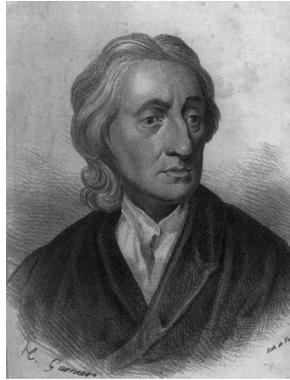


JOHN LOCKE

AND THE

ENLIGHTENMENT



The Enlightenment of the 1700s owes much to John Locke. Antedating Voltaire and Rousseau by two generations, he argued eloquently for two of the major Enlightenment themes, the social contract theory and religious toleration.

Social Contract Theory

Locke held that all people have natural rights (life, liberty, and property). They are called natural because all men are born with them. These are not created by government or society. In order to avoid the chaos of everyone using force to protect their own rights, the people consent to form a government that will protect their rights. And so the only government with a claim to obedience is one that rules by consent of the people, to protect their rights. For example, if a king by himself attempted taxation, this would be depriving the people of their rights to property, but for an elected body of representatives to approve of taxes, however, was simply the people agreeing to tax themselves. Committing crimes was a way of warring against the community and its members' rights, and so punishment was seen as self-defense and preservation of those rights.

Religious Toleration

Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) argued that Christians who want to convert the world, should follow the example of Jesus, who sent his followers out armed not with swords, but with a gospel message of love. He also wrote that while government had authority to use force in order to protect peoples' natural rights (life, liberty, and property), it had no authority to compel anyone to or away from a religious viewpoint (nor did Locke think that anyone could be "forced" to adopt a particular belief).

The ideals of the Enlightenment are sometimes misunderstood (by its proponents as well as opponents) as originating among Deists of the 1700s (such as Voltaire and Thomas Paine). While those two did much to promote government based on social contract, and religious toleration, they were using arguments used not only by Christians like John Locke in the 1600s, but by Calvinist and Baptist writers in the 1500s. Voltaire in his *Treatise on Toleration* (1763) stated that Europe had already enjoyed much religious toleration. Voltaire proclaimed religious toleration; he did not bring it about. *The bottom line is that these Enlightenment ideals can be considered part of the proud heritage of people of a variety of religious persuasions.*