Toward the middle of the eighteenth century a shift in thinking occurred. This shift is known as the Enlightenment or the “Age of Reason”. You have probably already heard of some important Enlightenment figures, like Rousseau or Voltaire. It is helpful I think to think about the word "enlighten" here—the idea of shedding light on something, illuminating it, making it clear.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment, influenced by the scientific revolutions of the previous century, believed in shedding the light of science and reason on the world, and in order to question traditional ideas and ways of doing things. The scientific revolution (based on empirical observation, and not on metaphysics or spirituality) gave the impression that the universe behaved according to universal and unchanging laws (think Newton). This provided a model for looking rationally on human institutions as well as nature.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), for example, began to question the idea of the divine right of Kings. In The Social Contract, he wrote that the King does not, in fact, receive his power from God, but rather from the general will of the people. This, of course, implies that "the people" can also take away that power! The Enlightenment thinkers also discussed other ideas that are the founding principles of any democracy—the idea of the importance of the individual who can reason for himself, the idea of equality under the law, and the idea of natural rights. The Enlightenment was a period of profound optimism, a sense that with science and reason—and the consequent shedding of old superstitions—human beings and human society would improve.

The idea of social contract came from two earlier scholars, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) believed that you formed a contract with your ruler which required you to obey that leader. John Locke (1632–1704) held that the contract required the government to uphold the natural rights of people. “Natural rights” were defined as life, liberty and property. Locke believed that people had the right to rebel against government if the contract was broken or if those rights were not upheld.

Once philosophers began debating about the basic concepts of government, discussions about the structure of government were not far behind. Charles Montesquieu (1689-1755) argued that no one branch of government should be allowed to get overly powerful. He argued that government should be divided into an executive, legislative, and judicial branch and those branches should check and balance each other. Notice that most Enlightenment philosophers did not reject government, just government that was corrupt or did not serve the people. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) believed that humans are born inherently good, but are slowly corrupted through civilization and society. Government was part of this corruption. People went into government with good intentions but were slowly corrupted by the power. Government, however, was a "necessary evil” because the alternative was anarchy.

You can probably tell already that the Enlightenment was anti-establishment and thus, anti-organized religion. Voltaire’s (1694 -1778) views led to major change in religion. Voltaire was an outspoken critic of religious intolerance and persecution within organized religions. Instead,
the Enlightenment thinkers developed a way of understanding the universe called Deism—the idea, more or less, is that there is a God, but that this God is not the figure of the Old and New Testaments, actively involved in human affairs. He is more like a watchmaker who, once he makes the watch and winds it, has nothing more to do with it.