

From Authority to Individualism

The philosophies of Puritanism, the Great Awakening, and the Enlightenment provide much of the intellectual foundation for the establishment of the United States. Listed below are a series of key ideas of these three major intellectual trends. After you have studied these lists of ideas, assume each of the following roles: a Puritan farmer in Massachusetts in 1640; a Baptist seaman in Rhode Island in 1740; and a scholar of the Enlightenment at the College of William and Mary in Virginia in 1765. Compose paragraphs that characterize the thinking of each of these men on each of the points listed below:

- a. his concept of God
- b. the individual's reason for existence
- c. the individual's relationship to the church
- d. the need for education
- e. the individual's role in government
- f. the individual's responsibility for improving society

You will want to outline your answers on each of these points before you write your paragraphs. These paragraphs should prepare you for a class discussion on the contributions of each of these philosophies to the political development of the nation.

Notes on Puritanism

- The church formed the foundation of the Puritan social order.
- In God's plan of creation, all individuals were born with original sin; God predestined some people, the Elect, for salvation.
- Puritans had a strong sense of the sovereignty of God and the depravity of humanity. They strived hard to live in accordance with God's will.
- People were innately unequal, and only the saints could run the church and the elite, the government.
- Church membership was a prerequisite for participation in politics.
- Puritans came to America specifically to create a model "City upon a Hill," a Puritan utopia in the wilderness. It was thus appropriate to guard, warn, and reprove each other against moral lapses.
- The Puritans had a covenant, or contract, with God. If they kept the contract, God would grant them saving grace.
- Puritans believed it followed logically that civil government stems from a voluntary agreement by all church followers.
- In the distribution of communal lands, Puritans allotted acreage to individuals based on family size, need, and skills valued by the community.
- Everyone was legally required to attend church services.

- Since the Scripture offered solutions to all problems of individual conduct, church and secular government, and social organization, and educated citizenry was necessary to enable individuals to interpret the meaning of the Scripture for their lives.
- Adherence to the strict Puritan moral code was both a sign of salvation and a path to prosperity.
- Puritans believed strongly in the correctness of their views and stood ready to use the power of the state to enforce religious uniformity.
- Puritan parents had an obligation to repress their children's willfulness and teach them obedience to God and their parents.

Notes on the Great Awakening

- Puritan piety of the seventeenth century had eroded by the eighteenth century in the New World atmosphere of individualism, optimism, and enterprise.
- Away from the persecutions in England, and removed by time and distance, Americans gave preference to the counting house over the meeting house.
- The Great Awakening was, in part, an emotional effort to reassert the earlier extreme piety over the rationalism and optimism of the Enlightenment.
- A heart open to the Divine Spirit was more important than a highly trained intellect.
- Revival preachers suggested that salvation was open to all who appealed to God, and they accused conservative clergymen of spiritual coldness.
- Most Americans had moved too far into modernity to share, even in times of religious revival, Jonathan Edwards's vision of the beauty and fitness of God's sovereignty and sinful humanity's helpless dependence on the miracle of Divine Grace.
- In America, with so many religious sects existing side by side, some people doubted whether any denomination had a monopoly over truth and grace.
- Most Congregationalist ministers in Massachusetts denounced the revivalists for permitting uneducated men to take it upon themselves to be preachers of the word of God and thus create confusion and errors and lead members away from their regular church.
- The widely-preached doctrine of salvation for all—of equal opportunity to share in God's grace—encouraged the notion of equal rights to share also in the good life on earth.

Notes on the Enlightenment

- The eighteenth-century Enlightenment produced a new climate of thought in which people believed that God had created humans and their world and that God had endowed humans with powers of observation and reason.
- People could observe this world and, by applying reason, could extract the “natural laws” that governed the phenomena.
- People were capable of perfecting human society by applying the rules of reason and removing human-created obstacles to a harmonious society.
- John Locke maintained that natural law ordained a government resting on the consent of the governed and respecting the inherent “natural rights” of all.
- God had created the world but had left the world to function according to the laws of nature.
- Man could perfect his world by finding the obstacles, removing them, and allowing the “natural laws” to operate freely.
- Men of the Enlightenment viewed the universe as a great clock, created by God, but allowed to operate freely. Thus, the object of the Enlightenment was to liberate the “natural laws,” that would then apply themselves equally and thus create a new order with harmony and balance.
- God—the “Watchmaker”—was no longer present. One could not communicate with Him.
- Reason became the new “faith,” and man became the new “god.”
- Any unnatural laws, such as the mercantile regulations, conflicted with “natural laws” and had to be removed to have a perfectly functioning economy.