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## **Religion and the American Founding: Pondering the Rise and Fall of Puritan Political Theology**

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One of the more interesting subplots of early American history is how Puritanism dominated political ideas during the colonial era, fueled the spirit of the American Revolution, but then failed significantly to impact the creation of the new American republic at the Constitutional Convention. When the nation's new constitution was written, longstanding Puritan ideas of a religious state; an established, tax-supported church; and mandatory tests for civil officeholding all succumbed to modern ideas of religious liberty and separation of church and state. What accounts for this sudden and dramatic decline of Puritanism's role in shaping American social and political thinking? How was it that Puritanism provided colonial America with so much of its political philosophy, was then willing to lend its vast prestige to the Revolution, but then had its voice virtually eliminated in the new governmental framework masterminded at the Constitutional Convention?

### **A. The New England Way**

From the early seventeenth century, in the New England colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire established and run by

Puritans, all citizens were taxed for the support of the Congregationalist ministers and buildings. For much of the seventeenth century, church attendance at “Congregational churches was mandatory for everyone. Catholics, Baptists, and Quakers had a presence in New England, but often suffered severe penalties--including fines, forced labor, banishments, and in the case of four obstinate Quakers who refused to be banished in 1660, hangings. After the passage of the English Act of Toleration in 1689, these colonies’ toleration of dissenting sects increased, but only grudgingly so. The Act of Toleration only granted to non-Congregationalists the right to hold their own religious services, provided they properly registered their ministers and places of worship. It did not extend to them, however, the right to hold public office, and Catholics and Unitarians were excluded from all the benefits of the Act.

Other colonies also established their own churches and persecuted, to one degree or another, those outside the approved form of worship. Anglicanism was established in Virginia, Maryland, the two Carolinas, Georgia, for a brief period in New Jersey, and in New York after 1664 when the Dutch Reformed church was disestablished. The pattern of establishment was no doubt a carryover from the Old World, but it persisted, despite models of nonestablishment in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, due in no small measure to the unrelenting Puritan political theology that made church and state inextricably intertwined and in service to the same divine ends.

Also in keeping with Old World practices, all of the thirteen original colonies required an attestation of religious belief or affiliation as a prerequisite for holding public office. These oaths were viewed as instruments of social control, given the traditional view that citizens were only trustworthy as civil servants if they were willing to affirm their allegiance to basic religious tenets. In the New England colonies, as one might expect, civil officeholders were required to swear allegiance to God, the Scriptures, and the Congregational church. The other colonial oaths were somewhat less onerous, requiring only a belief in God, perhaps a belief in the Trinity, the Scriptures, or, in some cases, a commitment to Protestantism.

## **B. Puritanism and Its Allies During the Revolution**

The American Revolution is the central event in American history. The dramatic step of separating from Great Britain was not a step taken hastily or unadvisedly by the colonists. Those with religious commitments were called upon to examine their religious heritages and determine whether they could support a revolution. For most Americans, the Revolution united religious beliefs and political principles into convictions about the proper nature of life as earthly and heavenly citizens. Going forward with a revolution demanded that its rightness be sanctioned and grounded in religious perspectives, especially those of the numerous and influential New Englanders of Puritan heritage.

Without those of Puritan descent on board, the Revolution would never have gotten off the ground.

The ideological background of the American Revolution is best understood as a combination of the disparate and competing traditions of Christian pietism and Enlightenment rationalism. These two live movements shrugged off fundamental theological differences to form a single movement for independence from Great Britain. Pietism was comprised of overlapping elements of Protestantism: the pietism of European immigrants who stressed the inner workings of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life, revivalist evangelism produced by the Great Awakening, and, most prominently, New England Puritanism. Fewer in number, rationalists looked to reason rather than revelation as the chief source of knowledge. Its religious manifestation was deism, which looked not to the Bible but to nature to grasp the mysteries of God's handiwork. But despite their considerable differences, pietists and rationalists discovered bonds of unity in commitments to liberty and republican government, the enjoyment of which, they believed, required a full separation from the mother country.

Puritan ideas were clearly the dominant influence on political philosophy throughout colonial America, even as late as the outbreak of the Revolution. Historian Bernard Bailyn asserts that New England Puritanism was "channeled into the main stream of eighteenth-century political and social thinking . . . by almost the entire spectrum of American Protestantism." Mark Noll estimates

that 75 percent of the colonists in 1776 were identified with denominations that had arisen from the Reformed, Puritan wing of European Protestantism: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and German and Dutch Reformed. By one estimate, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists alone made up more than 54 percent of the American population during the American Revolution. Thus, both in terms of ideology as well as in the sheer number of its adherents, Puritanism was indeed pervasive throughout the colonies.

How was the Puritan strain of thought able to support a revolution? Several factors are important here, but among the most significant were the Puritans' concepts of "covenant" and "consent." The Puritan emphasis on covenant established a relationship between the people and God and applied to the state as well as the church. The notion of consent held that man's consent is required at all key points of human existence. While salvation was the result of God's election, consent by man was required to seal it. Members of a congregation must consent to their own minister. In government, magistrates and rulers cannot rule without the consent of their subjects.

The political implications of the covenant and consent symbols became especially important when the severing of all ties with Great Britain became a point of serious consideration. But Puritan ideas did not become a stumbling block. The Puritans understood the relationship between a government and its citizens as one of mutual obligation and this belief, combined with the social compact and natural right theories of John Locke and others, formed an ideology

that merged with other patriots' parallel values of freedom, liberty, and consent of the governed. This helped shape the resistance of the colonies against the perceived imperialistic and tyrannical policies of George III and Parliament.

The New England Puritans' perennial image of themselves as God's "New Israel" also influenced Revolutionary thinking. Just as God had covenanted with Israel in the Old Testament, so had he brought the new "chosen nation" out of bondage and into a "new Canaan." This emphasis on God's covenant with the nation led the Puritans to expand the circle of earthly participants in God's covenant to include not only devout Puritans but all the inhabitants of the new Promised Land. This biblical imagery easily lent itself to the conflict of the Revolution; Britain was likened to Babylon and to Egypt while America was described as Judah. The colonists' confidence in the ultimate outcome would sustain them throughout their great time of trial.

Closely linked to the identification of America with biblical Israel was another line of thinking that helped to support the Revolution, biblical millennialism. The Puritans believed that a major element of God's covenant with them was that they would be God's principle instrument in establishing a millennial reign of righteousness on earth. It was widely believed that the millennial age of peace and righteousness foretold in Scripture could be dawning in America. With the prospect of political liberty and religious freedom, it seemed increasingly likely that the millennial age would arise from the struggle for liberty and Christianity in which the

colonists were engaged.

This emphasis on a new Christian millennium occurred simultaneously with a rationalistic secular utopian vision. This utopian vision saw the need for America to rid itself of all foreign restraints on the realization of its destiny. The relationship between this Enlightenment utopianism and biblical millennialism was at first complementary. Their incompatibility did not become clear until the very end of the eighteenth century when it was time to write a new constitution. In contrast to biblical millennialism, secular utopianism's key terms were not those of Scripture but of secular political ideals: liberty, reason, and the rights of man. Elements of both visions, however, were often blended together into what could be called a "millennial utopianism." Religious rationalism, especially in its emphasis on themes of progress and the perfection of humanity, contributed significantly to the colonial aspiration for independence. In effect, the American Enlightenment represented something of a translation into secular terms of the millennial goals, and even the spirit, of more biblically oriented Christians. This similarity between rationalistic and pietistic Americans, alongside other factors such as the Puritan emphasis on covenant and consent and the identification of America as the New Israel, explains in no small measure the seamless combination of the disparate traditions of Puritanism and Enlightenment rationalism.

### **C. The Alliance Crumbles**

This alliance worked well together in the Continental Congress as both pietistic patriots and their more deistic counterparts supported a significant degree of religious activity and language in their political undertakings. Conclusive statements about what this collaboration might contribute to the modern debate over the intent of the constitutional framers regarding the relationship between government and religious do not come easily. This is due primarily to the fact that the Continental Congress on one hand, and the Constitutional Convention and First Congress on the other, acted at different times and with different ends. The men of the Continental Congress were called upon first and foremost to prosecute a war, whereas those who framed the Constitution and Bill of Rights were charged with prescribing a comprehensive public philosophy that would ensure the success of a new constitution. The former readily put religion to use, whereas the latter had to think more critically about the long-term role of religion in an untested regime.

It is not surprising that the unlikely alliance between Christian pietists and rationalistic deists began to strain under the difficult constitutional questions regarding church and state. The new Americans put aside or did not recognize their differences long enough to withstand the British threat. Once that threat was removed, however, substantial disagreements became evident. The treatment of religion within the Constitution was the most salient issue.

As written at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the Constitution gave little attention to religion. Its only reference to religion was the prohibition against religious tests for federal officeholders contained in Article VI. This provision had a dual purpose--one principled, one practical. The principled aim was to preclude the possibility of any church-state union or the establishment of a state church. The framers clearly sought to ensure that the nonestablishment models of Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Delaware would frame the federal regime, not the establishment models of the New England and other states. The practical consideration was that even had the framers wanted to impose a religious test, given the diversity of belief in America, they would never have been able to agree on what the test should be. Moreover, the framers were concerned with writing a constitution that could be ratified, and any religious test was certain to stall ratification in those states where the test was likely to prevent many of its citizens from holding federal office. Given all of these factors, the framers wisely omitted any religious test for officeholding.

In 1787, within the whole of Western political culture, the secularity of the American Constitution was indeed an isolated anomaly. Religious establishments reigned all over Europe, not just Great Britain. The U.S. Constitution, then, can rightly be viewed as the document that marked the real beginning of political modernity. Government was now to be mostly a human affair; God might lend a helping providential hand, but the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of governments rested with men, not with angels.

Noticeably absent from the Constitution was any attempt to place the new government under divine rule. It is little wonder that as the proposed Constitution was presented to the states for ratification, disconcerted religious traditionalists, including many of Puritan persuasion, made uncomfortable by this break with the past, voiced their disapproval.

The specific criticism against the Constitution, voiced repeatedly, was that the document essentially ignored religion. Indeed, the Constitution contained only one reference to religion: the provision that no religious test could be required of any federal officeholder. This provision was controversial, to be sure. In Puritan Massachusetts, the “no religious test” clause generated so much dissent that it nearly resulted in its refusal to ratify. One Massachusetts official “shuddered at the idea that Roman Catholics, Papists and Pagans might be introduced into office; and that Popery and the Inquisition may be established in America.” But the “no religious test” provision survived, largely because the majority of American people saw the wisdom of it.

Similar objections were made to the Constitution’s failure to acknowledge God in some specific way. For one Connecticut critic, it was “a sinful omission in the . . . Constitution, in not looking to God for direction, and of omitting the mention of the name of God.” These and similar objections of more traditionally minded Americans, especially those of Puritan descent, were weathered by the framers. They changed nothing, except to agree at the First Congress in 1789 to add amendments that would make it clear that the free exercise rights of all

Americans were in now way jeopardized by the Constitution. The First Amemdment provided: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereod. . . ." This language ensured religious freedom, but did so principally by disabling government from being a religious advocate whose actions might interfere with Americans' own religious beliefs and actions.

The Constitution and Bill of Rights were ratified by the requisite nine states on December 15, 1791. Its new framework of neutrality toward religion, made mandatory by a separation of church and state, was already having its effects in the states. By then all but five of the states, on the model of the federal constitution, had ended their longstanding establishments. Georgia and Maryland ended theirs before the end of the century. Not surprisingly, the three New England states of Puritan heritage held on the longest. Connecticut in 1810, New Hampshire in 1818, and Massachusetts in 1833 finally ended their establishments, too. Massachusetts' move to cut its ties with the Congregational church proved wrong John Adams' prediction in 1774 that it would be "easier to effect a change in the solar system than to alter the church-state structure in Massachussetts."

Religious tests for holding public office went the way of establishments. As with establishments, religious requirements for public sevice were thought to violate religious liberty. By 1800, seven of the original thirteen states had

repealed religious test oaths. Most of the other states followed suit in the nineteenth century.

Puritan political theology had been removed from its throne. The rejection of state-sponsored religion, and religious tests for civil officeholding demonstrates that by the early 1800s the Puritan political mindset no longer held sway over a significant segment of the population. Through a series of factors, not the least of which were several points of congruence between Puritan and Enlightenment thought, Puritan-minded Americans voluntarily enlisted in an effort that would lead them to a destination they did not foresee nor entirely appreciate once they arrived there. Appropriated in a revolutionary movement and train of thought that would culminate in a secular constitution and the separation of church and state, it might be said that the Puritan mind, having once sat at the head of the table of American political philosophy, now unwittingly found itself waiting tables.

But it is important to note that religion was not entirely removed from the picture by the framers. The seemingly secular character of the new Constitution also rested to some degree on the tendency of many of the leading thinkers of the day to analogize it to the manner in which God himself was thought to govern the universe. With the spread of Enlightenment rationalism, the pervading theological metaphor for God's method of controlling the universe was a constitutional paradigm. This provided the political leaders with a vocabulary they could use to express the new concepts of a federal constitutional

government. Thus Americans could accept Thomas Paine's characterization of the republican system of government as "always parallel with the order and immutable laws of nature, and meets the reason of man in every part." Madison also could defend the idea of a constitutional government by appealing to its progenitor as God, "the supreme lawgiver of the universe." And John Adams would note to Jefferson that the "general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God; and that those principles of liberty are as unalterable as human nature and our terrestrial, mundane system." The kind of constitutionalism conceived by the founders was infused with a divine imprimatur – a necessary advantage to obtain and sustain the support in the hearts and minds of the people. Thus the new Constitution was never presented as a completely secular document; the idea of the providential hand of God's was consistently retained.

### **C. Reflections**

How all of this works itself out in America today is a matter of some controversy. The relationship between religion and government in the United States is complex, if anything. The framers were on the whole themselves unclear, and in some disagreement about the role that religion should play in national life. There is no dispute that, as a body, they were firmly of the view that the federal government should not interfere with the free exercise of religion so long as it did not disrupt peace and order. They were also of the view that the

government should disaffirm any special competence in religious matters. They were of differing opinions, however, about whether the federal government might exercise some subordinate, supportive role that would encourage religion or acknowledge the government's accountability to God as a human institution. Early presidential thanksgiving proclamations, congressional chaplaincies, and legislation reciting the merits of religion (such as the Northwest Ordinance) are evidence that many of the framers believed that the Establishment Clause should be read to countenance at least a very indirect role for religion in national life. What is abundantly clear, however, is that the old Puritan theology that called for theocratic government was rejected by the framers. America's broad religious diversity and love for liberty make it improbable that Puritan thinking will ever return to the throne of American public philosophy.