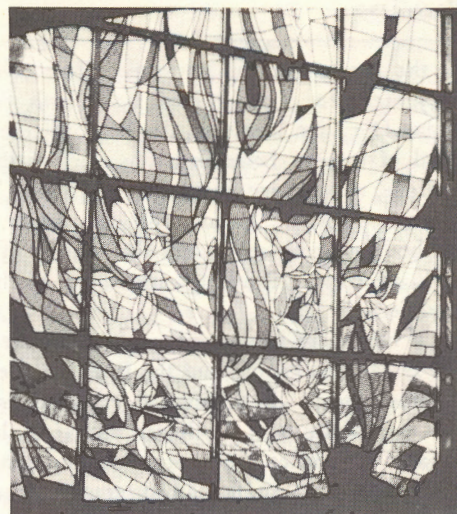


# RELIGION

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## *Religion and the American Revolution*

W. Stitt Robinson

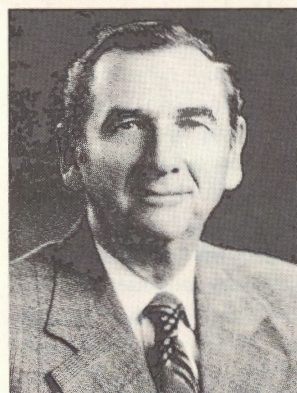
The American Revolution was not a religious war, but there were significant influences of religion during the Revolutionary Era and there were important changes that resulted from the conflict.

### PRE-REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS

Two major religious and intellectual movements preceded the Revolution in the eighteenth century and made their respective contributions to the leading ideas of the time. *First, the Great Awakening* was part of an international movement evident also in Germany and England that placed primary stress upon emotional and evangelical appeals in religion. Among the leaders of this movement in the American colonies were Jonathan Edwards who initiated his Edwardian revival in the 1730's, and George Whitefield from England who came to the colonies in 1739 and preached vigorously as he traveled from Massachusetts to Georgia. In Germany there were pietist groups such as the Moravians, Mennonites, Dunkards, and Schwenkfelders who contributed to migration to the colonies. And in England, John and Charles Wesley were leaders in the Methodist movement. There was a diversity of theology among these leaders as exemplified in Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. Edwards, one of the most powerful intellects of Colonial America, preached hell fire and damnation along with expounding freedom of the will within the limits of Calvinism and salvation of the elect. John Wesley, on the other hand, preached universal salvation through conversion as set forth in Arminianism which was named for Jacob Arminius, Dutch theologian of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. While the Great Awakening was divisive in contributing to splits within churches and denominations such as "Old Lights" and "New Lights" or "Old Sides" and "New Sides," it exerted positive influences in encouraging the founding of additional colleges by different denominations such as the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1746 (Presbyterian), Rhode Island College (Brown) in 1764 (Baptist), and Queen's College (Rutgers) in

1766 (Dutch Reformed). It involved the common man in a more active role in religion with the universality of salvation and gave an impulse to humanitarianism that was evident in the increased concern over the treatment of slaves. The questioning of established authority in religion gave encouragement to American patriots in the challenge of established British authority.

*The American Enlightenment* was the *second* movement of great significance with its emphasis upon the role of Reason and the ability of individuals to improve themselves and their society through the use of their powers of Reason. This led to the deification of Reason by Deism which influenced Thomas Jefferson and contributed to his reference to "Nature's God" in the following appeal in the Declaration of Independence: ". . . for one people . . . to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them. . . ." The "Laws of Nature" was the rationalist's emphasis on the natural rights philosophy which goes back to the appeal of Antigone to natural law in the Greek drama by Sophocles in the fifth century B.C.



This idea was later expounded in the thirteenth century A.D. in the thought of Thomas Aquinas who identified three kinds of law: divine law, natural law, and human law or the law of nations. The influence of John Locke was also very apparent in eighteenth-century America. In setting forth a theory of the state in harmony with Enlightenment precepts, Locke maintained that an individual's life in society must be regulated by principles of natural law. The agreements for social and political relations, including those stated in laws, stand as authority because

*A distinguished scholar of the American colonial period, W. Stitt Robinson, Professor of History at Kansas University, is widely read. Also a board member and Chairman of the Instruction Committee in the School of Religion, Dr. Robinson has long shared the concerns of religious studies. His bicentennial address relating these two areas was featured at the School's 1976 Burning Bush Society banquet; it is summarized here for our readers.*

of the consent of the governed. The ethical thought of the Enlightenment was derived from both the Greeks and the Judaic-Christian tradition. Its heritage, therefore, included the ideal of love or benevolence as well as the Greek virtues of courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom. The Enlightenment, influenced by the rationalism of science, adopted both the method of Greek ethics and the content of Christian morality, and its ethical thinking attempted to harmonize the two traditions.

While there were basic conflicts in the two movements of the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment, there were some common goals. Both favored religious freedom, both urged the disestablishment of church and state, both were interested in applied science, both promoted humanitarian reform, and both cooperated in the advancement of educational improvement, particularly in higher education.

### THE COLONIAL PULPIT

The pulpit was not immune to the conflict of the American Revolution. Even the role that the pulpit should play evoked controversy between the patriots or Whigs and the loyalists or Tories. Daniel Leonard, wealthy lawyer and loyalist of Massachusetts, complained of the potential of the patriot ministers:

When the clergy engage in a political warfare, religion becomes a most powerful engine, either to support or overthrow the state. What effect must it have had upon the audience to hear the same sentiments and principles which they had before read in a news-paper, delivered on Sundays from the pulpits, with a religious awe, and the most solemn appeals to heaven, from lips which they had been taught, from their cradles, to believe could utter nothing but eternal truths?<sup>1</sup>

John Adams responded that it was, indeed, the duty and right of clergymen to instruct their congregations on political affairs.

Adhering to the position championed by Adams, the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, Harvard graduate and minister of the West Church in Boston, published a tract in 1750 entitled *Discourse On Unlimited Submission and Passive Obedience*. He argued against the divine right theory of monarchy. From the natural law theory of the right of revolution, he developed the right to overturn a political order and set up a new government. John Adams designated this as the "opening gun" of the American Revolution. Mayhew later preached a sermon against the Stamp Act of 1765 and was blamed by the Tories for the riots that resulted in protest.

The Reverend Jonathan Boucher, an Anglican minister in Maryland, boldly demonstrated his loyalty to the Crown and took up the practice for his own protection on the eve of the Revolution of keeping two loaded pistols in the pulpit as he preached. He championed the divine right theory of monarchy and went on to challenge the consistency of the political theories of the patriots derived from John Locke by maintaining that the social contract theory of government was incompatible with the right of revolution.

The Reverend John Peter Muhlenberg followed a different course. As a Lutheran clergyman, he received ordination in the Anglican Church to serve his German congregation in Woodstock, Virginia. In January, 1776, he chose for the text of his sermon Ecclesiastes, third chapter, first verse: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (King James version). With the conclusion of the

sermon, he dramatically cast off his clerical gown and revealed his military uniform as a militia officer. Exhorting his congregation to follow him, he pursued a military career for the remainder of the war. The Revolutionary generation had to decide which preacher to follow.

This in itself was not always easy as demonstrated even by the Anglican clergy. In many colonies the Anglican clergy were loyalists but this was not true for Virginia as demonstrated in the conclusions of a recent study:

Among the 129 Anglican clergymen there were ten who refused to make any sort of *modus vivendi* with the revolutionary powers and fled from the province; ten others, although they remained faithful to their British allegiance during the war, continued residing in Virginia and eventually made peace with the new republican government; eleven Anglican clerics can best be identified as irresolute clergymen because they were both Tories and Whigs at different stages during the Revolution; twenty-two ministers were passive Whigs, continuing faithfully at their clerical posts, but taking no active part in revolutionary matters; twenty-one were moderately active Whigs, engaging in a variety of non-military revolutionary activities; and thirty-one clergymen were active Whigs, serving prominently on County Committees and in the provincial or continental armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

### VARIOUS RELIGIOUS BODIES

No definitive list of all religious groups in the thirteen colonies can be compiled from extant historical records for the Revolutionary Period, but the following eighteen denominations have been identified by one scholar with the approximate number of churches in 1775 out of a total of 3,228: Congregational, 668; Presbyterian, 588; Anglican, 495; Baptist, 494; Quaker, 310; German Reformed, 159; Lutheran, 150; Dutch Reformed, 120; Methodist, 65; Catholic, 56; Moravian, 31; Congregational-Separatist, 27; Dunker, 24; Mennonite, 16; French Protestant, 7; Sandemanian, 6; Jewish, 5; Rogerene (Baptist), 3.<sup>3</sup>

Two of these Protestant churches enjoyed in Colonial America a preferred official position in the association of state and church. The Anglican Church had by law become the official church in Virginia, Maryland, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and in part of New York. In Virginia, for example, where the association was most effectively established, taxes were collected for support of the Church, marriages were to be performed by the Anglican Rector, funerals were to be in the Church cemetery and conducted by the Rector, and at times church attendance was prescribed by law. The dispersal of population over a wide area and the limited supply of ordained Anglican ministers militated against a rigid enforcement of these requirements, but they were still in effect on the eve of the Revolution. In New England, the Congregational Church had a special official position in the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, while Rhode Island followed the traditions of Roger Williams with the separation of church and state along with Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey where no religious group achieved a preferred legal position.

With the increased immigration of the eighteenth century that brought a substantial number of Scots-Irish and German

settlers to America, there developed an increasing resistance to the Anglican Church by dissenters or by colonists with little or no religious conviction. The experience of the staunch Anglican, the Reverend Charles Woodmason, in the back country of South Carolina from 1766 to 1772 reveals the ingenious efforts of the numerous dissenters and non-religious rogues to frustrate the work of the Church of England. Even though exaggerating in his *Journal* some of the episodes because of his Anglican bias, Woodmason enumerated enough of the deliberate actions to demonstrate the perils of his missionary efforts. They spread confusion by tampering with the signs announcing his meetings, and they on one occasion "carried off" the key to the meeting house. They gave away two barrels of whiskey to disrupt one meeting of listeners, and they broke up another one by turning loose fifty-seven barking dogs. For several years Woodmason persevered in the face of these harassments and struck back with vehement criticism of those who tormented him.

*On the eve of the American Revolution the tension increased relative to the status of certain churches.* Presbyterians and Baptists, for example, stepped up their assault upon the preferred position of the Anglicans by maintaining that church buildings and glebe lands purchased with tax money belonged to all members of the colony. Some colonists were also aroused over the proposals to bring to America a bishop for the Anglicans. Those most apprehensive maintained that the bishop would simply be another imperial official to control them. Protestants in general expressed some alarm over the passage by the British Parliament of the Quebec Act in 1774. They believed this gave encouragement to Roman Catholicism by extending the jurisdiction of Quebec southward to the area between the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and by providing therefore ". . . the free Exercise of the Religion of the Church of Rome. . . ." Yet as decisions over allegiance were made, most of the Catholics of the colonies who were located in Maryland and Pennsylvania cast their lot with the patriots. Father John Carroll of Maryland, who later became the first Catholic Bishop in America, served on the committee along with Benjamin Franklin and others who went to Canada and attempted to persuade the Canadians to join the thirteen colonies in revolt against British rule. Followers of Judaism were also challenged to support the patriots. Best known among Jewish contributions to the American revolutionary effort was the assistance of Haym Solomon to Robert Morris in efforts to stabilize the financial problems of the colonists, assistance which ended up consuming much of the private fortune of Solomon in behalf of the patriots.

#### CONCERN OVER CORRUPTION

A modern note that attracted the attention of American revolutionaries was the concern over corruption. This led to the tendency of a number of patriots to identify Great Britain with vice and America with virtue. Objecting to a plan for an intercolonial American legislature that would stand between the colonies and Parliament, Patrick Henry exclaimed: "We shall liberate our Constituents from a corrupt House of Commons, but thro[w] them into the Arms of an American legislature that may be bribed by that Nation which avows in the Face of the World, that Bribery is a Part of her System of Government."<sup>4</sup> While others expressed the same sentiments about Britain, John Adams turned his attention to the problems of the emerging American republic. Adams observed that

"There is too much Corruption, even in this infant Age of our Republic. Virtue is not in Fashion. Vice is not infamous."<sup>5</sup> Adams, while sitting with the Continental Congress in Philadelphia when it was threatened by General William Howe in 1777, pondered the alternatives if Howe captured the city. He concluded that even if this were to occur, the hardship "would cure Americans of their vicious and luxurious and effeminate Appetites, Passions and Habits, a more dangerous Army to American Liberty than Mr. Howes."<sup>6</sup> Howe did, indeed, take Philadelphia, but it did not immediately produce the virtue anticipated because some American farmers and tradesmen continued to sell to the British with more stable currency rather than to the American patriots who struggled in the face of hardships and privations during the cold winter at Valley Forge. The patriots, nonetheless, persevered and with assistance from France succeeded in victory by 1781.

#### SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

One of the most significant cultural impacts of the Revolution was the impetus to separation of church and state. This was most immediate in the case of the Anglican Church for the respective states took steps individually to wipe away the laws which had provided it an official establishment with tax support and other privileges. In the decisions for separation, many of the states witnessed an intensive debate over the status of religion in the form of general assessment plans for tax support of religion. The essence of these plans was the provision of a tax in proportion to the wealth of the taxpayer which would go for the support of the particular Christian church or minister of the taxpayer's choice. The tax would extend not only to Protestants but to Catholic, Jews, and others with the proviso in some plans that individuals without a religious affiliation could designate other goals for their tax such as support to the poor or to public education. In Virginia, for example, where general assessment plans were extensively debated, both George Washington and Patrick Henry favored a mandatory tax levy while Thomas Jefferson and James Madison argued successfully for voluntary commitments. **In support of his position, Jefferson stated in his Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty of 1786: ". . . Almighty God has created the mind free. . . truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict. . ."**

General assessment plans were adopted in New England where Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire implemented schemes that gave the Congregational Church most of the tax yield even though it did not continue exactly the same preferred official position of colonial days. These state plans continued despite the provision of the First Amendment to the Constitution which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion. . . ." Since the interpretation in the early years of the New Nation considered this a restriction only on the national government, general assessment plans continued in Connecticut until 1818, in New Hampshire until 1819, and in Massachusetts until 1833.

#### MOVEMENT TOWARD AMERICAN CONTROL

Reorganization and incorporation of religious bodies resulted from the separation from British control. Two changes came as a direct result of the split. The Anglican Church of colonial days was reorganized in 1786 as the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Two years

before in 1784, the Methodists in a conference at Baltimore had established the Methodist Episcopal Church as an American institution.

New religious organizations included the support of higher education by continuing the colleges of the colonial period and gradually creating additional ones. Another significant development was the provision in many of the new state constitutions for state universities. In subsequent years states eventually implemented this important addition to the institutions of higher education. As we continue today these agencies of education, we also recognize the mutual goals of religion and education as evidenced by the efforts of the University of Kansas and the Kansas School of Religion.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Leonard, *Massachusettsensis*. . . (London reprint of Boston edition, 1776), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Lohrenz, "The Virginia Clergy and the American Revolution, 1774-1799" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1970), p. 400.

<sup>3</sup> Charles O. Paullin, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Washington and New York, 1932), p. 50 and plate 82.

<sup>4</sup> Lyman H. Butterfield and others, eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), II, 143.

<sup>5</sup> Lyman Butterfield and others, eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963- ), II, 131.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 338.

ATHA MEMORIAL STUDY CENTER

The Joseph S. Atha Memorial Study Center is being prepared in conjunction with the religion library. A memorial gift from Mrs. Atha will provide special study furniture, retrieval and storage facilities and some curriculum equipment.

The Study Center will be used by students from the regular classes and will house the curriculum and research laboratory of the KCPERS.

Mrs. Atha is a resident of Overland Park; with her late husband she has been a long time friend of the School.

COLLINS ACTING CHAIRPERSON

Professor Mary Collins is serving as acting chairperson of the religion program during this fall semester while Dr. Taylor is on sabbatical leave. Irv Youngberg, a trustee, is representing the Board of Trustees in the administration. The dean is conducting research in public education religion curricula in other states.

SCHOOL OF RELIGION FUTURE

According to current plans, the religious studies program will be integrated into the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as a department beginning in the summer 1977. This implements the decision of the Kansas Board of Regents announced last April.

One of the benefits expected from this integration will be the possibility of added breadth in some curriculum areas which the School of Religion has not been funded to offer.

And it is expected to open expanded opportunities for those religious bodies and the generous friends who have been the support of the School.

The corporation, The Kansas School of Religion, will continue under its present charter. As always it stands to assist the religion teaching program. Its use of Irma I. Smith Hall goes on.

Further it plans to move into the expansion of some of its outreach programs in which an increasing number of people are participating. At present the principal interests are:

1. *Continuing Education*, particularly for in-service Kansas clergy and interested lay people,
2. *Public Education Religion Studies*, developing the resources and training programs of its Kansas Center for Public Education Religion Studies, now working with about 100 teachers a year,
3. *Religion*, increasing the scope and value of this ecumenical journal for the religion reading public of the state,
4. *Popular conferences* in religion featuring national leaders in concentrated seminar experiences,
5. *Religion Library* expansion to help keep pace with today's prolific publishing.

It will take time to define the future, but it is full of promise.

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