

Week Three Handout

“Christian History in America: Visions, Realities, and Turning Points”

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Class 2: Resistance to Tyrants is Obedience to God?

Class 1 Goals

Understand the role of religion in the coming of the American Revolution.

Get a deeper understanding of the role of religion in the Constitution and in public life as imagined in the new society.

Opening Question:

Imagine a colleague approaches you at work one day and says, “Why are you Christians always trying to use the state to impose your religion upon us. Don’t you realize the American Revolution was inspired by the Enlightenment and created a government based on the separation of Church and State.” How would you respond?

Five Religious Ideas of the Revolution

(Shared by Deists and Evangelicals)

The Disestablishment of State Churches

The Doctrine of Equality by Creation

A belief in human sinfulness or corruptibility that mandated checks and balances to prevent tyranny

Republics are maintained by virtuous citizens

God or (Providence) works through nations to achieve His purposes

Legacies of Colonial Fears

Association of political oppression with religious oppression and fears of Catholicism

At time of Great Migration 1630s

During the English Civil War 1640s

During the Glorious Revolution 1680s

A Century of Wars with Catholic France

At the end of the French and Indian War

“...Safe from the hand of arbitrary sway and cruel superstition.” MA Pastor Thomas Bernard

Amplifiers of Tensions

The Great Awakening

The sense that God was doing something dramatic increased people’s apocalyptic expectations.

King George’s War

Saw New England Regiments capture the important French fort of Louisburg.

Britain’s decision to return the Fort was seen as a betrayal of New England and the

Protestant Interest

Jonathan Mayhew

Discourse on Unlimited Submission

Provides the theological justification for resistance to unjust governments.

The Question of Bishops

Apthorp Controversy

The Stamp Act

Riots provoked by his sermon?

How far can you preach

Resistance?

Response to the Quebec Act

Adams and Religious Liberty

“It excited a general and just apprehension that bishops and dioceses and churches and priests and tithes were to be imposed upon us by Parliament. It was known that neither king, nor ministry, nor archbishops could appoint bishops in America without an act of Parliament; and if Parliament could tax us they could establish the Church of England with all its creeds, articles, tests, ceremonies, and tithes, and prohibit all other churches as conventicles and schism shops.”

Other Factors and Legacies

Enlightenment Principles of Natural Rights

Lockean Liberalism

Renaissance Republicanism (Machiavelli)

Radical Whig thought from the English Opposition

Economic opposition to mercantilism.

Different development in the colonies than the mother country.

Reactions to parliamentary legislation

The will of God?

Religious Interpretations of Events

Many ministers saw the crisis with England as God’s judgment upon the people for their sins.

Others saw a diabolical plot hatched by Satan to reduce the colonists to slavery.

For Table Discussion

How should we respond to these interpretations as Christians?

What tools are available to us from the Bible or the historical profession to make these judgments?

Chaplain William Rogers

“Politically as a nation we are exhorted to trust in the Lord. God hath hitherto blessed our arms and smiled on our infant rising states . . . Provided we fear God and are publicly as well as individually honest; what have we now to alarm us? American exertions have hitherto been crowned with success; let us still under the banners of liberty, and with a Washington for our head, go on from conquering to conquer. . . . “Our fathers trusted and the Lord did deliver them; they cried unto him and were delivered; they trusted in him and were not confounded.” Even so may it be with us, for the sake of Christ Jesus, who came to give freedom to the world.”

The results of his exhortation?

William Rogers was a Baptist pastor and chaplain addressing the Continental army on July 4, 1779.

After hearing him the troops attacked and burned 40 Iroquois villages, destroying their fields and orchards.

Religion in the Declaration

References to God

“ . . . laws of nature and of nature’s God”

“ . . . all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . ”

But also . . . “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”

(Romans 13?)

“ . . . appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions. . . ”

“ . . . with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence. . . ”

Virginia Disestablishment

Anglican Established Church

Later surge of the Great Awakening

Severe persecution of dissenting sects, especially Baptists.

Coalition of Enlightenment Deists and Evangelicals against establishment.

Rejection of the MA option of reassigning your tax dollars to the church of your choice.

Final Disestablishment in New England not until 1820s-1830s

An Alternate Preamble?

We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, and His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government and, in order to form a more perfect union . . .

An Alternate Preamble 2

We the people of the United States, in a firm belief of the being and perfections of the one living and true God, the creator and supreme governor of the world, in his universal providence and the authority of his laws: that he will require of all moral agents an account of their conduct, that all rightful powers among men are ordained of, and immediately derived from God, therefore in a dependence on his blessing and acknowledgement of his efficient protection in establishing our independence . . .

William Williams of Connecticut

A Godless Constitution?

“ . . . in the Year of our Lord on thousand seven hundred and Eighty seven. . . ”

No religious tests for office holding

1797 Treaty of Tripoli – Unanimously ratified by Senate

Art. 11. As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity, of Mussulmen; and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

Structural Assumptions

Sinfulness or corruptibility of human nature requires checks and balances and separation of powers.

“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. . . It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.” Madison, Federalist 51

Religion, Virtue, and Public Morality

Washington’s Farewell Address: “Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National Morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

Jefferson’s Inaugural: “The liberties of a nation [cannot] be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that their liberties are a gift of God.”

Massachusetts Constitution

It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe.

As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality. . .

Allow for mandatory church attendance laws and taxes to support ministers’ salaries

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