***Religious Issues in American History***

Outline of Topics and Resources—Jonas Sauder

**Introductory Observations.**

Religion—*religare—*“how one ‘ties together’ the various aspects of life in a meaningful whole.”

Religion involves BELIEF: what I know, understand, hold to

IDENTIY: who I am, how I fit in

PRACTICE: what/how I do

History is known, told, and read from a *perspective*, for a *purpose.*

Narrative, providential, triumphalist, cause-effect, investigative… ?

Common *myths* of American history include…

**Myth:**a usually traditional story of [ostensibly](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ostensibly) historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon.

Common beliefs that undergird some common myths of American history include…

“Self-evident truths:” Life, liberty & pursuit of *happiness*

Sovereignty of the people: Majority rule/minority rights

Progress

Manifest destiny

Separation of church and state

Identity: What is an American? *Democracy in America* by Tocqueville

“City set on a Hill” & “Holy Experiment”

Selected religious *issues* that flow through American history

1. **Puritanism**
   1. Separatists (Pilgrims): from England to Holland to Plymouth in Massachusetts.
   2. Puritans: Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630’s
      1. Dissenters who couldn’t change or leave Anglican church
      2. 3000 mile distance allowed a 3rd alternative—a new “experiment”
   3. Rhode Island: Roger Williams (Anne Hutchinson)
      1. Pay Indians for land? Are titles clear?
      2. Can religion be forced by civil authority?
   4. Congregationalism
      1. no bishops
      2. local congregational rule
      3. membership of converted
      4. voluntary covenant
   5. John Eliot: missionary to Indians
      1. Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England formed in 1649
      2. Gospel translations and preaching in Algonquin
      3. Violence w/Indians escalates to King Philip’s War in 1675

3/20 of Indians & 1/65 New England colonists die.

* 1. Society is “piety-driven” rather than “priest-ridden.”
     1. Saints are in majority and thus in charge
     2. Civic authority through town meetings at central meetinghouse
  2. Intellectual leadership is developed for church and society
     1. 1649 “Old Deluder “ act provides for town schools
     2. Harvard and Yale are established
  3. 1679: “Reforming Synod” called
     1. Repentance becomes fashionable; some public
     2. 1692: Salem witchcraft hysteria: 20 executions
     3. Half-way covenant allows communing but non-voting membership of descendants

of full members.

* 1. 1740’s: George Whitefield & Great Awakening
     1. “New lights” tended to separatism
     2. Jonathan Edwards explains need for knowledge & affection in religion
  2. “City set upon a hill” blends with other colonies
     1. Prosperity and secularism prevail
     2. Religious diversity grows.
        1. Liberal intellectual tended toward Unitarianism
        2. Evangelical piety tended toward Methodism and the Baptists.
  3. Concepts of destiny, providence, serious hard work, and democracy persist today

1. **War**
   1. Revolution: a religious event
      1. 1766 Declaratory Act asserts sovereignty over colonies “in all cases whatsoever.”
         1. Tyranny: usurped scripture
         2. Idolatry: bowing to parliament
      2. “New Israel”
         1. church in the wilderness: “If God be for us…”
         2. political & religious liberty: “called to liberty…”
         3. hierarchy 🡪 republicanism
         4. conformity 🡪 toleration
      3. Great Awakening
         1. converted men build new society
         2. new vision of kingdom of God
         3. religion should be free because it matters—but cannot be enforced
      4. Enlightenment rationality
         1. reason over revelation
            1. reason and scientific knowledge supersede religion & ethics
            2. revelation still sufficient for the “masses”
         2. Locke: life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness
            1. if obstructed, revolution & new government needed
            2. basis of Declaration of Independence grievances
         3. Utopian vision
            1. corresponds to religious millennial views
            2. liberty, progress, rights of man
            3. religion should be free because it doesn’t matter
      5. Issues facing Mennonites in Pennsylvania
         1. loyalty to rebel government or England—

leads to split in Franconia—Christian Funk

* + - 1. drilling with local militia or paying substitute
      2. renting horses and wagons to army
      3. contribution vs. tax
      4. sale of market produce to British in Philadelphia
      5. hesitant use of continental currency
  1. Civil War
     1. Church support for slavery in South
     2. Firebrands & visionaries for abolition
        1. John Brown: Harpers Ferry
        2. Harriet Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
        3. Julia Ward Howe: *Battle Hymn of the Republic*
        4. Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians split after 1840’s
     3. Both sides claim righteous cause
        1. North: against the rotten core of slavery in South—compromise=moral apostasy

Preserve the sacred union

* + - 1. South: against northern fanaticism, despotism, infidelity

Prserve ordered liberty, states’ rights, biblical values

* + 1. Religion in Army
       1. Early: “tide of irreligion”
       2. With later suffering & devastation—more seriousness
          1. baptisms, prayer services, Bible studies
          2. idolized figures: Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee
          3. Lincoln’s 2nd inaugural address speaks of
    2. Effects on Mennonites in Shenandoah Valley
       1. Forced conscription of youth
       2. Confiscation & plunder
       3. Battle at Harrisonburg
    3. Religious legacy of war
       1. North: optimism with parallel deterioration of faith
       2. South: “defeat with God is not defeat”

Poet Abram Ryan writes *The Conquered Banner* & *Sword of Robert Lee*

* + - 1. Missionary generation follows

1. **19th Century Optimism**
   1. Utopianism
      1. Some believed in steady progress
      2. Some in return to pristine, innocent past
   2. Transcendentalism
      1. rejection of empty form and rationalism
      2. love of nature, self-reliance, focus on feeling awareness of the true, good, beautiful
   3. Experimental communities
      1. Shakers
      2. Brook Farm
   4. Holiness Movement—post civil war times into middle of 20th century
      1. National Camp Meeting Association
      2. Total consecration / entire sanctification
         1. some emphasized sinless perfection
         2. some power for service
      3. Reached across sectarian lines
      4. Individual perfection leads toward perfect community
         1. Jesus’ example & perfect love call for reaching out
         2. Systemic sins call for systemic solutions
      5. Urban rescue work
         1. immigrant settlement houses
         2. employment help
         3. shelters for poor, outcast, homeless
         4. industrial homes
         5. intense involvement of middle class women
      6. Bible schools and colleges begin
   5. Mennonite Parallels
      1. Evangelism, revivals, “plan of salvation”
      2. Missions programs
      3. Elkhart Institute begins
2. **Fundamentalism – Liberalism Divide**
   1. Late 19th century changes in industry, agriculture, education, transportation, communication, science, international affairs witness a polarity in Christians’ struggle to accommodate.
   2. The divide could be viewed through caricature or moderately:
      1. Caricature: Authority of inerrant book & external authroity vs.

Human reason/understanding & omniscient science

* + 1. Moderate: Christian Revelation vs.

taking scientific reasoning seriously and applying gospel to the needs of the times

* 1. Elements of Liberalism (modernism or progressivism)
     1. “a spirit of free inquiry which wishes to face new facts, accept whatever is true, state the abiding principles of Christian faith in …contemporary terms. (Christian History, Issue 55, p. 36)
     2. Freeing religion from doctrinal/dogmatic bondage & tribalism through objectivity & tolerance
     3. Following internal authority of reason, with the test of gospel being the living out of it
     4. Scripture is seen as poetic, mystical, mythical
     5. Protestant faith formulated in the Reformation was “prescientific;” needs update
  2. Elements of Fundamentalism
     1. Defending basic historic fundamental beliefs that define Christianity
        1. Inerrancy of scripture
        2. Virgin birth
        3. Resurrection of Christ
        4. Substitutionary atonement
        5. Miracles
     2. Dispensations of history; many charts showing the times & ages
     3. Shows that liberalism is non-redemptive, but assumes goodness of man
     4. Holds to biblical language about the reality of sin and need for repentance and conversion
  3. The Scopes “Monkey” Trial—July 1925
     1. William Jennings Bryan assists state of TN to prosecute John Scopes for illegally teaching evolution
     2. Clarence Darrow (agnostic), for defense, demonstrates the growing trend to show Bible-believing Christians as ignorant and intolerant.
     3. Trial is major media event by radio & newspaper
     4. Heightens the divides, hardens the lines on both sides.
  4. Institutions, publications, churches
     1. Fundamental
        1. Bible schools & colleges: Moody, Philadelphia, Westminster, BJU
        2. Annual Bible conferences on inerrancy, holiness, pre-millennialism
        3. Mainline churches split
        4. Scofield reference Bible becomes popular
        5. American Council of Churches
     2. Liberal
        1. Federal Council of Churches
        2. Princeton and other traditional theological seminaries go liberal
  5. Negative effects of the “battle” on the popular mind
     1. Fundamental extremists give bad reputation
        1. seen as anti-intellectual, against learning, narrow-minded
        2. extremists
           1. John F. Norris shoots in self defense when confronted about accusing a mayor of shifting Forth Worth funds to Catholic cause
           2. J. Gresham Machen writes effectively, leads numerous divisions is eventually suspended from Presbyterian ministry for being factious.
        3. Conflicted views of America as “God’s Chosen Nation” vs “under God’s judgment” with accompanying political stances
        4. Modern extremists of “pro-life” advocates keep the image going
     2. Fruits of liberalism merge with the culture in general
        1. If all that is needed is schools and social agencies, church is irrelevant
        2. Insisting that religion stay in private domain results in legal removal of Christian observances from public life (prayer, Bible reading, ten commandments)
        3. Current issues of evolution as fact, “pro-choice,” and “sexual orientation” show trajectory with no end in sight
        4. Tolerance opens the way to all “faiths” with intolerance of any faith claims
  6. Effects on Mennonites
     1. *Doctrines of the Bible* by Daniel Kauffman represent attempt to codify/safeguard the faith
     2. Midwest is seen as liberal; EMC & Hesston open to provide safe alternative to Goshen
     3. Interest in pre-millennialism and prophecy
     4. Goshen college closes for the ’23-’24 partly to deal with fundamental-modernist controversy
     5. Harold S. Bender writes *Anabaptist Vision* to navigate a third way
     6. Old Orders are basically out of the discussion
     7. Contributing factor is post-1960’s divisions that result in numerous conservative Mennonite groups

1. **Civil Religion**:
   1. Sacred sites
      1. Founding: Plymouth Rock, Lexington, Independence Hall,
      2. Battlefields: Gettysburg, Valley Forge
      3. Icons: pictures of Washington, Lincoln, “Liberty”, scenes
      4. Monuments, cemeteries: Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam War Memorial, Arlington
      5. Sacred time: July 4, Memorial day, Christmas
   2. Separation of church/state
      1. Allows ethnic religion and other faiths to thrive
      2. Move from concern with doctrinal purity to ethical/emotional intensity
   3. Challenges of each era bring stress to both Christian faith and civic stability
      1. wars
      2. depressions
      3. technological developments
      4. individual rights: slaves, women, sexual “orientation”
      5. poverty
      6. assimilation of immigrants
      7. westward expansion
      8. free enterprise & capitalism
      9. education
      10. ethics & morality: alcohol, abortion, marriage

**Selected Resources**

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**Back issues of Christian History magazines available for purchase.**

Most are available to read for free at <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/>

*8 Revival Comes to America*

*10 Pietism Reexamined*

*23 Spiritual Awakenings in North America*

25 [*Charles Grandison Finney: American Revivalism*](http://www.christianhistorystore.com/ch20finney.html)

*33 The Untold Story of Christianity and the Civil War*

*35* [*Columbus & Christianity in the Americas*](http://www.christianhistorystore.com/ch35columbus.html)

*41* [*American Puritans*](http://www.christianhistorystore.com/ch41puritans.html)

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*50* [*Christianity & the American Revolution*](http://www.christianhistorystore.com/ch50americanrev.html)

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