

Week One Handout

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

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Class 1: Founding Myths,
Fears, and Realities

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Class 1 Goals

Broaden our understanding of the diverse origins of Christian America.

Examine the original aspirations of settlers in the new world and the ways in which those aspirations led to conflicts among themselves and with native populations.

Explore the degree to which the original goals of the settlers were fulfilled.

Discuss the extent to which the visions of the earliest settlers can be models for us to emulate today.

Some Definitions

American: Will focus primarily on events in the United States or its predecessor colonies, but other North American histories from Canada and Mexico may be brought in for comparison.

Christian: This word will be broadly defined to include Catholic, Orthodox, and a wide range of Protestant believers, but special emphasis will be placed on the emergence and role of Evangelicalism.

History: The course will make use of the current conventions of the historical profession.

Visions: The aspirations of American believers as they attempted to build a society shaped by kingdom values.

Realities: The many ways in which those visions were not fulfilled and the reality fell short of the ideal.

Turning Points: Significant moments where the direction of the Christian movement changed.

Organizational Principles

Use the latest scholarship from both secular and Christian sources to examine American Christian History.

Make use of Primary Source documents to illustrate key aspects of that history.

Combine lecture with small and large group discussion of key ideas.

Use a Biblical world view consistent with the Grace Chapel statement of faith to critically examine major themes and events in US History.

Suggest practical application of this material in our lives as believers and citizens of two kingdoms.

A word about historical revisionism . . .

Opening Question:

What major ideas, event, people, and/or themes come to mind when you think of the early Christian History of America?

Father Junípero Serra (1713-1784)

Franciscan Monk instrumental in the settlement of and beginning of missionary work to Native Americans in California.

Helped found a series of missions from San Diego to San Francisco

Was known for beating his breast with a stone, burning his bare chest with a torch, and scourging himself in the pulpit to convince others to repent.

Eventually canonized, but controversy lingered over harsh treatment of Natives.

Don Juan de Oñate

Military Commander who led soldiers and priests into New Mexico to convert/conquer the Pueblo.

Demanded that they convert or “they would go to hell and suffer cruel and everlasting torment.”

When the Pueblo revolted after Spanish soldiers raped Native girls, Oñate killed 800 natives, cut one foot off of all men over 25, and gave children to the friars to be their servants.

The Pueblo Revolt (1680)

By 1680 the Pueblo revolted as a result of a drought and tired of Spanish economic and religious control over their lives.

Under the leadership of Popé they attacked and killed over 30 priests and 500 Native or mixed race supporters of the Spanish.

During the revolt chapels were burned, bells and icons destroyed, and some bathed with a root to “unbaptize” themselves.

It would take the Spanish 10 years to reassert control over the region and reintroduce Christianity.

Father Jean de Brébeuf

Pioneered culturally sensitive missions among the Huron in Canada in the 1630s.

Adopted native styles of dress

Learned their language

Respected traditional Native culture

Gained large numbers of converts

Contributed to *The Jesuit Relations*

Eventually tortured and killed by the neighboring Iroquois

Canonized in 1930.

Kateri Tekakwitha

(The Lily of the Mohawk)

Young woman from Mohawk Valley of New York who converted to Catholicism and moved to Quebec.

She observed a rigorous devotional life including severe asceticism.

Kateri started a small convent and was renowned for her holiness.

Pilgrims flocked to her grave where many miracles were witnessed.

She was made the first Native American saint in 1980.

For Table Discussion

How does incorporating stories like these change or complicate our understanding of early American Christian history?

Read through the primary source documents on your table.

How do those documents expand or challenge your interpretations?

What if we focused on a different set of stories closer to home?

What sort of Christian American would we discover if we looked at these examples in the more traditional “13 colonies?”

George Calvert

The Baron Baltimore

Sought and received a charter to be the proprietor for the new colony of Maryland.

Intended to establish the colony as a haven for Catholics.

When it attracted more Protestants they eventually enacted an Act for Religious Toleration in 1649. (Granted toleration for all Trinitarians.

William Penn

As a committed Quaker he served jail time for “blasphemy” for criticizing the church of England.

Established the colony of Pennsylvania as a haven for Quakers based on the principles of religious liberty, pacifism, and harmonious relations with Native Americans.

New Netherlands (New York)

Founded by the Dutch on Manhattan Island in 1614.

Had an established Dutch Reformed Church, but tended to focus more on establishing profitable trade relationships than emphasizing religion.

Had significant religious diversity from early on with populations of Jews, Muslims, and many different Christian groups.

After captured by the English it would change to an established Anglican church.

Georgia

Founded by James Oglethorpe as a colony to provide opportunities for the poor of England.

Had the original motto “Not for ourselves, but for others.”

Originally idealistically banned both slavery and alcohol.

John and Charles Wesley as well as George Whitefield spent time as ministers there in the early years of the colony.

Whitefield helped to raise money to establish an orphanage there.

Later followed the other Southern colonies and legalized slavery and alcohol.

The Puritan Vision

Build an Ideal Society based on Christian and Biblical Principles.

Life must be built around the teaching of the Bible, do only what the scriptures direct.

All society is a unified whole: church, state, and individual.

God works through covenants with groups of people first in families, then churches, then commonwealths, a covenant community must be holy to be blessed by God -Sinfulness leads to God’s judgment on the community

Did not believe in individual rights or democracy.
Rejected the Anglican Church and the king as corrupt

Religious Freedom

Sought the right to practice their beliefs and form their society and government without interference.

Non-Puritans had “free liberty to keep away. . .”

Economic Life

The Needs of the Commonwealth should trump individual gain

People were disciplined by both the state and church for striving for excessive profit.

The Puritan Dilemma

How do you exercise power in a fallen world?

How far should you use the power of the state to advance a religious vision?

What do you do when the population grows more diverse and does not share your vision?

Roger Williams

Concerned that the Puritans were insufficiently pure.

Protested the seizure of Indian land without payment.

Claimed the MA government couldn't mandate church attendance.

Expelled and founded Rhode Island with greater religious freedom.

Female Dissidents

Anne Hutchinson

Held meetings for women, then men too, to discuss the Sunday sermon and pray.

Claimed that Christians led by the spirit were not bound by the law. (Antinomian Controversy)

Claimed to communicate directly with God, expelled from Massachusetts.
(Undermined male authority.)

Mary Dyer

Executed for promoting Quakerism in MA after being expelled.

Fears of Declension

By the end of the first generation it was clear that the Puritans had not achieved many of their goals.

Only through the use of energetic state power could they enforce the orthodoxy required for societal cohesion and unity.

The second and third generations did not share the intense spirituality of the first or as effective leaders.

King Philip's War and the Salem Witch Trials shook people's faith in efforts to build a Puritan Commonwealth.

A new sermon style, the Jeremiad, – bemoaned their fall from an initial purity which never existed. A pattern that continues today.

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