Thinkers Of The Enlightenment Essay, Research Paper

After the Middle Ages, peasants moved from rural areas to towns in search of increased

freedom. They soon began to realize that things need not follow the traditions that dated back

centuries, that they had a right to form their own ideas, own opinions, and own system of

government despite their status. The two obstacles they faced were absolutist kings and dogmatic

churches, yet despite these the central ideas flourished: individuality, freedom, self-sufficiency,

and

creativity. In this environment, the philosophers flourished. What was most surprising is that the

most enthusiastic followers were among the upper class.

Voltaire, joined by an army of philosophes: Charles Montesquieu, Pierre Bayle and Jean

d?Alembert, fit in easily among the aristocracy. He dined at their tables, corresponded with

monarchs, and took a high-titled mistress. He opposed the traditional uptight French beliefs, but

had no interest in democracy, as he had far too little faith in the common fan for such a

government. He believed that the educated person could come to see what changes were

necessary in the world. Yet all Enlightenment thinkers were not like Voltaire. He was heavily

opposed by Rosseau, who distrusted aristocrats because he thought they betrayed decent

traditional values, and argued for democracy. When Voltaire expressed his thought that equality

was impossible, Rosseau countered by saying not only was inequality unnatural, it was damaging

to the governmental system. Voltaire played his hand on intellect, and Rosseau emphasized

emotion, not only contributing this theme to the Enlightenment, but to the romantic age later on.

While Voltaire endlessly repeated the same handful of Enlightenment notions, Rosseau?s ideas

sparked in wildly original flames. Though they would probably deny it, the two shared many

values. They both viewed absolutism as evil, and rejected orthodox Christianity. Both were

religious skeptics, their minimalist faith leading to the eventual transformation of the English

system of religion. Many of their views, shared or not, were used as a basis for the French

Enlightenment.

France was not the only time going through a period of great change. Great Britain also

developed a new breed of free-thinkers, such as John Lock and David Hume. They led the

king to having an open-mind to change, despite his powerful position as a monarch. Quakers

and Unitarians broke through the dogmatic barriers, which delighted Voltaire when he found

himself their in exile. Since England?s revolution was already out of the way, they were able to

proceed smoothly and gradually down the road to exile, with the power of aristocracy and

religion diminishing gradually.