The Development of the Idea of Individual Rights

1. How would you describe the difference between the classical republican idea of civic virtue and Christian ideas of morality? How did the Christian heritage contribute to the Founders’ understanding of human rights?

2. What features of society in the Middle Ages contributed to the view that rights belonged to groups, rather than to individuals? If the ideas about rights that prevailed during the Middle Ages were dominant today, how would they affect your life? What is meant by the rights of groups as opposed to the rights of individuals? What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing rights as being possessed by individuals rather than groups?

3. Give some contemporary examples of claims for group rights. What arguments can you make for and against these claims? Should certain individuals in our society be given special rights and privileges because they are members of a particular social group?

4. How did the Renaissance contribute to modern ideas about the individual and rights? How did the Protestant Reformation contribute? How did the rise of nation-states contribute?

5. With the development of capitalism, people began to view the individual differently than they had in antiquity or during the Middle Ages. What was this different view and why did it come about? How did the economic system of capitalism contribute?

6. What conflicts arise in a society that emphasizes both the importance of individual rights and of the common good? What evidence, if any, do you see of such conflicts in your own experiences? How do you think government and society should resolve those conflicts?

Adapted from *We The People, The Citizen and the Constitution.* pp. 19-25.

How did the Christian heritage contribute to the Founders’ understanding of human rights?

The American Founders were heirs to a legacy of antiquity, as important in its own way as that of the classical Greeks and Romans. They belonged to a Christian religious tradition thousands of years old. Though of different faiths within this tradition, most of the Founders had grown up in a religious environment. From early childhood, they were familiar with the teachings of the Bible.

The Christian tradition holds that the world was created and is governed by one God. Humanity occupies a special place in that creation. Each human being is created in God’s image and each possesses an immortal soul. For many, the striving for salvation through obedience to God’s divine law is of prime importance.

Some Founders were critical of organized religion and skeptical of certain religious doctrines. Most believed in a Supreme Being and in that Supreme Being’s interest in humanity and affairs of the world. Above all, they were convinced of the importance of each person obeying the moral code that they believed was given by that Supreme Being.

As you know, the Declaration of Independence acknowledges the "Creator" who "endowed men with certain unalienable rights." The Founders often spoke of "Providence" to suggest their belief in God's interest and involvement in the affairs of the world. During the writing of the Constitution in the summer of 1787, Benjamin Franklin encouraged his fellow delegates by declaring his conviction that "God governs in the affairs of men."

Whatever their particular religious backgrounds, the Founders believed strongly in the importance of the moral principles of Christianity to benefit the common good. Christian morality was different from the Greek and Roman ideals of civic virtue. Instead of public morality, these principles emphasized private morality as expressed in biblical teachings such as
the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. To classical republican virtues – courage, moderation, and wisdom – Christianity added other moral qualities, such as love and benevolence toward others.

To achieve what was best for society as a whole, the Founders thought that each person's moral principles and behavior should be based on both classical and Christian virtues. They felt that the practice of religion would help people live according to such moral standards.

Their religious faith also strengthened the Founders' belief in the ideals of justice and liberty. The Biblical stories of the struggle of the Hebrews against oppression and tyranny helped to inspire the American Revolution. These words from the Book of Leviticus are inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Finally, the teachings of Christianity also helped to develop the Founders' appreciation of individual rights. Classical republicanism put the good of the state and community above that of the separate interests of the individuals who belonged to it.

The Christian view of the individual and his or her place in the world was different. Its teachings stressed the dignity and worth of each human being. It was believed that each person possessed an individual soul. Therefore, the individual assumed a new importance in people's thinking about society and government. Much in the Founders' commitment to liberty and individual rights sprang from their belief in the rightness of such ideals.

**What were the concepts of the individual and society during the Middle Ages?**

Christianity spread rapidly in the centuries following the death of Jesus and eventually became the predominant faith within the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century C.E., but Christianity survived to shape European society in the centuries that followed. This period, from the fifth century to the fourteenth, we call the Middle Ages – the period that lies between antiquity and modern times.

Medieval society was based on the ideas of unity, social harmony, and other-worldliness. The European people of the Middle Ages saw themselves united in a single society called Christendom. Their spiritual leader was the Pope in Rome. The Popes enjoyed great authority and respect throughout Europe. There were no nations at this time to compete for people's loyalty. Most people thought of themselves in terms of only two allegiances: to their own local community and to the great unity of Christendom with one "universal" or "catholic" church presiding over it.

Medieval ideas about society also reflected the harmony that was thought to exist between each individual and the whole of society. Society was sometimes compared to a body – the body politic – in which some parts were more important than others but all parts were necessary for the good of the whole. The parts were dependent on each other:

- Society was divided into different classes and groups such as royalty, nobility, clergy, tradesmen, craftsmen, and peasants. Each class or group had certain rights and responsibilities.
- Society was hierarchical, that is, groups and classes were ranked from the most important at the top to the least important at the bottom. There was no equality between groups and classes.
- Each individual's role in society was defined by his or her role in one of these groups. A person had little chance of leaving the group into which he or she had been born.
· Any rights and duties a person had were usually spoken of in terms of the group to which that person belonged. There was no concept of "natural" or "universal" rights belonging to all people. Rights were seen as privileges or "liberties" belonging to particular groups in society. Members of the group enjoyed its "rights." There were few individual rights.

Medieval society was also other-worldly in its interests and activities. Christianity taught that the primary purpose of this life was to achieve salvation after death in another spiritual eternal life. The most important institutions of the Middle Ages, including churches and monasteries, were devoted to this end. Whatever else people achieved in their lives was secondary.

Economic life in the Middle Ages was based on subsistence agriculture. Most people lived on small farms or manors, producing enough food for the inhabitants to live on. There were few towns or cities. Travel was limited. Most people spent their entire lives within a few miles of the place where they were born. The few economic markets were tightly regulated by the nobility.

How did the Renaissance contribute to the development of individual rights?

During the medieval period, people did not strive to make "progress." That is, they did not believe that they could make things better for themselves and their children through hard work or individual initiative. Despite these attitudes, medieval cities did develop and prosper. Commerce began to flourish, cities grew, people started to travel more. Nation-states began to form. The invention of modern printing methods increased communication and knowledge.

The most important outcome of these changes was the Renaissance. The term Renaissance means "re-birth." It describes a rebirth or revival of intellectual life that began in Italy around the fourteenth century and spread throughout Europe. This new interest was inspired by the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman history, literature, and art, with a view of the world and humanity that was very different from that of medieval Christianity.

Instead of focusing only on other-worldly matters and the quest for salvation, people took a greater interest in the world around them. They directed their energy toward the possibilities of human achievement in this life rather than the life to come. They expanded their knowledge and began to develop new ideas about the world. Their art and architecture glorified the beauty of the human body; their literature and philosophy explored all aspects of human nature and human creativity.

During the Renaissance people began to accept the idea of progress and historical change. In many areas of life, greater importance was placed on the individual than on the class or group into which that individual had been born. People believed they could work to improve their positions in society. The new emphasis on individual opportunity led to an increased interest in the rights of individuals. This interest contributed to a reexamination of the individual's relationship to religious institutions and governments.

How did the Protestant Reformation advance the cause of individual rights?

The Protestant Reformation was a powerful stimulus to modern individualism. The Reformation was a religious reform movement that began in the early sixteenth century in western Europe. It resulted in new ideas about religion, individual rights, and government. Like the Renaissance, the Reformation was a rebirth and rediscovery of certain things. Supporters of the Reformation believed they were returning to the original principles of Christianity.
Development of Idea of Individual Human Rights:
European Thought from Middle Ages to Renaissance

Medieval society in western Europe had been dominated by the Church of Rome. Religious reformers, studying the Bible and other ancient religious texts, began to challenge the doctrines, traditions, and practices of the Church of Rome. They believed that the medieval church had become corrupt and had lost sight of the original truths of Christianity. Some critics attempted to reform the church from within, but many Protestant reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, established their own churches with the help of secular governments.

The Reformation was aided by the invention of the printing press. Books that formerly were scarce now became more available. The Bible was the most important of these books. For centuries the Bible had been available only in Latin, which few people other than priests could read. Medieval Christians relied on the Church to interpret the word of God for them. During the Reformation, however, Bibles were printed in English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish. Individuals were encouraged to read the Bible in their native language to determine for themselves what it meant. Being able to read the Bible for oneself encouraged greater freedom of conscience.

Protestant religious doctrine emphasized the direct relationship between each individual believer and God. The result was to reduce the importance of the church and to increase the importance of the individual. All individuals were seen as equal in the eyes of God. Each person is to be respected and held accountable by God as an individual.

The spirit of free inquiry and individual conscience inspired by the Reformation contributed to the development of modern individualism. It also ultimately posed a threat to all established institutions and authority. Some religious reformers soon began to question the authority of the Protestant churches and the governments that supported them. In England, for example, reformers attacked the Church of England for not being Protestant enough. They were called Puritans because they wanted to "purify" the church. Some reformers sought to reform the established church. Others decided to separate from it. Many American colonies were originally settled by people seeking freedom to worship in their own way and new forms of government that would allow this.

The modern nation-state's development was speeded by the forces of change created by the Renaissance and Reformation. There were no nations, as we understand that word today, during the Middle Ages. The power of kings and princes did not reach very far. Power was exercised locally by authorities who usually inherited their power. In theory, at least, all secular governments were subservient to the Church of Rome. They had little authority over church officials and institutions in their territories.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages many of these secular governments were expanding and consolidating their power into independent states. The Reformation helped this development by challenging the Church of Rome. Some states, like England, broke free from the Church of Rome and created their own national churches. Others remained loyal to the papacy but reduced the authority of the Church of Rome within their territory.

The rise of the modern nation-state was very important to the development of modern ideas about government and rights. People began to think of themselves as citizens of a particular state or country, with public rights and duties. Political thought began to focus on the question of what kind of government would be best for these states.

The modern nation-state also brought with it national legal systems and representative institutions of government.
Development of Idea of Individual Human Rights: European Thought from Middle Ages to Renaissance

What was the new economic system of capitalism?
Among the forces that helped to break up medieval society and 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, production and distribution are not controlled by the government.

Under capitalism, people gained more freedom to choose their occupations, start their own businesses, and own property. People had more control over their lives than had been possible in the Middle Ages.

People were able to pay more attention to their private interests than to the common good. They were encouraged to work to gain property and improve their positions in society. As a result, political and economic power shifted to a newly developed middle class of successful citizens.

How did the Renaissance and Reformation contribute to the growth of individual rights?
The Renaissance and Reformation produced a greater emphasis on the importance of the individual than had existed in the Middle Ages or in classical Greece and Rome. The ideas and opinions of individuals were valued. As the Renaissance emphasized individual activity and creativity, the followers of the Protestant Reformation emphasized the relationship between the individual believer and God. The rise of nation-states stimulated new thought about government and rights. Capitalism translated this new spirit into economic opportunity. More individuals could compete on an equal footing and hope to improve their place in society.

What was the Age of Enlightenment?
The worldly interests inspired by the Renaissance stimulated natural science – the study of the natural world and the laws that govern it. This new interest also was encouraged by commercial expansion and voyages of discovery beyond Europe. These voyages brought new knowledge about the natural world and about other cultures.

One advocate of scientific discovery, the English philosopher Francis Bacon, believed in the power of human reason and observation not only to understand nature, but also to control it for humanity's own purposes. "The end of scientific study," he said, "is the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." The discoveries of scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton seemed to confirm Bacon's faith.

Eventually, this spirit of scientific discovery was applied to human nature and society as well. During the Enlightenment, people began to apply the method of scientific thinking to the study of society and politics.

The American Founders belonged to the Age of Enlightenment. They believed in the powers of reason and observation to understand the workings of governmental and societal institutions. They thought these powers also would be a guide in ways to improve institutions. With such faith and self-confidence, the Framers of our Constitution thought they could create a new order of government during one summer's deliberations in Philadelphia.