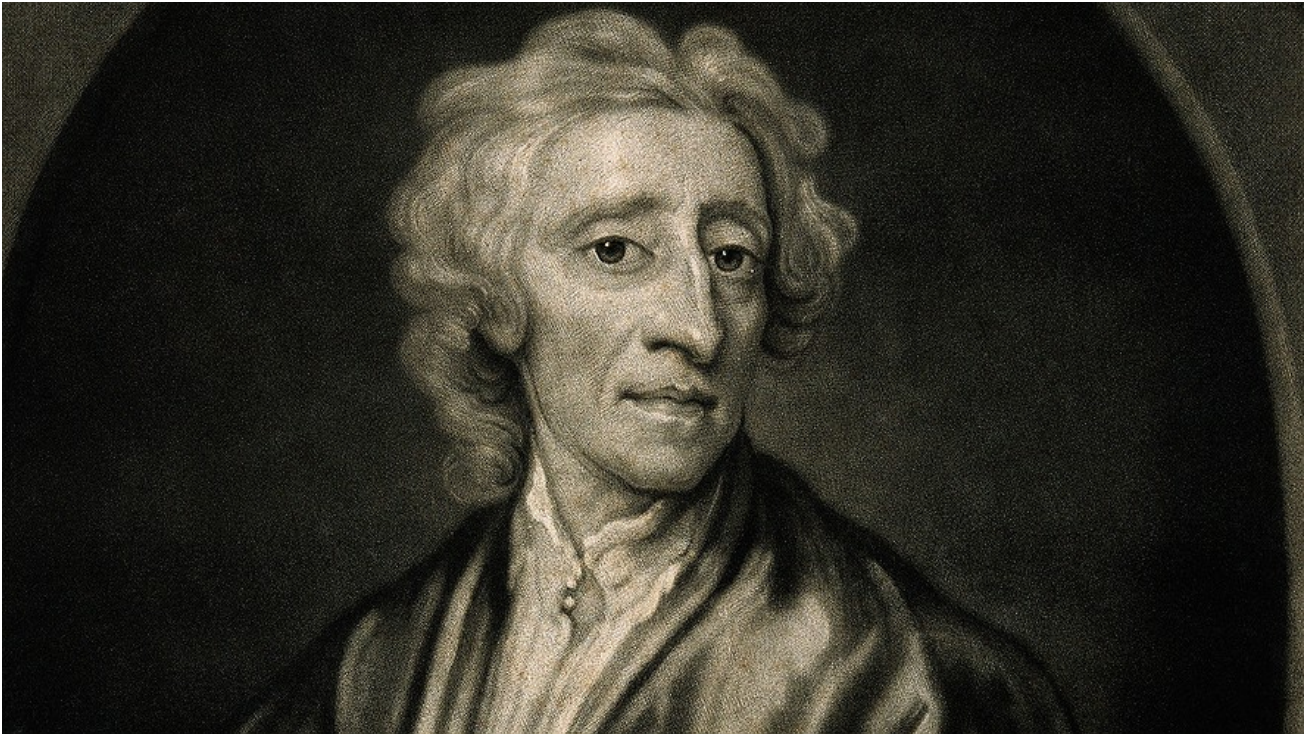


# Lockean Liberalism and the American Revolution

By Isaac Kramnick, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.27.17

Word Count **1,127**

Level **1170L**



English philosopher John Locke is pictured. His writings influenced the Founding Fathers of the United States. Image from Wikimedia Commons

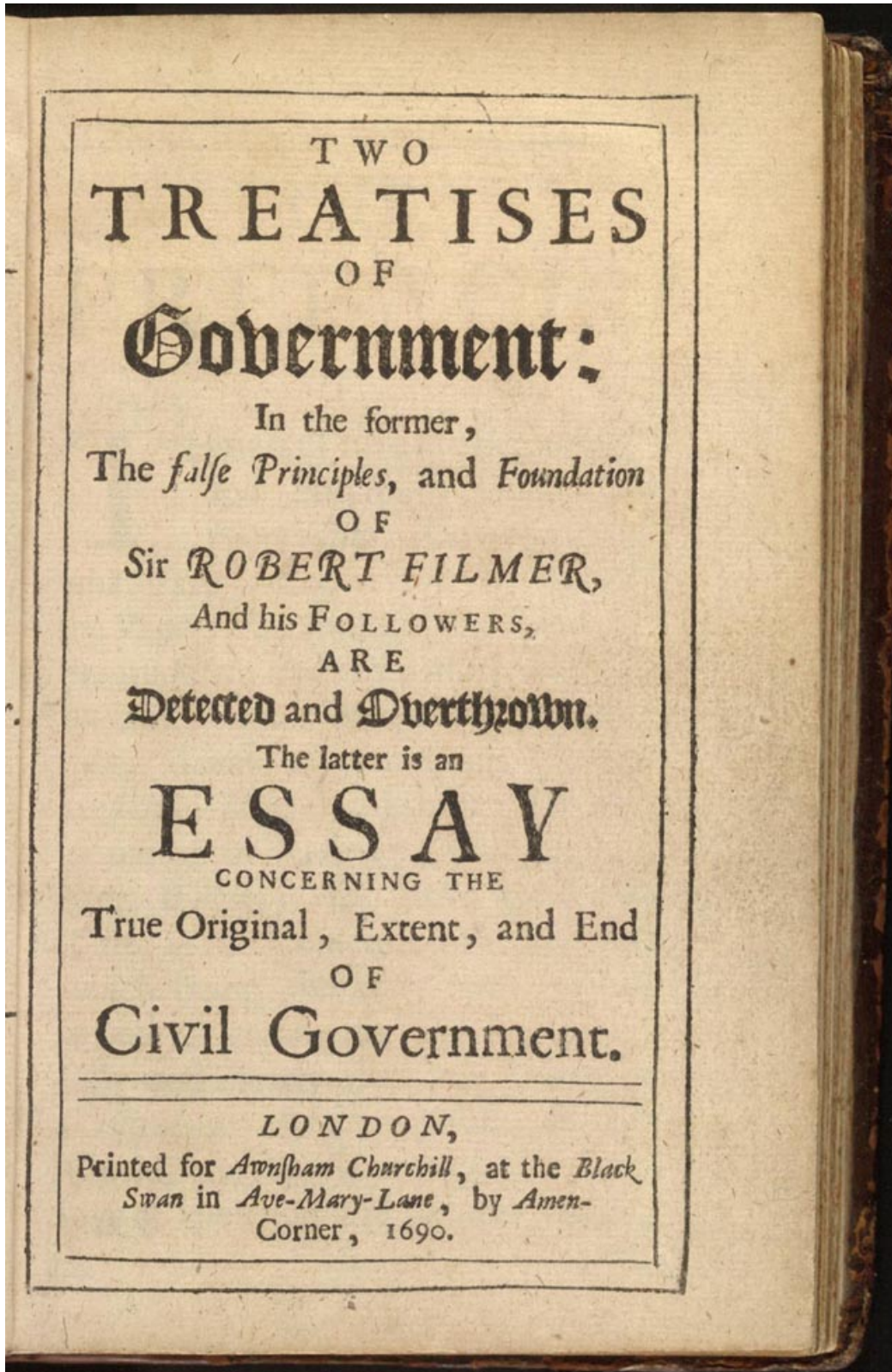
The town of Boston took one of the first important steps toward what became the American Revolution. On November 20, 1772, it adopted a declaration of “the Rights of the Colonists.” Drafted by patriot Samuel Adams, the declaration summarized these “natural rights” as “First, a right to life; Secondly to liberty; Thirdly to property.”

Adams described a “natural liberty of men,” which made each man the “sole judge of his own rights and the injuries done him.” This free man entered into political society by agreeing to accept a “Judge between him and his neighbors,” a government that would support, defend and protect his natural rights to “life, liberty and property.” Adams acknowledged in his declaration that the source of these principles was the English philosopher John Locke.

## **Rulers were God's agents**

Jonathan Boucher was a British Anglican priest who had moved to the American colonies. The Anglican church was also called the Church of England, and the king of England was the head of the Anglican church. Boucher criticized the idea that the colonists should have a revolution because he said the colonists had an obligation to accept and even revere established governmental authority — in this case, the British government of King George III. Governments were not voluntarily established by men, Boucher insisted. Instead, they were given by God to men, who must then forever obey those superiors God had chosen to govern them. Boucher defended the divine right of kings to govern and attacked the claim that American colonists had a right to resist unjust authority and to govern themselves. In a 1774 sermon, Boucher singled out the evil source of such misguided views: “Mr. Locke.”





Boucher's ideas on government had been the standard position in western Europe for 2,000 years. Boucher had a traditional Christian view of the state ("state" is another name for a government), which saw the state as part of God's design. The state's purpose was to enforce God's moral laws, to protect God's faithful and to spread God's truth. Through the Bible, God had given humans a set of absolute and timeless principles of right and wrong. The state's

mission was to implement this godly order in a particular time and place. Those who ruled over the state — traditionally, monarchs, lords and judges — were God's agents and had a divine right to their power.

## The Founding Fathers were Locke fans

A new view of the relation of church and state first arose in 17th- and 18th-century England. It separated church and state and saw the state as purely non-religious in its origins, functions and purpose. America's Founding Fathers accepted this new vision and rejected both the idea of a state church and the belief that political rulers were agents of God who must be obeyed.

Locke (1632–1704) was the English philosopher whose writings most shaped the intellectual and political worldview of 18th-century Americans. All the important figures of the revolutionary generation, including Samuel Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and Benjamin Franklin, were followers of his.



## "Governments are instituted among men"

For Locke, the state's origin was not divine — it had not been created by God to further His purposes. The source of its power was the people, who set up governments in order to protect their natural rights to life, liberty and property. Governments should not seek to promote moral and religious truths, Locke argued. It is not their job to educate their subjects in the ways of virtue, or to seek to improve men and society.



The state, according to Locke, should have only the narrow practical role of protecting private rights, in particular, property rights like the right to own land and a home. If it failed to protect the liberty or property of its subjects, then it could be dismissed and replaced by another government. The state existed only to serve the interests and to protect the rights of its citizens.

These were precisely the beliefs held by America's Founding Fathers. The language of the Declaration of Independence is pure Locke: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its power in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

### **Religious beliefs are private**

Men, according to Locke, have agreed to obey civil authority, not in order for that authority to tell them what to believe or how to pray, but simply because it keeps the peace. It is not the state's role, Locke wrote, to establish "any articles of faith, or form of worship."

Locke's view of government pushes religion outside the public political realm into a private realm of individual experience. Religious beliefs and practices are no longer public and political matters, but, instead, they are private and personal ones. Every man, Locke wrote, should have "the supreme and absolute authority of judging for himself" if his own beliefs are the true and proper ones. A person's religious beliefs cannot harm and should not concern anyone else.

Locke's view of the relation of church and state also changes the purpose of laws. "The business of the law," Locke wrote, "is not to provide for the truth of opinion, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth and of every particular man's goods and person."

### **Lasting influence**

Locke's vision had a tremendous influence on the Founding Fathers who established the United States. His ideas were clearly reflected in the Declaration of Independence, and they underly such key principles as the separation of church and state, freedom of religion and the right of citizens to choose their own government.

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**Quiz**

- 1 Which idea is BEST supported in the section "Rulers were God's agents"?
- (A) Jonathan Boucher didn't believe that individual citizens should have rights.
  - (B) Jonathan Boucher believed that the Founding Fathers were evil.
  - (C) Jonathan Boucher thought that rulers should enforce the Bible's principles.
  - (D) Jonathan Boucher thought that King George III should punish the colonies.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Religious beliefs are private."

*Locke's view of the relation of church and state also changes the purpose of laws. "The business of the law," Locke wrote, "is not to provide for the truth of opinion, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth and of every particular man's goods and person."*

What can be inferred from this paragraph?

- (A) John Locke believed that the opinions of most rulers were ill-founded and inaccurate.
  - (B) John Locke believed that the personal opinions of those in power should not influence law.
  - (C) John Locke felt that people were untrustworthy and needed to be monitored by the government.
  - (D) John Locke felt that laws should reflect what the government thinks is in the best interest of its people.
- 3 Which of the following answer choices BEST describes Jonathan Boucher's reaction to John Locke's beliefs?
- (A) casually dismissive
  - (B) strongly critical
  - (C) unfairly nasty
  - (D) nervously defensive

- 4 Which of the following statements BEST represents John Locke's approach toward government?
- (A) The government's main responsibility is to ensure that each of its citizens is happy.
  - (B) The government's primary job is to make sure the church remains separate from the state.
  - (C) The government's main role is to maintain the peace by upholding a system of laws.
  - (D) The government's primary purpose is to protect the rights and freedoms of its citizens.