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Freedom, Individual (Conditions for) in Mercy Otis Warren (1727–1814)

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For Mercy Otis Warren, individual freedom is ordained by God and depends on a government which provides the conditions to practice it. The only kind of government which offers such conditions is a Republic whose constitution articulates specific principles and precepts to ensure individual freedom. In fact, individual freedom is the very condition of and purpose for a Republic in which “Every domestic employment depends on the unimpaired possession of civil and religious liberty.” Conditions are derived from freedoms set forth in the constitution: freedom to live in security, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom to pursue happiness. The freedom for self preservation, protection, and safety involves a love for the “public good,” for “moral concern for the welfare of society ought equally glow in every human heart.” Tyranny that removes individual freedom proffers no “rights of conscience” nor “liberty of the press,” nor separation of the judiciary, executive, and legislative branches, nor trial by jury, nor representation of the people. Rather “the primary object of all government” must be the “rights of individuals” as they are ensured in individual freedom. One condition a Republic guarantees is the right to participate in political discourse and civic government, thus to engage in free expression of thought and opinion in both words and actions by both men and women. Another condition it offers is the opportunity to develop self-government or practice of virtue. Warren believed that women have a particular talent for being guardian of their own virtue in order to be moral guardian of family and thus of society. She emphasized that a Republican form of government in providing the conditions for individual freedom cannot as tyrannies do, condone slavery of any kind, nor can it aim for extremes but rather for “mediocrity” meaning the middle ground.

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