

Over a span of a few decades, Enlightenment writers challenged long-held ideas about society. Before the Scientific Revolution, people accepted the mysteries of the universe as the workings of God. The successes of the Scientific Revolution gave people the confidence that human reason could solve social problems. Although they encouraged reform, they were not active revolutionaries. However, their theories eventually inspired the American and French revolutions and other revolutionary movements in the 1800s, Enlightenment thinking produced three other long-term effects that helped shape Western civilization. They also emphasized the importance of the individual in society. Government, they argued, was formed by individuals to promote their welfare. Philosophes and reformers urged an end to the practice of slavery and argued for greater social equality, as well as a more democratic style of government. They wanted to rid religious faith of superstition and fear and promote tolerance of all religions. Faith in science and in progress produced a third outcome, the rise of individualism. They examined such principles as the divine right of monarchs, the union of church and state, and the existence of unequal social classes. The first effect was a belief in progress. Pioneers such as Galileo and Newton had discovered the key for unlocking the mysteries of nature in the 1500s and 1600s. Scientists made key new discoveries in chemistry, physics, biology, and mechanics. The British thinker Adam Smith extended the emphasis on the individual to economic thinking.