

Intellectual ideas of the Middle Ages

Critical Challenge

Critical Task

As evidenced by writings of three scholars in the late Middle Ages, write a one-page position paper on whether or not there was an intellectual revolution during this period.

Overview

Students address a dispute about the significance of the Renaissance: some historians believe that the Renaissance represented a thorough break from the Middle Ages, whereas others argue that the origins of the Renaissance can be found in the intellectual shift that took place in the late Middle Ages. Students examine brief writings by Salisbury, Abelard and Bacon to learn of the intellectual changes that occurred during this period. Students then adopt and defend a position on whether or not an intellectual revolution occurred during the Middle Ages.

Requisite Tools

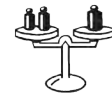
Background knowledge

- intellectual climate of the Middle Ages
- philosophical ideas of key thinkers in the late Middle Ages



Criteria for judgment

- criteria for “revolutionary” change (e.g., profound, relatively sudden)



Critical thinking vocabulary

- evolution and revolution



Thinking strategies

- data comparison chart



Habits of mind

- historical curiosity

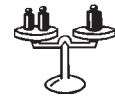


Suggested Activities

- ◆ Explain to the class that although some historians believe that the Renaissance represented a thorough break from the Middle Ages, others argue that the origins of the Renaissance are to be found in an intellectual shift that occurred in the late Middle Ages. Indicate that students will be asked to come to their own resolution of this historical dispute by looking at the writings of three thinkers—John of Salisbury, Peter Abelard and Roger Bacon—and then deciding whether or not there was a revolutionary change in thinking during the Middle Ages.
- ◆ Illustrate the major distinctions between revolutionary and evolutionary change: revolutions must both result in profound change and be relatively sudden, whereas evolution must be relatively gradual and may or may not result in profound change. The relative pace of revolutionary and evolutionary change means that the duration of the period of change must be matched against the duration of the period of constancy. (If a geological condition persisted for millions of years then a change which occurred over a thousand-year span would be, relatively speaking, revolutionary. On the other hand, a change which took a century to unfold may be evolutionary if the condition that it altered had existed only for a few decades.) Present examples of changes for students to classify as revolutionary or evolutionary (or neither): the current Information Age, the post-war baby boom, rock and roll, and so on.
- ◆ By way of introduction to the intellectual climate of the period read aloud the *Briefing Sheet: Philosophical thought in the Middle Ages* (Blackline Master) and invite students to comment upon the ideas.
- ◆ Distribute *Documents: Three Medieval views of knowledge* (Blackline Master). Assign individual students to read aloud the writings by the three scholars of the late Middle Ages. Ask students to prepare brief written answers to the questions that follow each document. Discuss these answers, provide an opportunity to ask further questions and offer their interpretations of each document.
- ◆ After the Documents have been read and discussed, assign students to work in groups to complete the *Data Chart: Changes in thinking during the late Middle Ages* (Blackline Master). Students are to identify the changes in thinking about the basis for knowledge that occurred over the 150 years from the writing by John of Salisbury (circa 1136) to that of Roger Bacon (circa 1280). Follow this activity with a discussion of information recorded on this chart. By this stage, students should understand the differences in these scholars' views of knowledge.



revolution and evolution



criteria for "revolutionary" change



intellectual climate of the Middle Ages



key thinkers in the late Middle Ages

- ◆ Introduce the critical task:

Based on the changes in thinking that occurred in the late Middle Ages as evidenced by writings of three scholars of the period, write a one-page position paper on whether or not there was an intellectual revolution during in the late Middle Ages.

- ◆ Review the distinction between evolution and revolution. Remind students to use the *Briefing Sheet*, *Documents* and *Data Chart* as sources of ideas as to how Medieval thinking changed. Indicate to students that they then have to decide and justify their position on two issues:
 - Did these changes in thinking profoundly alter the Medieval mindset?
 - Were these changes relatively sudden or progressive?



*data comparison
chart*

Evaluation

- ◆ Evaluate answers to the *Documents* or *Data Chart* questions on the basis of student understanding of the changes in thinking about knowledge that occurred during the late Middle Ages.
- ◆ Evaluate the position paper for students' ability to support their position in light of the two criteria for revolutionary change—the profundity and relative suddenness of the change in Medieval thinking.
- ◆ Evaluate whether or not students can argue that a change is evolutionary or revolutionary.

Philosophical thought in the Middle Ages

Universities and monasteries were the centres of intellectual thought in the Middle Ages and, unlike today, both institutions were founded upon the same philosophical and religious ideas. Today we think of universities as places that allow freedom of thought, but in Medieval times universities and monasteries held a tight control over how and what scholars could say. As the Christian church was present everywhere in daily life, knowledge and religion were interrelated in a complex fashion.

The intellectual ideas which were widespread thought during the Middle Ages (approximately 500 to 1450 AD) were primarily derived from ancient Greece (especially the 5th and 4th centuries). Medieval scholars studied closely the works of Plato and Aristotle who, among other things, were concerned with developing methods of reasoning to discover truth, clarify the nature of knowledge and understand how we come to know something. Some of the most important questions considered by both the Ancient Greeks and Medieval Scholars were questions such as, What is truth? What is the source or basis of our knowledge of the world? Does knowledge exist in the mind of God? Does it exist in the human mind? What is the means by which knowledge is gained? A primary aim of many Medieval scholars was to find harmony between reason and the mysteries of Christian revelations (teachings from God). Answers to these questions and proofs of these answers were the subject of many academic and theological debates, and some of these debates were written down as texts that are still studied in philosophy courses.

Briefing Sheet

Three Medieval views of knowledge

John of Salisbury, a student at the University of Paris in about 1136, describes the methods of his teacher, Bernard of Chartres.

Bernard of Chartres . . . followed this method . . . Since the memory is strengthened and the wits are sharpened by exercise, he urged some by warnings and others by floggings [whippings] and punishments to the constant practice of imitating what they heard. Every one was required on the following day to reproduce some part of what he had heard the day before . . . Evening drill, which was called declination, was packed with so much grammar that one who gave a whole year to it would have at his command, unless unusually dull, a method of speaking and writing and could not be ignorant of meaning of expressions which are in common use.

What was the major objective of Bernard of Chartres' teaching method?

What appears to be the basis for acquiring knowledge?

Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a teacher at the University of Paris, writes in his book *Sic et Non* (*Yes and No*) how we may arrive at the truth.

There are many seeming contradictions . . . in the innumerable [many] writings of the church fathers. Our respect for their authority should not stand in the way of an effort on our part to come at the truth. The obscurity and contradictions in ancient writings may be explained upon many grounds, and may be discussed without [questioning] the good faith and insight of the fathers. . . .

All writings . . . are to be read with full freedom to criticize, and with no obligation to accept unquestioningly; otherwise the way would be blocked to all discussion . . . But an explicit exception must be made in the case of the Old and New Testaments. In the Scriptures, when anything strikes us as absurd, we may not say that the writer has erred, but that the scribe made a blunder in copying the manuscripts, or that there is an error in interpretation.

. . . The master key of knowledge is, indeed, a persistent and frequent questioning . . . By doubting we come to examine, and by examining we reach the truth.

According to Abelard, how does a person learn the truth?

How are Abelard's ideas different from those found in Salisbury's writings?

Why do you think that Abelard made an exception in the case of the Bible?

Roger Bacon (1214-1294), who lectured at Oxford University, states the four causes of human ignorance and then explains how truth may be known.

There are four principal stumbling blocks to comprehending truth . . . the example of frail and unworthy authority, long-established custom, the sense of the ignorant crowd and the hiding of one's own ignorance under the shadow of wisdom.

. . . For in every act of life, or business, or study, these three worst arguments are used for the same conclusion: this was the way of our ancestors, this is the custom, this is the common view; therefore should be held . . .

How may Bacon's observations challenge the ideas expressed by Abelard and Salisbury?

. . . I now wish to unfold the principles of experimental science, since without experience nothing can be sufficiently known. For there are two modes of acquiring knowledge, namely by reasoning and by experience. Reasoning draws a conclusion and makes us grant the conclusion, but does not make the conclusion certain . . . unless the mind discovers it by the path of experience.

. . . Moreover, it is generally believed that hot water freezes more quickly than cold water in vessels . . . But it is certain that cold water freezes more quickly for any one who makes the experiment. People attribute this to Aristotle . . . but he certainly does not make this statement, but he does make one like it, by which they have been deceived, namely, that if cold water and hot water are poured . . . upon ice, the hot water freezes more quickly, and this is true. But if hot water and cold are placed in two vessels, the cold will freeze more quickly. Therefore all things must be verified by experience. [Therefore] we find necessary the science that is called experimental.

How does Bacon's view of the source of knowledge differ from Abelard's view?

Changes in thinking during the late Middle Ages

Scholars	How we come to know "truth"
John of Salisbury (1136)	
Peter Abelard (1079-1142)	
Roger Bacon (1214-1294)	

Data Chart