

American Colonial Conceptions of Liberty

This period of American history was a time of great change in understandings of what it means to be human and how we practice religion. The Reformation that began in Germany continued to spread across Europe, and even into the “new world.” The first European settlers had to wrestle with the concept of religious liberty, and decide whether to enforce God’s law on society or allow people to freely choose for themselves how they ought to worship.

What’s Happening in Europe? In Europe, new ideas are coming about concerning human liberty and the limits of government. The people depose royals that they believe are not fulfilling their obligations as stewards of the nation, given to them by God. John Locke is founding a new concept known as “liberalism,” and the old order of things is changing every day.

John Locke – Locke believed that “people set up civil governments to protect their rights of life, liberty and property. Any government that does not serve these aims is tyrannical, and the people have a right to overthrow it.”

The Mayflower Compact – This was the first written agreement of the “new world,” in which the settlers agreed together on how to set up their society. They “pledged their mutual submission to each other and to fair laws.”

Consent of the Governed – The Puritans were committed to government by consent of the people. Hooker believed that to have a legitimate government, the people must consent to the laws. Winthrop agreed, saying that the essential form of government begins when people consent to live together under one government, for their mutual safety and welfare.

Church and State – This time period was rife with issues regarding church and state. On one side are the **theonomists**. Theonomy is the idea that all people in society should be subject to God’s law. On the other side are those who believe that God rules in the church (as redeemer), and that the role of civil government is not to judge in matters of the conscience, but only in matters relating to “creation,” that is, life, liberty, property, etc. Thomas Hooker argued that a person should not have to be a member of a church in order to vote, because otherwise people would join the church not because they were Christians, but for political gain. This idea was put into place in the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut.

The First Great Awakening – During this time period, there was a renewed interest in religion and church membership. From a socio-historical view, one can understand this based on the massive changes occurring in society, as well as the constant threat of native raids on American colonies. However, great thinkers came to the forefront of American society, who have left an indelible mark on American religion.

Marks of a True Convert – During this time, Jonathan Edwards wrote on determining whether a revival was truly a work of God’s Spirit. He noted 5 marks of a true convert: 1. A high and orthodox view of Jesus. 2. Active working against sin. 3. Greater regard for Scripture. 4. Appreciation of spiritual truth. 5. A “spirit of love to God and man.” “Love and humility are two things the most contrary to the spirit of the devil, of anything in the world.”

Liberalism – Liberalism is a political and moral philosophy based on the rights of the individual, liberty, consent of the governed and equality before the law. It maintains that humans are naturally in “a *State of perfect Freedom* to order their Actions...as they think fit...without asking leave, or depending on the Will of any other Man.”