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WHAT HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS INFLUENCED MODERN IDEAS OF INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS?



LESSON PURPOSE

The previous two lessons explored ideas that shaped the Founders' thinking about constitutional government and civic life. This lesson examines several important historical developments that also influenced their ideas.

When you have finished this lesson, you should be able to explain the differences between classical republican and Judeo-Christian ideas about the importance of the individual. You also should be able to explain how certain historical developments influenced modern ideas about government, constitutionalism, and individual rights. Finally, you should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on approaches to theories of morality, the importance of the rise of capitalism, and how the Enlightenment inspired the Founders.

TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO UNDERSTAND

capitalism	nation-state
city-state	private morality
feudalism	public morality
Judeo-Christian	

HOW DID THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN HERITAGE CONTRIBUTE TO THE FOUNDERS' UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS?

Classical republican ideas and natural rights philosophy influenced the political ideas of the Founders. Another important influence on their thinking was the **Judeo-Christian** religious tradition. The Founders were familiar with the teachings of the Bible, but they also knew that differing religious beliefs had caused serious political conflicts.

Judeo-Christian morality was different from Greek and Roman ideals of civic virtue. Instead of **public morality** (the virtues that are important for acting in the community), it emphasized **private morality**, meaning the virtues of inner faith and obedience to God's law. These were expressed in biblical teachings, such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Christian teachings gave special importance to duties such as goodwill and loving others.

The Christian view of the individual also differed from that of classical republicans. Christian teachings stressed the dignity and worth of each human being. Much of the Founders' commitment to liberty and

individual rights sprang from their belief in such ideals.

Christianity spread rapidly through the Roman Empire in spite of the government's attempts to suppress it. Christians began receiving relief from persecution when the Roman Emperor Constantine came to power. Within a few years Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even after the Roman Empire collapsed in the West near the end of the fifth century, the Christian faith survived to shape European society. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church—often referred to simply as the Church—became an extremely powerful political force during the Middle Ages. Bishops, who were regional church officials, often were as powerful as the princes or barons in their territories. In some places bishops held governmental power.

The Church was the one unifying social institution in Europe during the Middle Ages. Its spiritual leader was the pope, whose seat was the old imperial capital, Rome. Most Europeans identified with this "universal" Church in terms of religion, but political loyalties were local. People looked to local rulers for protection, and they trusted people more than institutions. There were no nations, in the modern sense, to compete for their loyalties.



What evidence is there in this picture of the unequal relationship between lords and vassals? How does this relationship differ from the ideas about relationship between the people and government contained in the Declaration of Independence?

WHAT WERE EUROPEAN CONCEPTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY DURING THE MIDDLE AGES?

Apart from the unifying element of the Church, medieval European society was highly fragmented. Europe was divided into many isolated communities. Communication and travel were dangerous, slow, and difficult. People lived and worked within their own communities and typically had little contact with outsiders. The Church was the authority on all matters.

Government in the Middle Ages generally followed a hierarchical pattern known as **feudalism**. Feudalism was based on the principle of land for service. Those who lived on a lord's land were known as his vassals. They served their lord and in return were entitled to his protection. Feudalism created a political structure in which the feudal contract defined duties and rights. People were loyal to their lord, rather than to a country or to fellow citizens.

Even though Christianity accepted every believer as the equal of all others, certain medieval ideas about society and government were similar to those of classical republicanism. Medieval thinkers borrowed the classical idea of harmony between each individual and the whole of society, which they called *Respublica Christiana*—"Christian Republic." They also borrowed ideas from the Greek philosopher Plato, who compared society to a human body. Plato suggested that some parts of society, like some parts of the human body, are more important than others; but all are necessary for the good of the whole.

In summary, essential ideas of feudalism included the following:

- Society was divided into different classes and groups, such as royalty, nobility, clergy, tradesmen, craftsmen, peasants, and serfs. Each class or group had certain rights and responsibilities.
- Society was hierarchical—that is, classes and groups were ranked from the most powerful, royalty and nobility, at the top to the least powerful, serfs, at the bottom. No equality existed among groups and classes.
- Social relationships were thought to be permanent and hereditary. A person was generally not free to leave the class into which he or she had been born. Property—specifically real estate—could not be freely bought and sold. It could only be obtained or passed on through inheritance. Usually the eldest son was the principal heir. Inheriting property meant inheriting its responsibilities, such as service or protection.

- Rights and duties were tied to group membership or to particular grants of land. There was no concept of natural rights belonging to all individuals.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- 1 How did Judeo-Christian morality differ from Greek and Roman ideals of civic virtue?
- 2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing rights and responsibilities as being possessed by individuals rather than groups?
- 3 If the ideas about rights that prevailed during the Middle Ages were dominant today, how would they affect your life?

WHAT WERE THE RENAISSANCE AND THE REFORMATION, AND HOW DID THEY CONTRIBUTE TO IDEAS ABOUT RIGHTS?

The term *renaissance* means "rebirth." The Renaissance is the name given to the period marked by a revival of intellectual life that began in Italy around the fourteenth century and spread throughout Europe. During this period cities developed, commerce began to flourish, and education started to become more widespread. The invention



What was the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and government during the Middle Ages?

of the printing press using movable type in the fifteenth century increased communication and the spread of knowledge. Learned people rediscovered ancient Greek and Roman history, literature, and art, as well as medieval Arabic philosophy and mathematics. These discoveries inspired a view of the world and humanity very different from that of medieval Christianity.

During the Renaissance some people began to place greater importance on the individual than on the class or group into which they had been born. In the volatile **city-states** of Renaissance Italy and later in northern Europe, people found that they could move from one social position to another. Growing possibilities for individual opportunity helped lead to an increased interest among philosophers and jurists in the rights of individuals. This interest contributed to a reexamination of the individual's relationship to religious institutions and governments.

The Protestant Reformation was another powerful stimulus to modern individualism. The Reformation was a religious reform movement that began in the early sixteenth century in western Europe. Religious reformers, studying the Bible and other ancient religious texts, began to challenge the doctrines, traditions, and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The reform-minded clerics believed that the medieval church had become corrupt and had lost sight of the original truths of Christianity.

Some of these critics attempted to reform the church from within. Other reformers, such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) in Germany and later John Calvin (1509–1564) in France, obtained official government support, or establishment, for their breakaway churches. These reformers and their followers were called Protestants. The word *protestant* is derived from the Latin *protestatio*, meaning “declaration,” which Martin Luther made when he and his supporters dissented from an edict against the Reformation in the 1520s. The secular rulers who supported these new churches saw the Reformation as an opportunity to free themselves from the Catholic Church's political influence.

The Reformation was aided by the invention of a printing press using movable type, which allowed for more rapid and economical printing. For centuries the Bible had been available only in Latin, which few people other than priests could read. During the Reformation, Bibles were printed in English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish. Individuals were encouraged to read the Bible in their native language and to determine for themselves what it meant.

Being able to read the Bible for oneself encouraged greater freedom of conscience, or the freedom of individuals to decide about their own religious beliefs. Protestant religious doctrine emphasized a direct relationship between each believer and God. Luther argued



What was the significance of Martin Luther's declaration?

for the “priesthood of all believers,” which had the effect of decentralizing religious authority and empowering—and placing responsibility on—individual believers. All individuals were seen as equal in the eyes of God. Individuals were free to interpret the word of God, but God also was viewed as holding individuals accountable for their actions.

The spirit of free inquiry and individual conscience that the Reformation inspired contributed to the development of modern individualism. Ultimately it also posed a threat to most established institutions and authority. Some religious reformers, in fact, began to question the authority of the newly established Protestant churches. In England, for example, certain reformers attacked the Church of England during the Elizabethan period—principally the reign of Queen Elizabeth I from 1558 to 1603—for not being sufficiently Protestant. They were called Puritans, because they wanted to “purify” the church. Many American colonies were settled by people, including Puritans, seeking to worship in their own way, free from the requirements of established Protestant churches.

HOW DID THE NATION-STATE ARISE?

By the end of the Middle Ages rulers were beginning to expand their areas of control and to form new and larger states. The Renaissance and the Reformation helped to speed up this process. But the changes were not easy. During the Reformation Europe was torn apart by religious wars. In some places one-third to one-half the population was killed in this warfare.

In 1648 the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War, which had been fought since 1618 mainly on ground that today is in Germany. The conflict involved most of the continent's powers at one time or another and was one of the bloodiest conflicts that Europe had known. This settlement often is regarded as marking the beginning of the modern system of **nation-states**. The Peace of Westphalia recognized national sovereignty, the right of each nation-state to an independent existence. It also provided that each nation-state would respect the independence or sovereignty of the others. And it confirmed that nation-states could choose their own institutions, including religion.

The rise of the nation-state was important to the development of modern ideas about government and rights. People began to think of themselves as citizens of a particular nation or country, with public rights and duties. In addition to the nation-states there were

many independent city-states that practiced self-government by a rising class of merchants, tradesmen, and nobles. This development was in contrast to the old feudal system, in which people's rights and duties were defined in personal terms. Political thought began to focus on the question of what kind of government would be best for these states.

WHAT WAS THE NEW ECONOMIC SYSTEM OF CAPITALISM?

Among the forces that helped to break up medieval society and to pave the way for the Renaissance was the increase in commercial trade and its expansion over greater distances. Eventually this growth produced a new economic system called **capitalism**. Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of producing and distributing goods are privately owned and operated for profit in competitive markets. Unlike in feudal relationships, in capitalism goods and services are freely exchanged.

Capitalism allowed more people to choose their own occupations, to start their own businesses, and to buy and sell property. People also were able to pay more attention to their private interests than to the common good. They were encouraged to work to gain property



How did the Peace of Westphalia contribute to the modern system of nation-states?

and to improve their economic position. As a result in parts of Europe political and economic power began to shift to a newly developing class of successful citizens who gained wealth through commerce and away from the upper classes that derived their wealth from the land.

Natural rights philosophy and Protestant religion both contributed to the rise of capitalism. Natural rights philosophers believed that government existed to secure people's property. Protestant religious groups, especially those in the tradition of John Calvin, saw wealth as a sign of God's grace.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- 1 How do the new ideas that developed out of the Renaissance and the Reformation still affect our thinking today? Cite some examples of specific effects.
- 2 With the development of capitalism people began to view the individual differently than they had in the classical republics or during the Middle Ages. What was this different view and why did it come about?
- 3 How were the rise of the nation-state and capitalism related to individualism? What effect did these developments have on the common good?

CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE

Understanding the Effects of the Renaissance and the Reformation on Ideas about Rights

In previous lessons you studied the ideas of the natural rights philosophers concerning individual rights and the purpose of government. You also learned about classical republican ideas of civic virtue and the common good. Now work in small groups of four or five students to consider what you have learned in this lesson about the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the rise of the nation-state and capitalism.

- 1 Were any ideas prevalent during one of these periods with which people who believe in natural rights might not agree? What are these ideas? Why might some people disagree with them?
- 2 Do you think that ideas about the importance of the individual, individual rights, and the common good that emerged during these historical periods have influenced your thinking about the nature and purpose of government? If so, explain how.

HOW DID THE ENLIGHTENMENT INSPIRE THE AMERICAN FOUNDERS?

The worldly interests inspired by the Renaissance stimulated natural science—that is, the study of the natural world and the laws that govern it. Commercial expansion and voyages of discovery beyond Europe also encouraged this study. These voyages brought back new knowledge about the natural world and about other cultures.

Science and technology advanced rapidly. People began to believe that humans could solve many problems, such as how to treat diseases, that once had been accepted simply as misfortunes in life. By the eighteenth century this flourishing scientific and intellectual movement would become known as the Age of Enlightenment.

An important early figure in this movement was the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Bacon believed in the power of human reason and observation,



How did advances in scientific thought and reasoning reflected in the work of Francis Bacon and others influence people's ideas about human nature and government?



What are some of the essential elements of capitalism?

not only to understand nature but also to control it for humanity's purposes. The end of scientific study, he said, is the "enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." His goal was to subdue nature for the benefit of humanity. Discoveries by scientists, such as astronomers Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) from Poland, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) from Italy, and Isaac Newton (1643–1727) from England, seemed to confirm Bacon's faith in people's ability to understand nature.

This belief in science and reason also influenced the study of human nature and government. Living in the midst of intense scientific research and discovery in seventeenth-century England, philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, introduced previously, embraced scientific reasoning. Locke himself was an inventive physician. And Hobbes visited French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650)—often called the Father of Modern Mathematics and the Father of Modern Philosophy—in Paris and Galileo in Florence. Their ideas about the state of nature and the basis for

government were founded on the notion that human behavior could be understood, predicted, and controlled.

In the next century came Montesquieu, who was discussed in Lesson 1. This important Enlightenment political philosopher argued that the form of a society's government corresponds to the social, economic, and geographic conditions of that society. Therefore the best government for any nation is one tailored to the unique circumstances of that nation.

The American Founders belonged to the Age of Enlightenment. They believed that reason and observation, complemented by the study of history and writers such as Locke and Montesquieu, would enable them to understand the workings of governmental and social institutions. They thought that this understanding could generate what James Madison (1751–1836), who would become America's fourth president, called the "new science of politics." This new science would help the Founders construct a government for the new United States.

REVIEWING AND USING THE LESSON

- 1 How would you describe the difference between the classical republican idea of civic virtue and Judeo-Christian ideas of morality?
- 2 How did the Judeo-Christian heritage contribute to the Founders' understanding of human rights?
- 3 What features of society in the Middle Ages contributed to the view that rights belonged to groups rather than to individuals?
- 4 How did feudalism contribute to the idea that government is based on contractual relationships?
- 5 What modern ideas about rights were developed during the Renaissance? How did the Reformation contribute to the development of these ideas?
- 6 How did the rise of nation-states help to stimulate thinking about principles of government such as constitutionalism, individual rights, and republicanism?
- 7 How did the development of capitalism encourage new thinking about the individual and society?
- 8 Why was the invention of the printing press with movable type important in promoting the spirit of individualism?
- 9 How did the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment influence the Founders?



How might the invention of the printing press with moveable type have influenced intellectual thought during the Renaissance?