

The American Denominational System, Early American Religious Nationalism, Revolution, and concepts of “Freedom”

- This lesson will address the established churches and development of the uniquely American denominational system
- It will also look at the role of the New England clergy in developing an initial concept of Religious Nationalism along with the American Revolution
- The first Great Awakening will be looked at although this could alternatively be seen as successive waves of “revival”
- Lastly the concept of “Freedom” will be discussed in a cultural and religious concept and it is not what most would expect

The Established or State Supported Churches

- The original colonists did not hold to a concept of freedom of religion but replicated the church state union from England and Europe
- In New England the Congregational church replaced the Church of England and in Virginia and the southern colonies, the status and position of the Anglican Church was initially maintained much like the mother country
 - Both were state supported and, from a free market perspective, tended to operate like government institutions
 - Clergy tended to be unmotivated and catered to more established and wealthier populations
 - Due to economic factors rural populations were not well served
- While Puritanism isn't a denomination or a sect it closely aligns with the Congregational Church
 - Congregationalism appeared in England (East Anglia) in the late 1500's and is traceable to English church separatist Robert Browne
 - In England they were called separatists or Independents to distinguish themselves from Presbyterians and Reformed Churches. They established churches across English empire
 - In England, Congregationalists took control of the Parliament after the Second Civil War ending in 1649 with Pride's Purge, oversaw the trial and execution of Charles I, and established the British Commonwealth. In 1660 they lost power when the monarchy was restored
- Anglicans were the established church of Virginia and national Church of England
 - The church attempted to define a middle ground between Catholicism and the Lutheran and Reformed traditions or "*via media*"
 - In time, however, conflict between the Puritans and conservatives, that also aligned along political divisions, led to swings back and forth in control of the church

The Congregationalists

- Of the various religious groups during the colonial and antebellum periods, the Congregationalists were by far the most important from a geo-political perspective
 - Congregationalists, even including their off shoot groups (Unitarians, Universalists, Transcendentalists) were in terms of percentages very small and regional
- Congregationalist's churches weren't structured as denominations at least in part because they were so closely integrated with the government and the broader society
 - The Cambridge Platform for the Massachusetts Bay colony was signed in 1648 which established standards for ordaining ministers, accepting church members, and cooperating between churches
 - In Connecticut in 1708 the Saybrook platform gave ministers the ability to meet together in associations and make binding decisions over individual churches
 - Initially the process of joining a Congregationalist church was somewhat involved. Potential members had to testify to a religious conversion experience then be approved by the minister, elders, and the rest of the congregation
 - Within a generation these rules were reformulated to avoid erosion in membership
- It produced prominent clergy and lay people who were instrumental in initiating the Revolutionary War, the Civil War or War Between the States, and the First World War along with social reform movements including abolitionism, temperance /prohibition, and women's suffrage
 - also produced groups that most Christians see as being either cults or at least outside of Christian doctrines even when defined very loosely such as Unitarians, Universalists, and Transcendentalists

The Congregationalists (cont.)

- In Congregational theology of the time period, church and state had separate roles and responsibilities but worked together to ensure godly standards governed the society
 - Everyone in the colony had to attend a (Congregationalist) church and follow the commonwealth laws that instituted prevailing religious practices
 - Quoting from Congregationalist website *“no one anywhere in Europe believed that religion should be a personal choice: the church was an arm of the government, and rulers always decided how their people would worship”*
 - *“It was a “holy experiment”, a place where a dedicated band of believers would show the world what Jesus Christ really intended.”*
- The Congregationalists had a fairly intense interest in end of history prophecies or beliefs (Eschatology) that wasn’t common to other groups of the time period
 - Their beliefs were post millennial focusing on creating the kingdom of God on earth (pre millennial / dispensational belief system would form until early 1800’s)
 - Some reference to prophetic beliefs regarding a Jewish state but in a post millennial context
 - Also reflected an interest in spiritualism, occultism (arguable), and German philosophers
- Their ranks in terms of percentages started to decline after the first couple of decades in the new world
 - Never had any strong appeal or membership from people outside of their ethno-religious group.
 - Their churches were almost entirely within New England

The Denominational System

- The American denominational system that developed was unique from other regions of the world where there would tend to be a dominant church linked to the government
- The American denominations were originally largely regional
 - but grew to compete with each other so all areas became contested in terms of the religious marketplace
 - In the north, the denominational differences would come to be perceived as being relatively minor and people would eventually come to move fairly easily from one group
- Baptists
 - emerged out of the Puritan Separatist movement as did the Congregationalists but gradually took a different path that separated church from state
 - General Baptists were founded by John Smyth who was an Anglican minister who developed puritan or separatist views. He left the church and joined a small separatist congregation in Gainsborough outside of London
 - Particular Baptists followed the General Baptists by about one generation and were Calvinists believing that *“Christ died only for a particular group, the elect”*
 - Roger Williams with John Clarke, are considered the founders of the Baptist Church in America and the colony of Rhode Island along with the core concept of religious liberty and opposition to a state sponsored church
 - Williams established a Baptist Church in Providence and Clarke began a church in Newport

The Denominational System (cont.)

- Methodists

- The Methodist Church gradually broke away from the Anglican Church under John Wesley although not during his life time
- John Wesley was born in 1703, educated at Oxford, and ordained as a deacon in the Anglican Church in 1725. Wesley was ordained as a priest in 1728 and returned to Oxford in 1729
- He and his brother Charles formed a study group that emphasized consistency and routine in spiritual discipline which led to them coming to be referred to as “*Methodists*”
- After a failed mission in Georgia, the brothers became associated with members of the Church of the Brethren, who were staying in England before joining Monrovia settlements in the American colonies.
- The Monroviaans were decidedly Evangelical promoting a specific conversion experience which translated to American Evangelicalism
- in Bristol Wesley joined Whitfield preaching in an open air setting which was the beginning of the Methodist revival meetings
- Whitefield and Wesley eventually moved apart due to Whitefield’s belief in predestination

- Presbyterians

- The Presbyterian Church derives from the Church of Scotland and came to the colonies with Scottish Immigrants
- Theologically they were Calvinists or part of the Reformed School and were similar to the Puritans in that sense
- The Presbyterians were the second most prevalent denomination in colonial America in 1776 and also had a strong presence in Puritan New England

Population of Churches in America in 1776

Congregational (all in North East)	668
Baptist	497
Episcopal	495
Quakers	310
German Reformed	159
Lutheran	150
Dutch Reformed	120
Methodist	65
Catholic	56
Moravian	31

The First Great Awakening

- Beginning in the 1730's the revivalists, led by George Whitefield started to reshape the church in colonial America.
 - Whitefield would speak without a church, pulpit, or denominational sponsor as need be and his meetings drew huge crowds commonly running into the thousands. A crowd estimated at 30,000 heard him speak on the Boston Commons
 - He was especially critical of Harvard and Yale that produced most of the Clergy
 - It should be noted regarding Whitefield that he was in no way an abolitionist having advocated the expansions of slavery in Georgia and was in every respect a Puritan advocating what would later become known as “blue laws” including the banning of theatre, dancing, drinking, and music outside of church
- The First Awakening is generally seen as preserving Christianity at least temporarily amongst America's political or ruling class principally in New England
- This period could be seen as the birth of American Evangelicalism that then spread across the expanding country after the revolution
 - existing churches saw the revivalists in most cases as competitors and the clergy in particular did not appreciate competition from lowly paid bi-vocational preachers (Methodists / Baptists)
 - Some also saw the emotional aspects of the conversion experience, which is central to Evangelicalism, as being shallow and transient representing an over-simplified faith
 - The degree to which the new revivalism presented several characteristics of evolving protestant faith from England such as free grace and the revival meeting style was unmistakable
 - The simple, clear, and emotionally validating message of the revivalist was far more appealing to the unchurched and uncommitted than the theological lectures that were common at the time

The New England Clergy

- The clergy was the only leisure class with time available to address subjects that were not utilitarian. They would preach on Sunday and teach the rest of the week
 - They wrote prolifically including books and pamphlets, filled most chairs in the church established college system, and were the primary source of political opinion and commentary
- Congregationalists had some distinct advantages over the Anglicans
 - The Anglicans had a following of only the planters or ruling class in the Tidewater areas
 - The tidewater population was largely rural and difficult to access, it was also largely male
 - Congregationalists had a somewhat higher and probably more enthusiastic participation level amongst the ruling class
 - Population in New England was more concentrated in towns and had a merchant class
 - The college system they established, although tending to secularize rapidly from the beginning, was the gateway to the upper levels of society and remains so today
- “In New England, the unity of church and state was virtually complete”
 - Quote from William and Mary Beard
 - Congregational churches were fully opposed to the Anglican Church which was a branch of the English government making the churches a natural focal point of resistance to English rule
 - New England clergy generated massive amounts of written material. Cotton Mather, for example authored 383 books and pamphlets
 - In conjunction with government authorities, they enforced strict observance of the Sabbath, which included any sort of amusement or even worldly conversation, and implemented the American version of witch hunts

Separation from England

- The revolution was driven by largely economic issues that were and are presented in a philosophical and religious context
 - France and England led to several military encounters prior to the beginning of the Seven Year War. King William's War (1689-1697), Queen Anne's War (1701 – 1713), and King George's War (1744 – 1748) all involved American colonists
 - The most significant lasting effect of these continual smaller wars was the gradual development of a military capability with the colonies that was not solely tied to England
 - The 7 Year War, or the French Indian War as it has been taught in American schools, was a turning point in colonial history
 - The colonist's interactions with the Indian populations presents differently at different places and times and didn't have any sort of coherent plan at any level
- Throughout the colonial period prior to the Seven Year War, the colonists saw some restrictions on trade but these were moderate and not rigidly enforced
 - Restrictive laws were supplemented by other measures that were favorable to the colonies and it was generally concluded that colonists gained more than they lost by British rule
 - They also benefitted greatly from British military protection and investment and, in terms of taxation, were net beneficiaries. The Americans owed a great deal of their prosperity to England
 - Following the Seven Year War, a number of taxes were imposed on the colonies to increase revenue along with restrictions on the printing of paper money by the colonies
 - Cheap money had been used to pay taxes and debts to British creditors and is why Ben Franklin had referred to the revolution as a banking war
 - Estimates of the tax burden on the American colonist during the colonial period range from 1% of GDP to 2.5% varying with the area and the time period

The Clergy and the War

- The back and forth actions escalated leading to the Five Intolerable Acts that went through parliament in March and April of 1774 with little opposition
 - The fourth act legalized the quartering of troops in Massachusetts towns and the fifth, referred to as the Quebec Act, granted religious tolerance to Catholics in Canada
 - The Quebec Act was the most offensive to Protestant churches
- the New England clergy, played a key role in supporting the war through sermons and a vast amount of writings
 - Abigail Adams wrote her husband, *“The clergy of every denomination, not excepting the Episcopalian, thunder and lightning every Sabbath. They pray for Boston and Massachusetts, They thank God most explicitly and fervently for our remarkable success. They pray for the American Army*
 - Supportive Clergy were given ample time to address congress
- The war was cast and portrayed in prophetic terms
 - It was reasoned that in order for the millennium to come, Christ must defeat the Antichrist
 - The Antichrist, from shortly after the time of the reformation, was interpreted to refer to the papacy
 - Therefore it was reasoned by American dissenters, that any political or military defeat of Catholic countries (or in this case Anglican which was not far enough removed) was a step toward the dawning of the millennium which raised the cause of political liberty to that of a sacred mission
 - Samuel West of Dartmouth in an annual election sermon before the legislature in 1776 stated that the minions of the Antichrist *“better be understood as political rather than ecclesiastical tyrants”* and then went on to say that the *“horrible wild beast”* ascending from the bottomless pit in Revelation could refer to the British army

Demographics of the Conflict

- Blockades
 - While the British had a strong advantage at Sea, embargo and blockades were largely ineffective during this war which is a major contrast from most wars before and since
 - The American population, outside of the coastal cities and large plantations, consisted largely of subsistence farmers who produced what they consumed and were not dependent on trade to survive
 - Those who most supported the revolution were those most impacted by British measures effecting trade and banking
- Torres
 - Patriot groups were fairly ruthless in dealing with Torres. They commonly called on men to sign a loyalty or association test. If they didn't do this, they were jailed or became outlaws
 - In New England their property was confiscated and applied to fund the revolution
 - In addition to political suppression, there was also mob violence. Some were hung without trial and many others were tarred and feathered
 - In total, about 46,000 Torres fled to Canada or other locations
- Popular Support for the Revolution
 - It's not really possible to determine which side had popular support in the colonies as there was no election and no polls and there is conflicting evidence and claims
 - John Adams asserted that two thirds were for the American cause and one third for the British
 - Torre John Galloway, who had been in the First Continental Congress but later left for England, claimed that only about 20% of the colonial population supported the revolution
 - A committee of American loyalists stated in an address to the king that *"the number of Americans in his majesty's Army exceeded the number of troops enlisted by Congress to oppose them."*

Myths of the Revolution

- The idea that government comes from the consent of the governed and that the governed should play a role in the government was not a radical new concept
 - It was actually based on the Magna Carta with a long history in British common law
- There were strong regional patterns in support for the Revolution
 - Economic motivations overwhelmingly benefitted the New England states and New York
 - Southern sympathy was based on the concept that the Northern colonies were getting their rights violated as Englishmen
 - Heavy handed occupation policies drove people to support the rebellion
- While establishing a Republic they were not advocates of Democracy.
 - Starting with Hamilton who is considered the most “progressive” of the founders; *“Experience has proved that no position in politics is more false than this. The ancient democracies.. never possessed one feature of good government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure, deformity.”*
 - *“The evils we experience flow from an excess of democracy. The people do not want virtue but are dupes of pretend patriots” Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts*
 - *“A democracy is the only pure Republic but is impracticable beyond a small town” Thomas Jefferson*
 - *“Give all the power to the many, they will oppress the few. Give all the power to the few, they will oppress the many. Both, therefore, ought to have the power, that each may defend against the other. Alexander Hamilton*
 - When modern politicians worship at the altar of democracy they are appealing to a false history. The founders saw government as something that was potentially very dangerous and needed to be constrained through a system of checks and balances

Myths of the Revolution (cont..)

- Universal suffrage
 - Voting rights were highly limited in early America very similar to what they were in England
 - certain rights may be conveyed by God to all men, participation in government was bestowed based on specific criteria intended to ensure people who voted had a stake in the society
 - The founders believed in a natural hierarchy of talents and abilities which reflects a sort of natural self-organization that has always been present in history
 - Jefferson wrote of this, *“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization. It expects what never was and will never be”*
- Slavery
 - the North and specifically the New England states, benefitted greatly from the transport of slaves across the New World, were economically dependent on slave produced crops and raw materials, and produced the ships but slave owning was also wide spread in the North during the colonial period
 - William Penn, John Winthrop, John Hancock, and Benjamin Franklin owned slaves as did many other Northern signers of the declaration and delegates to the constitutional convention
 - Beyond investing heavily in slavery as a business, the institution was widely spread in New England at this time
 - Half of all ministers, lawyers, and public officials in Connecticut owned slaves
 - Most principal families in Norwich, Hartford, and New Haven owned slaves

Understanding “Freedom”

- Freedom is commonly assumed to mean the ability to do with your life as you see fit within the constraints of not directly limiting the ability of others to do likewise
- In a libertine sense, in colonial America and in Monarchies, this really wasn't much of an issue. People were free but not necessarily very responsible.
- To many of the founders, especially those of Puritan or, to a somewhat lesser extent, Episcopalian backgrounds, there was a bit more to the concept that must be understood for the context of the term to be fully grasped
- When the founders looked across Boston or Philadelphia in 1776 what would he have seen ? (the following examples are from “Renegade History”)
 - In Philadelphia which had only a population of 24,000 at the time, there were 160 licensed taverns. There were also many unlicensed taverns equating to at least one tavern for every 100 residents
 - In Boston in the middle of the century, it was estimated that liquor was sold at one of every eight residential houses (note Boston and Philadelphia were seaport towns)
 - Within these establishments, the crowd was typically ethnically mixed including both free blacks and slaves (laws in some colonies forbade this but they were largely ignored and not enforced), accompanied with music that was a combination of African and Borderland musical heritages
 - Drinking was frequently done before work, or at work, and even instead of work. These patterns were so well ingrained and the labor supply was tight enough that employers didn't or couldn't do much about it in many places
 - Women owned and operated a large percentage of taverns during the colonial period, especially in port cities. Roughly 40 percent of the taverns in Boston during the 1760s were owned by women

Tavern Culture and Creating Civil Discipline

- “*Tavern culture*” worked against discipline or authority and didn’t respect or elevate the status of elite society
 - There were also the common social problems that are associated with alcoholism along with a degrading of the nuclear family.
 - Births to unwed mothers were very high with one out of twenty people between 1790 and 1799 having at least one illegitimate child.
 - Divorce was also easy to obtain for women as well as men
- Liberty in the context of the time addressed political liberty which attempted to replace external constraints on behaviors with voluntary restraints willingly adopted by the citizenry
 - Political liberty could in many respects be seen as intentionally constraining personal liberty much in the same way that the phrase “*freedom from sin*”
- John Adams
 - *It would produce so much Taste and Politeness, so much Elegance in Dress, Furniture, Equipage, so much Musick and Dancing, so much Fencing and Skating, so much Cards and Backgammon, so much Horse Racing and Cockfighting, so many Balls and Assemblies, so many Plays and Concerts that the very imagination of them makes me feel vain, light, frivolous, and insignificant.”*
 - *“Under a well-regulated Commonwealth, the People must be wise virtuous and cannot be otherwise. Under a Monarchy they may be as vicious and foolish as they please, nay, they cannot but be vicious and foolish ... [T]here is one Difficulty which I know not how to get over. Virtue and Simplicity of Manners are indispensably necessary in a Republic among all orders and Degrees of Men.”*

Creating Discipline (cont..)

- Revolutionary leaders actually saw boycotts of British goods as a way to increase discipline and selflessness in the population
 - Boston Evening-Post editorialized that Americans *“of late years insensibly drawn into too great a degree of luxury and dissipation.”*
 - *“It seems plain to me that the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, where reason does not authorize them.”* John Locke
 - *“I hope the war will last until it introduces among us the same temperance in pleasure, the same modesty in dress, the same justice in business, and the same veneration for the name of the Deity which distinguished our (Puritan) ancestors.”* Benjamin Rush
 - *“Luxury and Extravagance are in my opinion totally destructive of those Virtues which are necessary for the Preservation of the Liberty and Happiness of the People”* Benjamin Rush
- Over time the shame of pleasure and comfort made its way into the American psyche and church, especially in the Puritan regions of the North
 - these behaviors in the minds of the unchurched largely defined the faith. These sorts of sins were victimless in that they didn’t directly involve anyone against their will, but collectively they break down the nuclear family structure and erode society
 - Legislation aimed at enforcing personal morality became more standard and accepted over time
 - This could be seen as the initial projection of the Yankee soul onto the other cultures
 - It also played a role in the treatment of Blacks in the North, leading to the establishment of Black codes, as well as anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant persecution

Jefferson and Adams

- As to how successful this shaping of society was, in many respects, at least through the mid-20th century, it would seem to have been remarkably successful although requiring a good deal of patience
- While John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were political adversaries, later in life they became friends and regularly corresponded with each other
 - In the last years of his life, Adams wrote to Jefferson this fundamental question: *“Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice, and folly?”*
 - Jefferson could not formulate a response to this
 - Adams was born a Calvinist Congregationalist who was influenced by Deism and eventually would up a Unitarian while Jefferson is generally considered to be a deist. Both, however, saw Christian religion as necessary for society to function .
- This then leaves us with a key question
- *If the success of the Republic is dependent on the people to which it is entrusted achieving and holding to high moral, along with spiritual and intellectual standards, what happens when these prerequisites are not met?*