Religion and the Revolution

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RELIGION IN COLONIAL AMERICA

From the time of their first settlements at Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, British colonists in North America practiced numerous forms of Christianity. Because of this diversity, the colonies as a whole can be described as pluralistic, meaning that several forms of belief and practice co-existed within the settlements. Despite this variation among the colonies, however, individual colonies were often dominated by a single religious group. In Massachusetts and Connecticut, Congregationalists were the most numerous and powerful churches in the religious landscape. In Virginia and throughout the South, the Church of England, or Anglican Church, exerted the most influence. In Pennsylvania, Quakers provided the religious and political center until the 1750s. In Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island numerous groups thrived simultaneously, including Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Jews, and Quakers.

Although the colonies were pluralistic, the ruling religion in any given colony was not necessarily tolerant of other faiths. While residents of Rhode Island and Pennsylvania enjoyed complete religious freedom, other colonies had established churches that were supported by civil taxes. Established religions encouraged strict conformity to their beliefs and values and punished those who failed to meet religious community standards.

Colonial religion has often been described as dissenting religion. In England, a dissenter was someone who was not a member of the Church of England. Since its founding by King Henry VIII during the Protestant Reformation (1534), the Church of England had received financial support from the government. All British subjects who were members of churches other than the Church of England were called dissenters, because they disagreed with the tenets and practices of the state's official religious institution. Many who emigrated to the colonies, such as the Puritans and the Quakers, were dissenters who moved to North America in part to distance themselves from the Church of England and to practice their faith undisturbed. As dissenters, these colonists enjoyed their freedom from the Church of England, but they did not abandon the idea of a publicly supported church. At the time of the Revolution, nine colonies had established churches that received financial support from the government. The Congregationalists, in Massachusetts and Connecticut, who dissented from the Church of England, became themselves the established church in its place. In some of the southern colonies, the established church remained the Church of England. Colonial religion was therefore a complicated mosaic, characterized by both freedom and coercion, dissent and conformity.

CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE COLONIES

This American mix of free religious choice, strict religious discipline, and in some cases state support for religion, persisted from the 17th into the 18th century. However, early in the 18th century, widespread religious revivals began to modify colonial religious life in several important ways. Most important, the message and the style of the revivals often changed people's perceptions of the established churches and undercut church authority. These revivals, sometimes referred to collectively as the Great Awakening, began in New England and spread south over a period of approximately three decades, from the 1730s to the 1760s. Two of the leading figures of these revivals were Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), the famous theologian, and George Whitefield (pronounced WIT-FIELD) (1714-1770), a tremendously popular itinerant (traveling) preacher who spoke throughout the colonies. Whitefield preached in the open air and his revivals drew large, enthusiastic crowds that sometimes numbered in the thousands. Both Whitefield
and Edwards stressed the individual's personal responsibility to seek salvation, the value of a virtuous life, and the tremendous power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the faithful. Their message emphasized the individual's direct relationship with God, rather than his or her relationship with a church or a minister. By focusing on the individual, the revivalists de-emphasized the role of institutions in religious belief and practice and stressed the equality of all people in the sight of God.

In some cases, the revivals prompted colonists to expect the immediate return of Christ to earth to commence his promised reign of peace. This expectation, called millennialism, was accompanied by the belief that individuals could help hasten the millennium through their actions on earth. Both the message of the revivals and the expectation of Christ's return to earth underscored the need among true believers for personal conviction and individual action—two values that were central to traditional Puritanism. Revivalism and millennialism provided a reason for individual Christians in the colonies to re-evaluate their existing religious institutions and encouraged them to change their society for the better.

RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND REVOLUTIONARY ZEAL

Even as the revivals were changing the face of colonial religion, the colonies were also experiencing political stresses and strains. Repeated British wars with the French were taking their toll on the colonies, especially on those nearest the battle lines. After the last of these wars, the Seven Years War, British policies forced the colonies to pay for their share of the war effort and to shoulder the cost of ruling conquered territories in North America, thus irritating already raw colonial nerves. In particular, the Stamp Act, the Quebec Act, and the proposed introduction of an Anglican bishop for the Americas provoked the ire of numerous colonial clergymen. The political struggle with England took on, in the eyes of many colonists, religious and moral components that fueled anger toward the parent country.

In part due to the revivals, clergymen emerged in this period as community leaders who provided political as well as religious guidance. Colonists who were not permitted to vote for political officials could still select which minister they would follow, or they could choose to follow none at all. The revivals further strengthened this egalitarian or democratic flavor in colonial religion. Ministers who had long commented on religious and moral issues now also began to comment on the pressing political issues of the day. The Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, a Congregationalist minister in Boston, vocally opposed the Stamp Act on the grounds that it infringed illegally on the colonists' rights. Clergymen also spoke out against the Quebec Act, which secured religious toleration for Catholics in British Canada. To some colonists, the war against the French had also been a war against Catholicism, which they viewed as a form of despotism. The king's tolerance of Catholics thus appeared to some to have been a serious betrayal. In addition, non-Anglican colonists in this period grew increasingly concerned that Britain would establish an Anglican bishop in the colonies to gain further control over colonial life and religion. In the decade immediately preceding the American Revolution, clergymen addressed each of these issues in sermons and pamphlets, often portraying England as a tyrannical and immoral force that intended to usurp the colonies' religious and political freedoms.

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AND LAY ATTITUDES IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

The message and style of the revivals, combined with the political developments of the 1760s, came together in the 1770s to provide potent support for the war for independence from England. During the Revolutionary War itself, most clergymen, lay preachers, and lay women supported the war effort, regardless of denomination or social and economic standing. For Protestant ministers in the colonies, the Whig values of liberty and civic virtue blended easily with Protestant values of Christian virtue and righteousness. Freedom from sin became indistinguishable from the idea of freedom from British tyranny. A good example of a patriot minister is the Presbyterian John Witherspoon (1723-1794), the only minister
to sign the Declaration of Independence. Witherspoon, who had emigrated from Scotland to become president of the College of New Jersey--later renamed Princeton University--vigorously defended the colonists' right to independence from Great Britain. Ministers like Witherspoon used Biblical rhetoric and imagery to identify the colonies with ancient Israel, claiming that God had given his special blessing for the rebels, just as he had to the chosen people of the Bible.

While most clergymen gave their full support to the patriot cause, some offered a more critical assessment of the colonists' revolution. For example, Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803) defended the colonies' right to freedom but vigorously denounced the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom from England when some colonists themselves owned slaves. Hopkins, a Rhode Island Congregationalist who had witnessed the brutality of the slave trade, wrote several tracts calling for the immediate abolition of slavery. Baptists were another group that offered a sympathetic but biting critique of the revolutionary cause. As a dissenting group within New England, Baptists had to pay taxes to support the established Congregationalist Church; the revolutionary cry of no taxation without representation therefore had an ironic ring to their ears. While giving their full support to the patriots' demand for political freedom, they used the revolutionary rhetoric to advocate their own religious freedom from Congregationalist taxes.

Hopkins and the Baptists were "friendly critics" of the patriot cause. Other religious leaders flatly opposed the Revolution. Not all religious leaders and lay people in the colonies believed that a revolution was in the colonies' best interest. Loyalists, who were primarily Anglicans, stressed the Christian obligation to obey earthly rulers and expressed fears that the patriots offered no clear alternative government to replace the rule of the king and Parliament. Some Anglican Loyalists also pointed out that they had sworn oaths to keep the liturgy, which required ministers and congregants to pray for the king, as a part of the worship service. Anglican ministers who continued to perform this part of the liturgy were often harassed, fined, and punished by their patriot neighbors. One of the colonies' most famous Anglicans, Samuel Seabury (1728-1796), eloquently expressed the feelings of Anglican Loyalists in his Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress. Even so, not all Anglicans were Loyalists; in Virginia, numerous Anglican clergy supported the war against Britain. Two leading patriots, George Washington (1732-1799) and Patrick Henry (1736-1799), were members of the Anglican Church. And just as not all Anglicans were Loyalists, not all Loyalists were Anglicans. Roman Catholics often felt an allegiance to the king for providing them with the right to worship freely, and some Methodists heeded the call of their denomination's founders--Englishmen John and Charles Wesley (1703-1791; 1707-1788, respectively)--to honor the king.

Other groups, while sympathizing with the colonies' struggle for independence, maintained their traditional commitment to pacifism. Quakers, Mennonites, and other pietistic groups had long disavowed violence as a means of redress and therefore refused to serve in colonial armies. Because of these sects' long-standing tradition of nonviolence, the colonial governments exempted them from military service. In some colonies, however, pacifists were still required to pay taxes to support the army and to pay a tax specifically in lieu of service. Among the Quakers, the wealthiest and most influential of the pacifist groups, those who paid this commutation tax were disciplined within the Society of Friends, or, in some cases, expelled.

**POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NEW NATION**

Just as religion influenced the Revolution, the Revolution also had an impact on religion. First, churches themselves suffered during the war. Church buildings were used as jails and barracks; in some cases, they were burned to the ground during protests or fighting. Church attendance declined markedly during the war and remained low until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Revolution also led to the disestablishment of official churches in most colonies, although Connecticut and Massachusetts did not
disestablish the Congregational Church until 1818 and 1833, respectively. New state constitutions usually acknowledged the Christian God but guaranteed religious freedom to their citizens. Perhaps the most famous of these statements of religious freedom was Virginia's *Declaration of Rights*, which declared all religious sentiment to be a matter of individual conscience. Disestablishment, however, did not mean complete religious freedom; in some states, candidates for office still had to take an oath declaring their belief in Christianity. In contrast to the state constitutions, the *Federal Constitution of 1787* did not mention God at all. The Bill of Rights explicitly separated church and state, ending once and for all the tradition of national established churches, and guaranteed complete religious freedom to American citizens.

The Revolution's success proved to many that the United States was the special object of divine favor, sustained by its belief in the Christian God. Despite the separation of church and state, Christianity remained the unofficial religion of the new nation. As the new republic moved into the nineteenth century and experienced the dramatic revivals of the Second Great Awakening, Christianity grew as part of the new nation's identity, despite the continued presence of other religious traditions in the United States.