



ABIGAIL ADAMS
— INSTITUTE —



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

The Great Conversation: HOW SHOULD WE LIVE

Volume III: Reform & Enlightenment

The Great Conversation explores some of the most serious questions about the good life put forward within the Western intellectual tradition.

“ *Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness.* —Immanuel Kant— ”

Wednesdays from 6 - 7:30pm.
Online through Zoom.





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Volume III: Reform and Enlightenment

This semester we ask the question, “How we should live?,” in conversation with texts that confront us with the rise of modern Europe: the definitive transition from the Middle Ages to our contemporary world of global capital and the bureaucratic nation-state. This is the time when the nations of western Europe come to have a disproportionate influence on the course of world history. These are the centuries of the Protestant Reformation, the Age of Discovery, the wars of religion, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment—along with Romanticism as a reaction to, yet still a strange ally of, Enlightenment.

The remarkable innovation of absolute monarchy during this period of early modernity could not have arisen without the collapse in credibility of the Catholic Church following upon the Avignon Papacy and the Papal Schism, its long participation in great power politics, and the avaricious corruption of the penitential system. It is always an urgent question: “By what principle shall we order our common life?” With the path of Christian humanism not fully traversed, a new type of governmentality would instead assert itself: a secular state built on consolidated sovereignty, standing armies, imperialism, increasing taxation, and emerging technological power.

The measure of rationality shifts from religion to science, as the Thirty Years War kills off half of the populations of the German lands and Newton demonstrates an order linking the motion of stars to the motion of earthly projectiles. But is there still a place for realities that are not scientifically measurable?

Sessions will meet on Wednesday evenings, from 6 – 7:30pm online through Zoom. Access instructions are sent out weekly to RSVPs. The texts are available in pdf format on our website or in a bound book, which can be picked up at our offices. RSVP online at www.abigailadamsinstitute.org/tgc-rsvp

Week One (Sept. 16)

The Freedom of a Christian
- Martin Luther -

Week Two (Sept. 23)

"The Sileni of Alcibiades"
- Erasmus -

Week Three (Sept. 30)

The New Atlantis
- Francis Bacon -

Week Four (Oct. 7)

The Tempest
- William Shakespeare -

Week Five (Oct. 14)

Leviathan
- Thomas Hobbes -

Week Six (Oct. 21)

Ethics
- Baruch Spinoza -

Week Seven (Oct. 28)

The Provincial Letters
- Blaise Pascal -
Philosophical Letters
- Voltaire -

Week Eight (Nov. 4th)

Autobiography
- Benjamin Franklin -

Week Nine (Nov. 11th)

Emile
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau -

Week Ten (Nov. 18th)

"What is Enlightenment?"
and "Idea for a Universal
History with a
Cosmopolitan Intent"
- Immanuel Kant -

Week Eleven (Dec. 2)

*The Influence of the
Passions on the Happiness
of Individuals and
Nations and Delphine*
- Madame de Staël -

Week Twelve (Dec. 9)

*Childe Harolde's
Pilgrimage*
- Lord Byron -