**Voltaire (1694-1778)**

Who Was Voltaire?

**Voltaire** (born *François-Marie Arouet*) was a writer and philosopher in France in the 1700s. At this time in Europe, popular thought was undergoing drastic changes. For centuries, our understandings of science, social laws, morality, etc. had been governed almost exclusively by tradition and superstition, and by powerful institutions, such as governments and organized religion. But with exciting scientific breakthroughs and rapid technological progress, people were starting to question that. Instead of believing what governments and churches told them, they started thinking **empirically**, meaning that they relied on observation, experimentation, reason, etc. The result was a widespread challenge to establishment authority, which led to revolutions in government, religion, education, and other facets of society, a movement which we call the **Enlightenment**. Voltaire, whom you'll read about in this lesson, was both shaped by the Enlightenment and was himself an Enlightenment force, molding with his writings how others of his day understood the world around them.

Voltaire the Skeptic

One of the hallmarks of Voltaire's thinking was skepticism. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, he distrusted anything that couldn't be supported with firm, reasoned evidence. As a result, his writings often attacked institutions and assumptions that lacked logical authority. Some, but not all, of the targets of Voltaire's skepticism were:

Governments

Many of the governments of Voltaire's time were **monarchies** based entirely on long tradition. Political power was handed down through families, and ruling individuals could rule as they pleased. Voltaire considered this style of rule silly and harmful, and believed governments should protect the liberties of their constituents.

Organized Religion

Voltaire believed organized religion was an instrument used by religious officials to protect their own wealth and power and to persecute practitioners of other beliefs. He did not think any single church was a true religious authority.

Traditional Economics

Like many of his contemporaries, Voltaire believed the comfort of the rich depended on the discomfort of the poor, and so was skeptical of traditional economic systems. Karl Marx, one of history's most famous economic skeptics, was deeply influenced by Voltaire's work.

Conventional Gender Roles

Voltaire rejected the assumption that men and women should be confined to specific types of work and lifestyles based simply on their gender.