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Acton Institute: The Birth of Freedom Study Guide

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ACTON INSTITUTE: THE BIRTH OF FREEDOM

CHAPTER ONE (0:00)

Martin Luther King: "I Have a Dream" speech, Washington, DC, 1963

Declaration of Independence, 1776: "We hold these truths to be self-evident —
That all men are created equal. . . ."

Reaffirmed by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address, 1863

Ronald Reagan in Berlin, 1988: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!"

Question: How is freedom born?

CHAPTER TWO (2:39)

Empires of the ancient world rejected the idea of liberty

Plato and **Aristotle** both believed that slavery is natural

Even in the West, the empire of Alexander the Great and the Roman Republic
perpetuated this low view of human life

The merchant Hilarion

German tribes crossed the Rhine and eventually brought down the Roman Empire in
the West

Cassiodorus [succeeded the philosopher Boethius as *magister officiorum* under
Theodoric, the king of the Ostrogoths]

The film shows the ruins of the Roman forum

Role of **monks**

The word slave began to disappear; **serfs** and peasants enjoyed more freedom, rising
status, and property rights

Serfdom was in decline by the 15C and eliminated in the West by the 16C (although it
persisted in central, eastern, and southern Europe)

Slavery was universal; Christian Europe got rid of it

CHAPTER THREE (9:36)

The economy of the ancient Greeks was based on slavery

The **Athenian democracy** widened political participation beyond the aristocracy,
opening it to 10-15% of the population, but the experiment was unsustainable

The Athenian assembly was wild, changeable, irresponsible (for example, it meted out
death sentences to the admirals who failed to rescue drowning sailors
as they hastened to save the fleet from destruction by the Spartans)

The great monument to its folly was the trial and death sentence of **Socrates**

The Athenian democracy recognized no higher law than the arbitrary whims of the
majority

Rome: The Republic was a step closer to democracy, but it was an aristocratic
oligarchy, "democracy for the few," that slid toward an imperial dictatorship
[what the Greeks called tyranny]

Cicero, Cato the Younger, and others attempted to ground human rights in universal
principles that were most clearly articulated by the Stoics

Stoicism and the idea of natural law had little influence outside intellectual elites
Cicero was slain during the proscriptions that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar

Emperors enjoyed divine status [Augustus, Caesar's adopted son, adopted the title "Savior of the World"]

Jews were usually excused from emperor worship, but persecutions came in waves
Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed, 66-70 AD, and virtually all of Judea, 132-35 AD
Yet the Jewish view finally prevailed

Conversion of the Emperor **Constantine** c. 312 AD

Christian view: the highest authority is the will of God, not the will of the monarch
The abolition of gladiatorial matches under Christian emperors was followed by the rapid increase of charioteering as a substitute.

Following the arrest of a charioteer in **Thessalonica** by the Roman authorities in 390 AD, an insurrection broke out and the Roman garrison was attacked.

When Emperor **Theodosius** set a trap and took revenge on the city (7000 were killed), **Ambrose**, the archbishop of Milan, blocked his access to the cathedral and compelled him to do public penance

By thus insisting on its independence, the Church created the possibility for free space throughout all society – families, guilds, professions – and resulting in a rich social mix and the possibility for democratic self-governance

CHAPTER FOUR (20:15)

Medieval England: Far-reaching effort to limit royal authority

King John [son of Henry II, founder of the common law system, and younger brother of Richard Coeur de Leon (the Lion-hearted)]

A group of barons and their knights pressed the king to parley with them on the field of Runnymede [the first formal Parliament met later that century]

Led by **Stephen Langton**, the Archbishop of Canterbury, they presented the **Magna Charta** (Magna Carta) to the king [afterwards, King John appealed to Pope Innocent III, who overturned this Great Charter, but Pope and King both died within a year and the Magna Carta was reaffirmed for the first of several times]

Familiar rights, such as the freedom of the Church, taxation by consent, trial by jury, and the right of habeas corpus, were included

Magna Carta is the mother document of political liberty that led eventually to the English Bill of Rights and subsequent documents [similar documents were introduced in the Kingdom of Leon, late 12C, and in the Kingdom of Hungary, 1230]

Stephen Langton drew on Biblical precedents: the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, who said: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

Caesar has authority, but it is not absolute; there are limitations on royal power

The **Middle Ages** [seen as a transition from the "Dark Ages" to the "Renaissance"] has been depicted as a benighted sleep before the **Renaissance** [the so-called "rebirth" of learning]

Transformation of Europe: slavery gave way to serfdom, the Church wrested its independence from emperors, and a strong middle class emerged in an

unprecedented flowering

Rodney Stark, church historian: The idea of the “Dark Ages” is a lie [in fact, the term was used by Renaissance thinkers who celebrated “the rebirth of learning” following nearly a millennium of superstition and ignorance after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West (476 AD)]

Look at the technological progress between 500 [the time of Boethius and Cassiodorus] and 1400 [the Quattrocento of the still early Renaissance].

The character of the Roman empire—cheap slave labor and the heavy hand of the state—discouraged the invention of labor-saving devices

But in the medieval period the spirit of innovation flourished: first in the monasteries, then in the city-states of northern Italy [Genoa, Milan, Florence, Venice], and eventually across Europe

During the early, high, and late Middle Ages (especially the 10-15C), Europeans invented or advanced innumerable technological innovations, which included: The heavy wheeled plow, harnesses for teams of draft animals, improved roads for heavy wagons, wagons with brakes and front axles that could swivel, the horseshoe, the three field system, textiles and eyeglasses, water power [including waterwheels], chimneys, a system of branch banking and insurance that accelerated commerce and trade, plate armor, cannons, the knight on horseback [Charles V, the 16C Holy Roman Emperor, is shown], the compass, the round ship for sailing the high seas, polyphonic music, a system of musical notation, thin stone walls with stained-glass windows, and the Gothic cathedral.

CHAPTER FIVE (25:40)

Capitalism found fertile soil among the Dutch and English

Entrepreneurs in the wool industry thrived under commercial legal codes that protected their investments

Around 1440 AD, **Johann Gutenberg**, a goldsmith, converted a wine press into a printing press; its invention made global discussion possible

In 1517, **Martin Luther**, a monk and university professor, posted his 95 theses (a call to debate) at Wittenberg

The Protestant Reformation articulated theological principles that encouraged political freedom; man is both a sinner and a saint; safeguards are needed to limit power, but so are basic rights, because people are image bearers of God

The followers of **John Calvin** [who were persecuted in France and Holland in the late 16C] pioneered in developing the idea of the **social contract** [based on the Biblical concept of the covenant]

The Pilgrims [Separatists] who came to America [from exile in Leyden in the Netherlands] aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620; since they landed far north of the Virginia colony they drafted the Mayflower Compact to provide a legal basis for civil government

Other Christian groups—Puritans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Quakers, Anabaptists—also came to the New World, which permitted the American experiment to move forward rapidly

Many of the Puritan and other political writings of this period were afterward distilled into

the writings of the political philosopher **John Locke**, a “cradle Calvinist” who spent time in the Leyden coffee houses; Locke had the genius to be able to make these ideas acceptable to an Anglican and royalist community

CHAPTER SIX (30:39)

The thirteen American colonies were generally loyal to England but war broke out in 1775

A Declaration of Independence was issued the following year in Philadelphia

There is nothing new in the language of “All men are created equal;” it may be found in the Creation story, the minor prophets, and the words of Paul that we are all one in Jesus Christ

The Treaty of Paris, 1783, concluded the war; the Constitution was ratified in July 1788, less than a year after a Convention that sought to protect against dangers from either the One or the Many

The founders recognized that neither individuals nor groups can be entrusted with unlimited power and devised a system of checks and balances as a safeguard

But some who came to America originally to seek religious freedom denied it to others

George Mason, the author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, knew that faith is a matter of reason and conviction, and cannot be coerced; the First Amendment later established the freedom of religion for the world’s first constitutional republic

But a contradiction lay at its heart: slavery had been revived during the age of exploration

William Wilberforce [The picture is of the most recent Houses of Parliament; Westminster Palace was rebuilt in a neo-Gothic style in the 19C]

Wilberforce, who was already a Member of Parliament, underwent an evangelical conversion in 1785 while on a lengthy tour of Europe in 1784-85

He introduced his first bill to abolish the slave trade in 1789; it was abolished in 1807

A bill abolishing slavery and compensating slaveholders was passed three days before he died in 1833

Christian abolitionists were also active in America

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 and attributed the Civil War to “America’s original sin” in his Second Inaugural Address in March 1865

The post-Civil War 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments abolished slavery and took steps to protect the civil rights of former slaves

The question can be raised about the hypocrisy of Christians supporting slavery;

Samuel Gregg makes the point that Christians could not have an easy conscience about it in the way Plato and Aristotle did; but Christianity gives people, even unbelievers the capacity to critique themselves

CHAPTER SEVEN (42:06)

The American revolution established rule of law and increasing political freedom.

By contrast, the French Revolution ended in a series of massacres, internal purges, and The reign of Napoleon

Alexis de Tocqueville, who sought to understand what made the difference between

the two revolutions, singled out the Americans' faith in a divine moral order. The French revolutionaries (such as Maximilien Robespierre, whose picture is shown along with the Goddess of Reason) rejected Christian principle in favor of murder, the guillotine, and the Terror.

By contrast, **George Washington** asserted that there is no public happiness without private morality.

The European **constitution-treaty** reflects a similar impulse to that of the French Revolutionaries.

[A similar point is made by Francis Lieber's in his essay Anglican and Gallican Liberty" (1849) http://works.bepress.com/steven_samson/191/ . The economist Friedrich Hayek cited it in *The Constitution of Liberty*: "we have had to the present day two different traditions in the theory of liberty: one empirical and unsystematic, the other speculative and rationalistic – the first based on an interpretation of traditions and institutions which had spontaneously grown up and were but imperfectly understood, the second aiming at the construction of a utopia, which has often been tried but never successfully. Nevertheless, it has been the rationalistic, plausible, and apparently logical argument of the French tradition, with its flattering assumptions about the unlimited powers of human reason, that has progressively gained influence, while the less articulate and less explicit tradition of English freedom has been on the decline."]

Mention of Europe's Christian heritage as a source of Europe's commitment to human rights law was rejected. This rejection is a part of a systematic campaign to reinterpret our past.

Without citing reformers' religious motivations, it is very difficult to account for the campaigns to end slavery, establish civil rights, and fight against eugenics.

La Grande Arche de la Défense (**the Cube**) contrasted with the **Cathedral of Notre Dame**

George Weigel notes the architectural diversity of the latter and asks: Which culture would better protect the very human rights the Arch was designed to celebrate? Problems with moral relativism. If freedom and democracy are defensible, it must be because they are consistent with the truth about man and his dignity.

Both political and religious freedom were born in the West.

Alfred North Whitehead noted the Christian belief that the universe has rules. Scientists thus set out to discover them.

[Quotation from Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Mentor), p. 19: "I do not think, however, that I have yet brought out the greatest contribution of medievalism to the formation of the scientific movement. I mean the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope. . . . When we compare this tone of thought in Europe with the attitude of other civilisations when left to themselves, there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. . . . What I mean is the impress on the European mind arising from

the unquestioned faith of centuries. By this I mean the instinctive tone of thought and not a mere creed of words.”]

The fundamental conception of God is thus the key.

CONCLUSION (55:00)

When did Europe learn its dignity? It learned its dignity in the school of Christian freedom – in the social pluralism of the medieval world.

Review

Plato	Aristotle	Athenian democracy
Socrates	oligarchy	Thessalonica
Theodosius	Ambrose	John [Lackland]
Stephen Langton	Magna Charta	Middle Ages
Renaissance	Martin Luther	John Calvin
social contract	Mayflower Compact	John Locke
George Mason	William Wilberforce	Abraham Lincoln
Alexis de Tocqueville	George Washington	Constitutional Treaty
the Cube and the Cathedral		