

The Age of Reason

Moving from Puritanism
to Rationalism

Tinkers and Thinkers

New ideas had been arising in Europe and was challenging the faith of the Puritans.

The Age of Reason began with philosophers and scientists of the 17 and 18th centuries who called themselves Rationalists.

Rationalism

The belief that human beings can arrive at truth by using reason, rather than by relying on the authority of the past, on religious faith, or on intuition.

Puritanism vs. Rationalism

Puritanism

“God [is] actively and mysteriously involved in the workings of the universe.”

Rationalism

Sir Isaac Newton said God is a “clockmaker”.

God’s special gift to humanity was reason – “the ability to think in an ordered, logical manner”

Home-grown Thinkers

“[H]ome-grown practicality and interest in scientific tinkering or experimenting thrived in American colonies.”

Early Colonists had to be thinkers and tinkers to survive; “they had to make do with what they had, and . . . had to achieve results.”

Smallpox Plague

- **Outbreak in 1721 was equivalent to our problem with AIDS today.**
- **Cotton Mather (natural science and medicine as well as minister) was accredited with pushing a non-traditional method of inoculation as a cure.**
- **The method was highly criticized and debated (Mather's house was even bombed).**
- **Even though the treatment was controversial, it worked.**

Smallpox Plague

The controversy illustrates two interesting points about American life in the early 18th century:

1. “[C]ontradictory qualities of the American character existed side by side” (Ex: Cotton Mather)
2. “[A] practical approach to social change and scientific research was necessary in America.”

Popular Thought

**“American thought had to be
thought in action.”**

**Americans wanted to “improve the
public welfare by being willing to
experiment, to try things out, no
matter what they authorities might
say.”**

Rationalists and God

- “[D]iscovered God through the medium of the natural world”
- “[T]hought it unlikely that God would choose to reveal himself only at particular times to particular people”
- “[B]elieved that God made it possible for all people at all times to discover natural laws through their God-given power of reason.”

Deism -

Are people basically good?

- **Believed “that the universe was orderly and good”**
- **Believed “in the perfectibility of every individual through the use of reason”**
- **Believed that “God’s objective . . . was the happiness of his creatures.”**
- **Believed “the best form of worship was to do good for others”**

Rationalism and Revolution

“The American struggle for independence was justified by rationalist principles.”

“The Declaration of Independence bases its arguments on rationalist assumptions about relations between people, God, and natural law.”

Self-made Americans

- Pamphlets - “[L]iterature was intended to serve practical or political ends.”
- Following the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) – “organizing and governing the new nation were . . . the most important”
- Masterpiece of the Age of Reason – Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (written as an autobiographical narrative)