

SECTION 3/The Middle Ages and the Rise of the Modern World

Focus Questions

- How did events in Europe in the Middle Ages contribute to the tradition of liberty?
(pages 13–16)
- What part did the Renaissance and the Reformation play in planting the seeds of liberty?
(pages 16–17)

Terms to Know

feudalism
Magna Carta
Scholastics
Renaissance
Reformation

The idea of individual worth, advanced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, had a profound impact on Western civilization. It helped bring about a major change in the way people felt about themselves and the way they viewed figures of authority. From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and Reformation, important contributions were made to the history of liberty.

The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages (A.D. 500–1400) are sometimes called the Christian centuries, because during this period of European history, religion was the focus of life, and the Church was the leading institution. Government at this time was based on **feudalism** (page 315), a political system that arose when fierce invaders raided Europe in the late 800's and 900's. Kings were unable to protect their people against the invaders, so the people turned to strong local lords for help. These lords, who owned vast amounts of land, became very powerful. They formed alliances with fellow nobles by giving them land and protection in return for loyalty and military support. One indirect result of both feudalism

and medieval Christianity was a strengthening of the idea of liberty.

Christian opposition to tyranny. Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages condemned tyrant kings. They held that a monarch's powers were limited by God's laws. They also said that monarchs should act for the common good of Christian people. Some thinkers argued that monarchs who violated Christian teachings or oppressed the people forfeited their right to rule. John of Salisbury, a twelfth-century English theologian, described the wicked nature of the tyrant:

☞ A tyrant . . . is one who oppresses the people by rulership based upon force, while he who rules in accordance with the laws is a prince. Law is the gift of God, the model of equity, a standard of justice, a likeness of the divine will, the guardian of well-being. . . . [When the law is attacked] it is plain that it is the grace of God which is being assailed, and that it is God himself who in a sense is challenged to battle. . . . The tyrant thinks nothing done unless he brings the laws to nought and reduces the people to slavery. ☞

Opposition to tyrannical authority also drew support from feudalism. According to custom, the king was duty-bound to honor his feudal arrangement with the nobles. This included respecting certain personal rights of the nobles. When a king violated the feudal arrangement, nobles sometimes banded together to challenge the king's actions. One result of such a challenge might be a contract, negotiated with the monarch, designed to safeguard the nobles' rights.

The Magna Carta. The most famous and most important of these contracts was the **Magna Carta**. In the thirteenth century, King John of England was fighting a costly and losing war with the king of France. In order to pay for it, he made the English nobles give him more and more money. He also punished some of them without benefit of a trial.

In 1215 the angry nobles rebelled and forced John to accept their terms, which they presented to him in written form as the Great Charter—or in Latin, the Magna Carta.

The Magna Carta is celebrated as the source of the traditional English respect for individual rights and liberties. Although it was basically a contract between the king and nobles of England, the Magna Carta contained certain important principles that could be interpreted as limiting the power of the English monarch over all of his subjects. The introduction to the Magna Carta, and several of its most important points, are excerpted below.

¶ John, by the Grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou, to the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciars, foresters, sheriffs, stewards, servants, and to all his bailiffs and faithful subjects, greeting. Know that we, out of reverence for God and for the salvation of our soul and those of all our ancestors and heirs, for the honor of God and the exaltation of the holy church, and for the reform of our realm:

1. In the first place have confirmed that the English church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished and its liberties unimpaired. . . . We have also granted to all free men of our kingdom, for ourselves and our heirs forever, all the liberties written below. . . .

12. No tax or aid shall be imposed in our kingdom, unless by common counsel of our kingdom [advisers to the king]. . . .

14. And to obtain the common counsel of our kingdom . . . we will cause to be summoned the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and greater barons, individually by our letters . . . for a fixed date . . . and to a fixed place; and in all letters of such summons we will specify the reason for the summons. And summons being thus made, the business shall proceed on the day appointed, according to the counsel of those present, [even] though not all have come who were summoned.

28. No constable or other bailiff of ours shall take anyone's [wheat] or other chattels unless he pays on the spot in cash for them or can delay payment by arrangement with the seller.

39. No freeman shall be arrested or imprisoned . . . or in any way victimized . . . except

by the lawful judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land.

40. To no one will we refuse or delay right or justice.

42. It shall be lawful in future for anyone . . . to leave our kingdom and return safely by land and water . . . except for those imprisoned or outlawed . . . and [those] at war with us. ¶

- (1) Why did the nobles specify so precisely the way meetings of the "common counsel" of the kingdom were to be called?
(2) Which provision protected individuals against unlawful seizure of property?

A number of historians have looked hard at the motives of the nobles who forced King John to accept the Magna Carta. Friedrich Heer, a German historian, gave this assessment:

¶ A reactionary wind blows through Magna Carta, a document which embodies the group egotism of a hard-headed, self-seeking feudal aristocracy, who judged that the time was ripe for humiliating an already weakened monarchy and arrogating to themselves [laying claim to] a number of its rights.

Yet when all is said, men are justified in celebrating Magna Carta as one of the great declarations of political freedom. It was solemnly confirmed by each successive king right down to the end of the Middle Ages; it prepared the way for the constitutional monarchies and constitutional states of modern times, and even today has not lost its aura. ¶

As Heer suggests, over the centuries the principles of the Magna Carta were extended to protect the liberties of the English people. Point number 12, for example, was later interpreted to mean that the king could not levy taxes without the consent of Parliament—England's national legislature. The principle of "no taxation without representation" was the rallying cry, over five centuries later, of the American Revolution. Point 39 was interpreted as forbidding groundless arrest and guaranteeing all accused persons a jury trial, or what has come to be known as "due process of law." Implied in the Magna Carta is the principle that the monarch must govern according to the law, not by whim.



King John of England is pictured here signing the Magna Carta (the copy shown at right above is one of four that survive). In reality, the king did not sign his name. He did, however, affix his official seal to the document.



Representative assemblies. In England, the "common counsel" grew into Parliament, a true representative assembly. Such assemblies also developed in other European lands. Usually they resulted from the kings' dependence on the nobles for military support. Because they were dependent, monarchs considered it wise to listen to the opinions of these lords. Kings called councils of nobles to discuss matters of war and peace and other vital concerns. In time, the high clergy and deputies from the towns also attended such meetings. An important tradition had been established: Rulers had a duty to seek the advice and consent of their subjects on important issues.

The Scholastics. The Middle Ages were an age of faith. The Church taught that achieving salvation was the goal of human life and that the way to

salvation was through following Church doctrines. Many churchmen did not trust the philosophical writings of the pre-Christian Greeks and Romans, especially their emphasis on the power and goodness of reason. They feared that studying the works of the ancients would lead Christians away from their faith.

One group of medieval philosophers, however, maintained the tradition of respect for rational thought that had been handed down by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The **Scholastics**, as these medieval philosophers were called, tried to explain and clarify Church doctrines through reasoned argument. By preserving Greek philosophy, the Scholastics performed a task of immense historical importance. But in the process of preserving Greek learning, they also changed the essential character of philosophy.

Renaissance and Reformation

The Renaissance. Modern times began with a brilliant cultural movement that emerged in fourteenth-century Italy and spread from there to the rest of Europe. This movement was known as the **Renaissance**, from a French word meaning "rebirth" (page 327). What was reborn during the Renaissance? The Renaissance gave a renewed importance to the individual and to worldly accomplishments. Renaissance people rejected the medieval view that life on earth was merely a preparation and a testing ground for life after death. They believed that life was meant to be embraced, enjoyed, and lived to the fullest.

During the Renaissance, individualism became deeply embedded in the modern Western outlook. It was expressed by artists who sought to capture individual character, by explorers who ventured into uncharted seas, by conquerors who carved out vast empires in the Americas, and by merchant-capitalists who amassed huge fortunes by taking great risks.

The Reformation. A revolutionary Church reform movement in the sixteenth century also fostered individualism. In rebelling against the Catholic Church—which they believed had become corrupt and full of error, Protestant reformers stressed the importance of a direct relationship between each believer and God. Their movement was known as the **Reformation** (page 337).

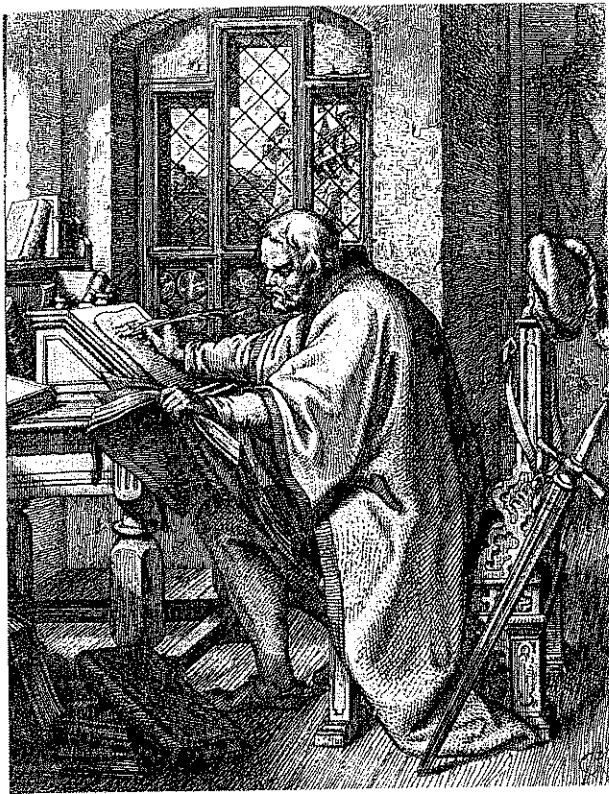
The Church claimed the right to interpret the Bible for all Christians. Protestants called on believers to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. The Church said that the only way to salvation was through the Church. Protestants said that the clergy had no special powers and that people could find individual paths to God. The Protestant emphasis on private judgment in religious matters—on a sense of inner conviction rather than a reliance on authority—further strengthened the importance of the individual. The father of the Reformation was the German monk Martin Luther (page 338). In the following passage he argued against the Church's claims to authority:

☐ Think it over for yourself. You must acknowledge that there are good Christians



Hugh of St. Victor, a German monk, philosopher, and teacher, was a leading Scholastic of the twelfth century. Here he is shown teaching other monks at a monastery college in Paris. Hugh's contemporaries called him "the second Augustine," after the great Christian philosopher of Roman times.

While the Greeks had recognized no authority higher than reason, Christian thinkers made reason the servant of faith. The Scholastics taught that to understand nature, to know what was morally right, and to govern properly, one had to be guided by the Bible—the revealed word of God—as interpreted by the Church. Whereas the Greek philosophers followed wherever their reason led them, the Scholastics never allowed themselves to question their faith. As one Scholastic put it, "I would not be an Aristotle [meaning a philosopher] if this were to separate me from Christ."



Martin Luther's attacks on Church practices led to his excommunication by the Pope and to the movement known as the Reformation. Here Luther is shown in his study, translating the Bible into German.

among us who have the true faith, spirit, understanding, word, and mind of Christ. Why ever should one reject their opinion and judgment, and accept those of the Pope, who has neither that faith nor that spirit? . . .

In addition, as I have already said, each and all of us are priests because we all have the one faith, the one gospel, one and the same sacrament; why then should we not be entitled to taste or test, and to judge what is right or wrong in the faith? . . . We ought not to allow the spirit of liberty . . . to be frightened away

by [the Pope's] pronouncements. . . . We ought to march boldly forward, and test everything the Romanists [Catholics] do or leave undone. . . . It is the duty of every Christian to accept the implications of the faith, understand and defend it, and denounce everything false.⁹⁹

(1) What is Luther's opinion of the Pope's judgment? (2) What does Luther say to suggest the importance of individuals to the faith? (3) Do you think Luther wanted to be Pope? Why or why not?

Seeds of liberty. The Reformation and the other changes that swept Europe during and after the Middle Ages had much to do with the shaping of the modern world. The Reformation shattered the religious unity of Europe and, by challenging the authority of monarchs and Popes, indirectly contributed to the growth of political liberty. Both the Renaissance and the Reformation placed emphasis on the importance of the individual—an idea that would play a significant part in the growth of liberty in modern times.

Section 3 Review

1. **Define or identify:** feudalism, Magna Carta, Scholastics, Renaissance, Reformation.
2. What limits did the Magna Carta place on the king's power to tax?
3. How did the principle of rule by law, as implied in the Magna Carta, undermine the power of the king?
4. What was the origin of England's Parliament?
5. **Critical thinking:** How did the Renaissance and the Reformation promote the idea of individualism?