Revolution and Religion
The Debate over Religious Establishment

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Abstract

This paper examines just how radical the American Revolution truly was through the lens of early American Religion by analyzing the effects of the revolution on American churches and the relationship between church and state.

The American Revolution created both an institutional and ideological crisis in American religion. The war itself demanded the involvement of many churches and religious leaders and disrupted religious establishments. This caused the churches to decline and sparked a vigorous debate over the separation of church and state which included the expansion of religious freedom. This increased liberty of thought and action, to believe and to worship, was the greatest effect produced by the American Revolution upon American religion. Legal concessions produced by tolerant American legislation, especially the Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty, and the pluralism of American society ultimately resulted in the codification of religious freedom in American law as the First Amendment to the Constitution. The cumulative results of the revolutionary period ultimately established an unprecedented degree of religious liberty.

This liberty however, was simply part of a larger debate involving religious establishment. The arguments for a strong connection between political and religious authority differed among the states. Many contended that the piety and morality produced by religion would strengthen American society and government while others felt that political regulation would only diminish individual freedoms and lead to civil and moral abuses. The protestant consensus throughout the country eventually led to greater tolerance towards various denominations (especially Christian churches), and the establishment-not of an official state church-but of a foundation for increased religious activity.
The American Revolution created both an institutional and ideological crisis in American religion, causing the churches to decline and sparking a vigorous debate over the separation of church and state which included the expansion of religious freedom. The greatest effect produced by the American Revolution upon American religion though was the establishment—not of a church - but of the principle of religious freedom in American society and its codification in American law as the First Amendment to the Constitution. The cumulative results of the revolutionary period ultimately established an unprecedented degree of religious liberty.

For the American churches, the revolution produced an institutional crisis. First, the war resulted in a period of “distraction, disruption, and decline” 1 Many churches needed to reconstitute themselves altogether in the aftermath of military combat. Also, the importance of political issues contributed to a new legalistic method of approaching traditional theological questions. Finally, evolving church and state relationships created new opportunities for growth and suggested a new age of religious freedom. 2 The entire era however, marked perhaps the greatest poverty of established religion in American history. It was the spiritual depression immediately precipitating the surge of evangelism of the Second Great Awakening which occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The war initiated this decline by damaging the clerical leadership of the churches. During the conflict, many partisan pastors fled as opposing armies approached. Others were drawn into the rebellion as chaplains and some even joined the revolution as actual combatants. Generally, the war left the churches disorganized and preoccupied with military and political concerns throughout America. 3 Most Tory ministers fled while revolutionary preachers were interrupted by the conflict. 4 In addition, the war diminished the possibilities of training or recruiting clergymen since most of the academic facilities were put to military use. 5

Significantly, the revolutionary era also conceived an ideological crisis within American religion over the question of religious establishment and religious liberty. Religious freedom and tolerance gradually increased during this time until they were legally codified with the passage of the First Amendment to the Constitution in 1791. Originally, religious freedom was formally recognized only in Rhode Island and Maryland but was eventually accepted to a degree in most of the colonies. 6 The English Bill of Rights, tolerant American legislation, and the remarkable pluralism of American society ultimately contributed to a continuous

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2 Ahlstrom, 442.
3 Ahlstrom, 442-443.
4 Ahlstrom, 443.
5 Ahlstrom, 443.
6 Ahlstrom, 459.
series of legal concessions. The Massachusetts Declaration of Rights (1780) affirmed some of those concessions, proclaiming,

All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights...It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly...to worship the Supreme Being, the great creator and preserver of the universe. And no subject shall be hurt, molested or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience.

Helped by the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty, these developments accelerated during the revolutionary period. Toleration was granted after the war to virtually all Protestants in every state. Many calls for religious toleration, though, originated with non-Christians. Jews in Philadelphia petitioned the state legislature in 1783 for a revision of the constitution. They complained that a mandatory oath for representatives in the state assembly inherently deprived Jews of their natural rights and so they insisted on more tolerant treatment by the state. Citing their basic belief in God, the Jewish community in Philadelphia insisted that their conduct and behavior was equally moral and orderly to that of Pennsylvania Christians and similarly corresponded with the ideals pronounced by the American Revolution. Ultimately, Pennsylvania amended the state constitution in 1789-1790 to accommodate Jews on an equal basis with Christians before the law. It was Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty however, that proved the most revolutionary. In 1786 Jefferson wrote,

No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.

7 Ahlstrom, 459-460.
9 Ahlstrom, 442.
The expansion of religious liberty though took time. *The Virginia Declaration of Rights* written by George Mason in 1776 expressed similar ideas but only in 1779 was the Anglican Church disestablished, and it was not until 1786 that Jefferson’s statute was enacted. The sanctioning of complete religious freedom in Virginia was nevertheless unprecedented, and meant that everyone was free to aspire to any political office regardless of their religious beliefs or practices. For Jefferson, he considered it one of the three greatest achievements of his life. Such an ideological discontinuity with English tradition and indeed with history itself was truly radical. The expansion and extension of religious liberty thus defended against the intolerant abuses and violence of European history and the discrimination of the American colonial past.

The issue of religious liberty was part of a larger debate involving the question of religious establishment. Nearly everyone during the revolutionary era acknowledged the importance of religious liberty. The major question was whether government should directly support religion. Each state had a different view of the matter. Most believed that the state should assist the churches in some way. The majority of the Founding Fathers opposed laws that made church attendance compulsory since they viewed man’s approach to God as a personal relationship. Jefferson in particular sought to rescue religion from state sponsorship which could lead to injustice, discrimination, and violence. He did not argue against religious faith or morality but rather resisted monopoly and political domination. Despite throwing off British colonial rule, many Americans still adhered to the European tradition of a strong connection between political and religious institutions. In Britain, the King was the supreme head of the Church of England. It was not until the establishment of the First Amendment to the Constitution that the United States broke with that convention and instituted religious liberty.

During the revolutionary period, most Americans argued for some form of public, state aid to the (protestant) churches. South Carolina had experimented with a constitution in 1778 which supported all varieties of orthodox Protestantism. This view was based upon the quasi-universal presumption that the happiness of a people and the order of civil government depended upon moral and religious piety. Bostonians asserted in 1780 that, “Piety, religion and morality are essential to the happiness and good order of a people and that these

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14 Ahlstrom, 460.
principles are diffused by the publick worship of God, and by publick instructions.”

The Massachusetts Declaration of Rights (1780) also declared that such morality could only be diffused by the establishment of both public worship and instruction. Therefore, the people had a right to invest their government with the necessary power to authorize a state-supported religion. Still, every denomination would be afforded equal protection under the law; never would any sect be subordinated to another. Believing that the ideal of religious toleration was compatible with compulsory support for churches, Massachusetts declared that the duty of good government was to prevent different denominations from molesting and disturbing one another.

The government must arbitrate between these different sects for “every religion which is persecuted, becomes itself persecuting.” Thus, a state established religion was acceptable so long as it encouraged Christian morality and allowed everyone to pursue the truth for themselves. Each individual, for his part, should be allowed to maintain and profess his own system of religion provided that it did not undermine the good order and peace of society. For Rev. Ezra Stiles, a prominent Congregational minister and president of Yale University, America could never fulfill its divine destiny unless virtue was properly diffused among the population. After all, Rev. Stiles believed holiness was the end of all civil government. Without true religion (Christian Protestantism), the system of government in the United States was imperfect.

An opposing view favored the perspective of classical liberalism, holding that humanity and liberty were threatened by government. Religious institutions were only safe when separate from political institutions. Therefore, the “government should enable churches to operate on their own-but should do nothing more.”

In 1780 Ashby, Massachusetts issued a statement opposing a religious establishment. The declaration logically averred that no religious society chose their state legislature and thus, neither should the state choose any kind of religion. Every religious body should be independent from any political force in the same way that the United States was independent from Great Britain. Just as

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17 Brown, 312.
20 Brown, 311.
the British had no right to legislate on behalf of the American colonies, no government should have the ability to regulate the churches. Many cited the Bible as a testimony against religious establishment, suggesting a separation between religious and political forces. Like Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 who took it upon himself to support the Ark of God and was struck dead, the Ashby proclamation insinuated that states themselves would suffer should they attempt to interfere with religion. Both Quakers and Baptists led by Isaac Backus protested against the quasi-establishment religious tax mandated by Massachusetts even before independence in 1774, Backus wrote,

*these lines are to let you know that we are determined not to pay...not only upon your principle of not being taxed where we are not represented, but also because we dare not render that homage to any earthly power which I and many of my brethren are fully convinced belongs only to God.*

Both the Quakers and Baptists thus refused the taxation of the colonies by the British Parliament and the taxation of Massachusetts churches by the state. James Madison also protested religious taxes which he felt violated the natural and unalienable rights of mankind, “Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the Manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence. The religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man.” It was to preserve government that the bounds separating church and state had to be maintained. Contrary to Rev. Stiles, Madison claimed that civil government did not actually need religion to be secure. Religious establishments would make the United States a signal of persecution, not an asylum. Madison further alleged that interference with religion and the right to free exercise would actually destroy moderation and harmony among American society. Therefore, government should “leave this particular right untouched and sacred.”

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25 Brown, 324.
The debate over ratification of the federal constitution, especially the concerns of Antifederalists, brought the discussion of religious establishment to the forefront of the American political and religious consciousness. Americans commonly feared that religious oppression followed religious monopoly. Article Six of the Constitution had prohibited any kind of religious test as a qualification to any office. To quell the fears of an elite national religious establishment, James Madison championed the passage of the First Amendment which states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The revolution also increased denominationalism among American religion. “The religious situation of many Christian churches and sects when none of them occupies a privileged situation and each has an equal claim to status as a Christian community in the eyes of the law” was ubiquitous in American society in the late 18th century. This condition in the United States however, also repudiated the claims of the Roman Catholic Church, churches of the Magisterial Reformation, and other sects that claimed to be the sole possessor of true Christian doctrine and authority. In addition, denominationalism rejected the concept that all Christians must be comprised within a single church. This inclusive perception allowed respect for each church and community, as well as increased toleration. Rev. Ezra Stiles felt America should be committed to encompassing all the religious sects and denominations of Christendom. He viewed the United States as a tolerant refuge for all Christian variations, a place where all denominations would be independent of one another. None would have claim to superior secular powers or civil immunities. This separation between the churches and the state would thus increase tolerance and prevent a power struggle from developing among the different denominations. To the world, America would be a shining beacon of a harmonious civil society despite having deep religious differences.

27 Ahlstrom, 461.
28 Ahlstrom, 461.
29 Cousins, 13.
30 Stiles, 317-318.
Revolution and Religion

Thus the American Revolution resulted in an institutional crisis among declining American churches in addition to an influx in denominationalism and an ideological crisis which culminated in the legal separation of church and state and the expansion of religious freedom. Even though a protestant consensus underlay the tolerance of American religion, the revolutionary era sparked debate over religious establishment which ultimately saw the consummation of unprecedented religious freedom for the United States. Americans managed the relations between church and state in such a way that granted a radical degree of religious freedom while providing a foundation for American religion to prosper, both a precedent for history and the beginning of continuity for the future. 31

Bibliography


31 Brown, 312.