers did not always agree about the answers to these questions. For example, some of them defended the right of kings to rule. Others argued that people should have more say in their own government – perhaps a republic or democracy.

The Enlightenment also had roots in the Renaissance and the Reformation. The humanists of the Renaissance questioned accepted beliefs. They celebrated the dignity and potential of the individual. During the Reformation, Protestants rebelled against the Catholic Church. They put individual beliefs ahead of the authority of the church. Enlightenment thinkers went even further in rejecting authority and upholding the freedom of individuals to think for themselves and make their own decisions.

Like the humanists of the Renaissance, many Enlightenment thinkers were inspired by classical culture. Trust in reason, for example, goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks. So does the idea that people should have a say in their government. Philosophers who argued for this idea could point to the democracy of ancient Athens or the republic of ancient Rome. Christian ideas also colored Enlightenment thinking. Enlightenment philosophers preferred rational understanding to faith based on the Bible. Yet most of them continued to believe in God. They saw the laws of nature as the work of an intelligent Creator. They saw human progress as a sign of God’s goodness. Often their approach to moral problems reflected Christian values, such as respect for others and for a moral law.

Several European monarchs tried to apply Enlightenment ideas during the 1700s. Among them were Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria. These rulers became known as “enlightened monarchs” who had the people’s best interests at heart. Enlightened monarchs founded universities and scientific societies. They introduced reforms such as greater religious tolerance and an end to torture and the death penalty. But these rulers pushed change only so far. They did not want to anger the noble classes, whose support they needed. Nor did they want to lose their own power. During this time, trade between countries generated new wealth. The wealthy merchant class had economic power, and now demanded a share of political power which was held by the nobility and monarchy.

Overall, the thinkers of the Enlightenment prized reason over authority. They questioned the basis of religion, morality, and government. Enlightenment thinkers believed that humans were perfectly able to discover truth for themselves. Enlightenment thinkers also criticized accepted ideas about government. They questioned the long-held belief in the divine right of kings to rule. Many stressed individual rights that governments must respect. Toward the end of the 18th century, these ideas played a major role in revolutions in both America and France. The Enlightenment helped to shape modern views of human nature, society, and
Directions: Use the reading on the Enlightenment to answer the following questions. This is for a grade.

1. ____ What is an important similarity between the way scientists were thinking during the Scientific Revolution and the way philosophers were thinking during the Enlightenment?
   A. both wanted to use religion and tradition       C. both wanted to use reason and rationalism
   B. both wanted to use experiments                D. both wanted to use Ancient Greece philosophy

2. ____ In what way did some of the Enlightenment thinkers differ in their views?
   A. some wanted the Catholic Church to have all the power while others did not
   B. some wanted the monarchies to have power while others did not
   C. some wanted to rely on Renaissance and Reformation ideas while others did not
   D. some wanted the scientists of the Scientific Revolution to control government while others did not

3. ____ Which of the following was not a question asked by the Enlightenment thinkers?
   A. what kind of laws do we need?       C. what is the best form of government?
   B. what rights should people have?     D. what type of revolution should we have?

4. ____ How did the Renaissance and Reformation influence the Enlightenment?
   A. people turned completely away from religion and God and toward rationalism
   B. people in countries began to form constitutions and did not listen to the Church
   C. people pushed for governments such as democracies, republics, and oligarchies
   D. people began to question authority and promote individual freedom

5. ____ What is the relation between Christianity and the Enlightenment thinkers?
   A. Most Enlightenment thinkers believed in God and their ideas reflected Christian beliefs
   B. Most Enlightenment thinkers turned away from God, the Church, and Christian beliefs
   C. Most Enlightenment thinkers believed that people should not be free to choose their religion
   D. Most Enlightenment thinkers believed in Ancient Greece’s democracy
6. ____ Which of the following was not a reform by one of the Enlightened Monarchs?
A. building universities and scientific societies   C. ending torture and the death penalty
B. more understanding and open to different religions  D. becoming a democratic government

7. ____ Which group of people gained economic power and pushed for political power?
A. Nobility   B. Merchants   C. Peasants   D. Monarchies

8. ____ Which of the following was not an area that Enlightenment thinkers called into question?
A. religion   B. government   C. morality   D. trade

9. ____ Which of the following was an accepted belief that Enlightenment thinkers began to question?
A. The right of the people to rule over the Catholic Church
B. The divine right of a monarch to rule over people
C. The belief that the Earth was at the center of the universe
D. The Catholic beliefs that people get to heaven through good deeds

10. ____ Using only paragraph 3, what type of government would fit best with that information?
A. Theocracy   B. Democratic   C. Monarchy   D. Autocracy

11. ____ Which of the following is not an overall effect of the Enlightenment and its ideas?
A. monarchs that push for reforms   C. modern view of government and society
B. American and French Revolutions   D. increase in trade and wealth

Understanding the Enlightenment Reading & Questions

1. The word Enlightenment refers to a change in outlook among many educated Europeans that began during the 1600s. The new outlook put great trust in reason. Political thinkers said to forget the teachings of the past. Focus on reason!
2. The Enlightenment thinkers asked questions such as: what kind of laws do we need, what rights should people have, and what is the best form of government? These political philosophers did not always agree about the answers to these questions. For example, some of them defended the right of kings to rule. Others argued that people should have more say in their own government – perhaps a republic or democracy.

3. Christian ideas also affected Enlightenment thinking. Most of the thinkers continued to believe in God. They saw human progress as a sign of God’s goodness. Often their approach to moral problems reflected Christian values, such as respect for others and for a moral law.

4. Toward the end of the 18th century, these ideas played a major role in revolutions in both America and France. The Enlightenment helped to shape modern views of human nature, society, and government. Without the ideas of the Enlightenment, it is quite possible that most countries would still possess monarchies and individuals would not have basic rights.

1. _____ What did the Enlightenment thinkers want to rely on? (paragraph 1)
   A. Reason  B. Religion  C. Military

2. _____ Which of the following was not a question asked by the Enlightenment thinkers? (paragraph 2)
   A. what kind of laws do we need?
   B. what is the best form of government?
   C. what type of revolution should we have?

3. _____ What is the relation between Christianity and the Enlightenment thinkers? (paragraph 3)
   A. Most Enlightenment thinkers believed in God
   B. Most Enlightenment thinkers did not believe in God
   C. Most Enlightenment thinkers believed people should not have a religion

4. _____ Which of the following is not an overall effect of the Enlightenment? (paragraph 4)
A. Increase in trade and wealth
B. modern view of government and society
C. American and French Revolutions

5. _____ What type of government do you think would most Enlightenment thinkers want?
A. Dictatorship       B. Republic or Democracy       C. King or Queen