

Week Four Handout

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

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Class 4: Resistance to Tyrants is Obedience to God?

Class 4 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.

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

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

The Perspective of Townsend, MA

“no Religious Test shall Ever be required as a qualification to office or public Trust under the United States, But we think it necessary that our Civil rulers be professors of the true religion and apparent friends to it.”

“Nor can we on any consideration agree to a Constitution Which Will admit into governt, Atheists Deists Papists or abettors of any false religion.”

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

Discussion Questions

- Can Religion become too free?
- What happens when you lose ecclesiastical control over church life?
- What happens when you lose governmental control over church life?
- Is religious freedom worth the risk?

Factors Influencing Growing Religious Innovation and Diversity

- Immigration seeking greater religious freedom
- Continuation of longer term trends
- A reaction against the perceived harshness of Calvinist Doctrine
- A reaction against too much religious diversity
- Openness to religious entrepreneurs

Unitarians

- Old Light, educated and wealthy
- William Ellery Channing
- New England, Boston
- Rejected the trinity, Jesus was mortal, not God - denied original sin, encouraged people to develop their goodness

Universalists

- Tended to be less wealthy individuals from rural New England
- Hosea Ballou
- Claimed that a loving God would never condemn anyone to hell.
- Believed in universal salvation.

Transcendentalists

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry Thoreau
- Bronson Alcott
- Eastern MA: Concord and Boston
- Criticized materialism of society, rejected the depravity of man, people should follow their conscience. Individualism and self-reliance, critics of American political failings - Utopian
- Communities founded at Brook Farm, Hopedale, Fruitlands.

Shakers

- Mother Ann Lee
- New England, Ohio
- New York Kentucky
- Root of human sin is sexual intercourse, founded celibate communities, believed Mother Lee was the second coming of Christ

Mormons

- Joseph Smith – Brigham Young
- New York - traveled West to Utah
- Appearance of the Angel Moroni with golden plates and translations to Smith.

Jesus preached to natives in the New World, Book of Mormon, later many gods, polygamy etc.

Millerites -- (7th Day Adventist)

William Miller

Ellen White

New York - spread from there

Believed that Christ would return in 1844, first and second disappointments, belief in the spiritual return of Christ, retreat into themselves, later evangelism, emphasis on nutrition and healthy living.

Oneida Community

John Humphrey Noyes

Putney, VT

Oneida, NY

Complete perfection, absence of sin. Biblical communism, a perfect community must be formed before Christ could return.

Complex marriage necessary for true fellowship.

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