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HOW CHRISTIAN WAS THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

Derek H. Davis

How Christian was the American Revolution? The answer perhaps depends upon how we understand the question. If we seek to know whether there was an adequate biblical justification for the Revolution, we probably cannot give a very satisfactory answer because while there were many Christian patriots who supported the Independence movement, there were many Christian Tories who supported submission to Great Britain and many Christian pacifists who thought that war under any circumstances was wrong. In other words, Christians disagreed on whether the Revolution was a part of God's will. If, however, we seek to know whether the Revolutionary movement was sustained by Christian ideals, we can probably come closer to saying that the Revolution was indeed Christian, since so much of the Revolution's ideological underpinnings were theological arguments advanced by Christians.

But to leave it at that would be misleading because there were other ideological forces that fueled the movement to separate from the mother country. These included political philosophies that focused on reclaiming from England the colonists' liberties--civic, religious, economic, and personal. But the most distinctive ideology other than Christianity was what might be called Enlightenment rationalism, itself semi-religious in its makeup. Both of these ideologies--Christianity and rationalism--embraced the political ideas and rhetoric of liberty and together became the driving forces behind the Revolution. Most all American patriots identified with one of these two worldviews, and it is safe to say that the Revolution would neither have been commenced nor sustained on the strength of one of them alone. Thus, it is important to describe how these two groups, despite pronounced differences, supported each other and in the words of historian Patricia Bonomi, "did not cause separate channels but flowed as one stream toward the crisis of 1776." Only then will we be equipped to say how Christian the Revolution really was.

Prelude to War

Beginning about 1763, Americans began to look more at the disadvantages of colonial connections to Britain than the advantages. The Intolerable Acts, a series of measures designed to increase British revenues in the colonies, antagonized the colonists who protested the measures as the unlawful taking of property, in short, as "taxation without representation." This basic response soon expanded to claims that the British acts were threats against the colonists' natural rights and fundamental liberties, without which the enjoyment of their very human existence stood in jeopardy. As historian Charles M. Andrews has said, "New soil had produced new wants, new desires, new points of view, and the colonists were demanding the right to live their own lives in their own way."

As George III and Parliament stepped up attempts to bring colonial compliance with their efforts to increase British revenues, the arguments against the mother country soon reached beyond the rhetoric of deprivation of natural rights and fundamental liberties. Increasingly, the colonists appealed to the God of the universe as the witness to these liberties of which He was the author. The appeals of Christians and rationalists were immediate and vigorous, yet clearly distinguishable.

The Christian Response

As talk of revolution increased, Christian clergymen across the colonies preached to their congregations the justness of the colonists cause. Samuel Langdon from Massachusetts, for example, preached in 1775: "If God be for us, who can be against us. . . . May we not be confident that the Most High . . . will plead our righteous cause . . . ? Other patriotic preachers joined in a chorus of dissent against the British attack on American liberties, leading John Adams to say, in the months just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, "they

[the clergy] engage with a fervor that will produce wonderful effects. Those . . . of every denomination . . . thunder and lighten every Sabbath."

This kind of religious zeal supporting a revolution was perhaps to some extent an outgrowth of the fervency of the Great Awakening, the great evangelical revival that spread throughout the colonies from roughly 1735 to 1755. As a result of the thousands of Christian conversions that took place, many, including the Awakening's greatest preacher, Jonathan Edwards, saw America becoming the center of God's kingdom on earth. The conversions were seen as proof that world history was culminating in a new Age of the Spirit. The creation of new men, converted men, especially political leaders, would make possible the realization of God's promised kingdom. Change, Edwards believed, was good for man and society. This new evangelical emphasis, then, produced by the Awakening, provided one of the most powerful forces that helped to focus American discontent and offered a new vision that allowed for a breaking with the past.

The new vision corresponded with the way that New England Puritans still perceived themselves as God's "New Israel." From the time of the earliest Puritan settlements in Massachusetts in the 1600s, the Puritans understood themselves as the "chosen people" of God, just as Old Testament Israel was a "chosen nation." As God had brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt to Canaan, so He had brought the Puritans out from the bondage of the Old World into a "new Canaan." Moreover, just as God had many times in the Old Testament entered into covenants with Israel, he had covenanted with the New Israel whereby it would be the focus of His plan to usher in a millennial age of righteousness on earth. This postmillennial vision, which emphasized the return of Christ only *after* the Christianization of the world, was a widely accepted eschatology during the Revolutionary era.

One of religious historian Harry Stout's many impressive contributions to the growing literature on colonial religion and politics has been his demonstration that in the 1760s and early 1770s, New England still looked to biblical Israel as the model of its relationship to God.

According to Stout, the unity of the American people in the Independence movement led the New England Puritans to expand the circle of earthly participants in God's covenant with them to the nation as a whole. In this way, Puritans and their various denominational descendants—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and German and Dutch Reformed in particular—became intellectually supportive of independence, believing that America was the central focus of God's intention to usher in a reign of righteousness upon the earth. In the frantic days preceding the Continental Congress's Declaration of Independence, Ebenezer Baldwin of Connecticut was only one of many contemplating the possibility that America might become "the principal seat of the glorious kingdom, which Christ shall erect upon Earth in the latter days."

Christians seeking a scriptural perspective on a possible war with England were especially challenged by Romans 13:1: "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." This verse was an obstacle to many Christian colonists. How could a Christian support independence in the face of such a clear statement that God ordains all governmental authority and obedient Christian citizenship requires submission to such authority? Anglican minister Jonathan Boucher of Maryland, for example, concluded in a 1775 sermon that "obedience to government is every man's duty . . . because . . . it is enjoined by the positive commands of God." Loyalists (those who opposed the Revolution) numbered about one-third of the American population and many of them cited Romans 13:1 as the basis of their loyalty to the mother country.

But Romans 13:1 could be interpreted differently. Many patriot preachers taught that the passage did not require unlimited passive obedience unto despotic, evil governments; it rather approved of human government in a broad, generic way in which submission would be the *normal* practice. Prominent Congregational minister Jonathan Mayhew, for example, held this view, stating that civil magistrates should be obeyed only so long as "they do not grossly abuse their power and trust, but exercise it for the good of those that are governed." This

interpretation of Romans 13:1 became widespread among other colonial preachers, thus removing the verse as an obstacle to revolution.

Patriot ministers regularly preached on the theme of liberty as well. If God's people had "been called to liberty," as Galatians 5:13 promised, meaning liberty *in* Christ, then it did not seem too much a stretch to believe that this also meant freedom *from* political tyranny. This theme was further supported by the social contract and natural right theories of such philosophical divines as John Milton, Algernon Sydney, and especially John Locke. Modern researchers have affirmed that outside of the Bible, the writings of John Locke were the most frequently cited source for justifying the Revolution. Locke held that all men possessed the natural rights of life, liberty, and property, and if the enjoyment of these rights were interfered with by the civil sovereign, the people had the right to revolt and form a new government. Not coincidentally, Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was grounded in Locke's philosophy, enumerating the various colonial liberties which the British government had violated.

The Rationalist Response

Ideas associated with Enlightenment rationalism also supported the colonies' separation from England. The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century movement that elevated reason over revelation as the chief source and test of mankind's knowledge. The achievements of Sir Isaac Newton and other astronomers and mathematicians gave to mankind a new confidence in the power of human reason, without the assistance of divine revelation, to grasp God's government of the universe. The Enlightenment promised to reveal the mysteries of God's created handiwork simply through the application of human intelligence. As religious historian Sidney Ahlstrom stated in assessing the impact of the Enlightenment on the Revolutionary era, "more and more thinkers came to accept its primary assertion that reason and scientific knowledge could supply all the necessary elements of religion and ethics, though many might

concede that revelation was still needed by the masses.” The American Revolution, from the perspective of Enlightenment ideals, was a natural occurrence in a larger revolution involving the progress of the human race. The Enlightenment movement held in its grasp some of America’s most educated people. Its religious manifestation appeared most prominently in the form of Deism, which accepted the evidence of God, but basically spurned the Bible as a supernatural book.

Deists widely supported the Revolution, and with such political leaders as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, and arguably John Adams and George Washington, in their corner, it does not seem an exaggeration to say that they maintained a dominant presence in the Continental Congress, the body that governed American affairs from 1774 to 1789. Of course the Continental Congress was also populated with more traditional Christians, but Congress always sought to model the kind of cooperation between Christians and rationalists that it hoped would be observed across the colonies. By way of illustration, the Declaration of Independence, in its four references to God—“Nature's God,” the “Creator,” the “Supreme Judge of the World,” and “Divine Providence”—were essentially Deist terms which Christian congressional members consented to because they in no way denied Christian truth. Yet during the eight-year Revolutionary War, the annual thanksgiving and fast-day proclamations issued by Congress and observed throughout the colonies were written with the awareness that the overwhelming majority of religious Americans were Christian; the proclamations therefore regularly invoked the name of Jesus Christ and asked for His blessings upon the war effort.

Emerging from the Enlightenment during the Revolutionary era was a secular utopian vision. It saw the Revolution as promising an imminent and radical transformation of the world and the universal establishment of peace, freedom, and morality. This utopian vision represented something of a translation into secular terms of the millennial goals, and even the spirit, of more biblically-oriented Christians. Its key terms, however, were not those of Scripture, but more

exclusively those of political ideals: liberty, reason, progress, and the rights of man. Newspapers of the era were full of columns upholding visions of a future era of liberty and peace that were not dependent upon Scripture. The *Boston Gazette*, for example, described America rising to that "happy period" when "virtue and liberty [shall] reign here without a foe, until rolling years shall measure time no more." And the *New York Journal* urged perseverance in the Revolutionary cause until "true freedom and liberty shall reign triumphant over the whole globe." Rationalism, especially in its emphasis on themes of progress and the perfection of humanity, contributed significantly to the colonial aspirations for independence.

Conclusion

We return, then, to the question with which we began: How Christian was the American Revolution? We can say, without hesitation, that the Revolution would never have occurred, much less enjoyed a successful outcome, without the full-fledged support of many Christians. In this sense the Revolution *was very Christian*. But neither would there have been a Revolution without the support of less biblically-oriented rationalists. In this sense, the Revolution was *not at all Christian*. For orthodox Christians, Holy Writ sanctioned, even demanded that the Revolution go forward. For less religiously orthodox rationalists, reason and political philosophy were the underpinnings of their commitment to the Revolutionary cause. But no matter, the final outcome for all patriots, Christian or not, was the same—the Revolution was countenanced. In each case, the arguments for the Revolution were stated in a compelling religious framework, assuring devotees of both camps, especially those who would fight and even die for the cause of Independence, that their efforts were looked upon with favor from heaven.