

The Impact of Christianity + on Colonial America



The Origins of
Christianity in America

The Mayflower
Compact

The Fundamental
Orders of Connecticut

The Bible and
Colonial Life
in America

The Declaration
of Independence

The Great Awakening
Impact

Robert J. Menges
2018

Contents

Introduction	1
I. Origins of Christianity in Colonial America	2
II. Mayflower Compact.....	6
III. Fundamental Orders of Connecticut	9
IV. The Bible and Colonial Life in America	11
V. Great Awakening Impact	14
VI. Declaration of Independence.....	16
Conclusion.....	18
Bibliography	19

Introduction

There are many passages of scripture that direct the work of historians operating from a Christian worldview. These principles include the propositions that God is comprehensively sovereign over the nations (Acts 17:26) and that He has established order, intelligence, and truth in the universe and history (Isaiah 42:5).¹ These principles ought to guide any research of history from a Christian worldview.² Because of Christianity's strong influence in the Colonial era, understanding these principles is vitally important for an honest and objective evaluation of primary and secondary source material in this era.

The study of Colonial America is an enormously broad subject when one considers the totality of settling activities across all of North America. When this study is narrowed to the area that would become the thirteen American colonies, the question of the impact of Christianity in the colonies and the American founding becomes much more focused and visible. This thesis—and the question of whether Christianity had a significant impact in Colonial America and the founding era leading to the creation of the United States—bears great significance to gaining an accurate perspective of the historiography of Colonial America and the founding of the nation. The research will explore the thesis argument that the Christian worldview not only had a great impact upon Colonial America, but that it actually helped create the environment that led to the nation's founding.

The research methods will primarily involve an in-depth look at specific events leading up to and during the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay settlements, as well as three of America's foundational documents that came as a result of those two early settlements. The research will also probe the views of the Protestant reformers, key founders of the settlements and the nation,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*.

² Liberty University History Department, "Biblical Principles & The Study of History", accessed April 24, 2018, <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/arts-sciences/history/?PID=18375>.

as well as some of the more obscure individuals and events that played a role in the colonies and the nation's formation. The research will draw heavily from primary sources such as the aforementioned foundational documents, journals, firsthand accounts, sermons, and letters. The research material will also encompass scholarly secondary articles and monographs from a variety of perspectives covering the thesis topic. The Mayflower Compact, the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, and the Declaration of Independence will be used as primary source foundational documents to anchor the main thesis argument concerning the impact of Christianity in Colonial America and the nation's founding. They will also be used to argue the position that the Christian worldview permeated the ideas of many of the colonial leaders and drove many of their actions during the growth of the colonies. Lastly, opposing historiographical viewpoints pertaining to Christianity in Colonial America will be consulted and integrated in order to attempt to bring balance and objectivity to the thesis argument.

All of these sources must be recognized for their inherent weaknesses. Although it is critical for the Christian historian to be relentless in the quest for information from any particular area of study, it is equally important to recognize the limits of what might be available as evidence in any given area of study. History is filled with gaps and there is actually very little recorded information to work with. This reality should serve to temper the work of the Christian historian and serve as a reminder to maintain humility when drawing conclusions (Psalm 90).

I. Origins of Christianity in Colonial America

Did Christianity have much of an influence in Colonial America? If it did, at what point did it begin to make that impact? A strong argument can be made that Christianity's influence in Colonial America began long before the first arrivals in Jamestown and Plymouth. Some historians would argue that the Jamestown settlement brought Christianity to America; others

might argue that because of the motivations of the English Separatists, Christianity's real influence in Colonial America began at Plymouth colony. From a purely theological standpoint it could be argued that the Christian influence in Colonial America began in the mind of God Himself. However, working from a historical position grounded in the Christian worldview a strong evidentiary argument can be made that the genesis of any impact of Christianity in Colonial America can be traced at least as far back as Europe during the Protestant Reformation.

John Adams, second President of the United States and one of the Committee of Five selected by the Second Continental Congress to draft the Declaration of Independence, had this to say about John Calvin, one of the most notable figures of the Reformation:

After Martin Luther had introduced into Germany the liberty of thinking in matters of religion, and erected the standard of reformation, John Calvin, a native of Noyon, in Picardie, of a vast genius, singular eloquence, various erudition, and polished taste, embraced the cause of reformation. In the books which he published, and in the discourses which he held in the several cities of France, he proposed one hundred and twenty-eight articles in opposition to the creed of the Roman Catholic church. These opinions were soon embraced with ardor, and maintained with obstinacy, by a great number of persons of all conditions.³

This quote from Adams is more than just a statement about Calvin's contributions to the Protestant Reformation—it is important to make the connection that Adams is referencing the impact of the Reformation and by extension Christianity in Colonial America. Adams is saying that Calvin's points were not simply embraced passively but rather with great fervor by all peoples no matter what class they came from and that they accepted the leveling effect of Christianity.⁴ This "leveling effect" created a subtle but enormous shift in sociological norms.

³ John Adams and Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850), 313.

⁴ Samuel Smith, HIUS 510 Presentation: "Religion in Colonial America", accessed May 1, 2018. https://learn.liberty.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_409346_1&content_id=_21872587_1.

In the public record, there is a veritable list of who's who when it comes to those connecting the dots between the Reformation and the colonial and founding era of America. Whether operating from a Christian worldview or not, many notable individuals connect Calvin and reformation thought with the Christian worldview-based ideas that were brought to the American colonies. Fellow Genevan and philosopher Jacques Rousseau, who was no friend to Christianity, had only praise for his compatriot for his contributions to the ideas that would one day birth liberty in America: "Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognize the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much credit as his Institutes, so long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be held in reverence."⁵

The world-renowned German historian Leopold von Ranke, for example, reached the similar conclusion that "John Calvin was virtually the founder of America."⁶ Noted nineteenth century Harvard historian George Bancroft was another respected academic who asserted that Calvin's Christian worldview made its way across the Atlantic onto the shores and wilderness of America. Bancroft lauded Calvin as "the foremost of modern republican legislators," responsible for elevating the culture of Geneva into "the impregnable fortress of popular liberty, the fertile seed-plot of democracy."⁷ Of utmost importance to this thesis argument was Bancroft's belief that the living legacy of Calvin could be traced to the Plymouth pilgrims, the Huguenot settlers off South Carolina, and the Dutch colonists in Manhattan. Bancroft concluded, "He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American

⁵ John Witte, *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39.

⁶ David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005), ix.

⁷ David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*, ix.

liberty.”⁸ John Adams summed up Calvin, the Reformation, and the Christian worldview’s impact in Colonial America and issued this pointed charge: “Let not Geneva be forgotten or despised. Religious liberty owes it much respect.”⁹

There were of course other reformers who shaped the worldview thought of many of who immigrated to Colonial America. Perhaps lesser known than John Calvin but with tremendous impact concerning the Christian worldview would be Samuel Rutherford. In 1644 the Scottish Presbyterian Rutherford authored *Lex, Rex, or, the Law and the Prince: A Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People*. “Lex Rex” refers to the idea that Law must be elevated above King—a radical idea in seventeenth century Europe where the prevailing political philosophy of the day was the inverse “Rex Lex” or King is Law. Today, the Anglo-American ideal of “the rule of law” embodies Rutherford’s principle.¹⁰ With the exception of the principles found in the Magna Carta, the idea that there could be a higher law under heaven than the monarchy was a foreign concept. Rutherford’s work, *Lex Rex*, was considered by the government as “inveighing against monarchy and laying ground for rebellion.”¹¹ Rutherford like Calvin, was drawing principles from the scriptures that although radical for their day, made their way into the worldview of many who would carry them across the Atlantic.

The Protestant Reformation was indeed the seedbed for Christianity that would have great influence and impact in Colonial America. John Foxe records in his famous *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* the powerful words of William Tyndale: “if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than he (the Pope)

⁸ David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*, ix.

⁹ John Adams and Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adam*, 313.

¹⁰ David Koppel, “Origins of the Declaration of Independence: Samuel Rutherford’s ‘Lex, Rex’”, *Washington Post*. July 2, 2016, Opinion section.

¹¹ Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex, or, the Law and the Prince: A Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People*, 1644, reprint, (Colorado Springs, CO.: Portage Publications, Inc., 2009), xxiv.

did.”¹² Tyndale was the first person to translate the Bible into English and to leverage the recently invented printing press in order to produce Bibles that could be placed into the hands of commoners. In the early sixteenth century, Tyndale could not possibly have known what would follow once the scriptures were available to the common man. He could not have imagined the events that were set in motion for the scriptures to impact a whole new world across a vast ocean. With just a few words, Tyndale not only announced the fundamental purpose of his own life but also unconsciously set into motion a long chain of events that led to religious liberty in America.¹³

II. Mayflower Compact

Establishing the fact that Christianity in America began well before the first English settlers arrived lays the groundwork for building an understanding of how Christianity would impact Colonial America and the founding of the nation. The impact of Christianity in the American colonies and on the American founding can be seen in many areas. One of the most notable areas to find this impact is in its founding documents. To begin to look at this impact, it is instructive to point out that the English settlement of Jamestown in 1607, on the heels of two earlier attempts in the 1580s, was primarily an attempt to export a new colony in Virginia for economic reasons and as a solution for social woes.¹⁴ Jamestown would eventually thrive and certainly would bear witness of the influence of Christianity in years to come, but a much more overt influence can be seen north of Jamestown just thirteen years later.

In his journal article "Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding," Sanford Kessler writes about the fact that the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville believed

¹² John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 1563, reprint (Springdale, PA.: Whitaker House, 1981), 139.

¹³ Michael Farris, *From Tyndale to Madison* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 4.

¹⁴ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), 122.

the Puritans founded America by establishing biblical principles as the basis for American political life.¹⁵ This impact is clearly seen in the language of the founding documents but also and perhaps more importantly in the principles embedded in them.

After arriving in Cape Cod bay in late 1620, the passengers onboard the Mayflower would not disembark without first creating an agreement under God. The Mayflower Compact bound them together into what they referred to as a “civil body politick.”¹⁶ On the surface one might not notice the Christian influence inside the compact and its connection to today’s Constitutional Republic. University of Massachusetts history professor Len Travers argues “The document by itself does not create democracy in the new world, what it does do is to create an elected authority to which they promised to give all due obedience.”¹⁷ Travers’ view is somewhat incomplete without the connection to the impact of the Christian worldview upon the ideas contained within the document. To connect the dots, it is necessary to dig a bit deeper into the undergirding ideas embedded in the Compact.

The Mayflower Compact contained the principles of the social contract theory that would be expounded by the English philosopher John Locke in his discourse on civil government written later on in 1689. Although the source of Locke’s ideas about civil government have been debated by historians and theologians alike, Locke wrote extensively in his second treatise on civil government about the need for mankind to live under a social agreement or contract due to human nature. To support this theory Locke described what he called “The state of nature” and “The state of war” which, whether intentional or not, are clearly based upon the biblical doctrine

¹⁵ Sanford Kessler, "Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding", *The Journal of Politics* 54, no. 3 (August 1992), 779.

¹⁶ *Mayflower Compact*, From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed April 12, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp.

¹⁷ Len Travers, Documentary: “Desperate Crossing: The Untold Story of the Mayflower”, Lisa Wolfinger, Producer, New York: A&E Television Networks, 2006, accessed May 3, 2018, https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity|video_work|1785558.

of the fallen or depraved nature of man.¹⁸ Locke posited the need for people to have a governing document that transcended the whims of men. Locke explained that in mankind's natural state, men and women were free to pursue and defend their own interests, which resulted in a brutal state of war.¹⁹ According to William Bradford in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, this was a real threat to the passengers disembarking from the Mayflower. Bradford records that the compact was "occasioned partly by the discontented and mutinous speeches that some of the strangers amongst them had let fall."²⁰ *Mourt's Relation*, the other primary source document for the events of Plymouth also records that "some were not well affected to unity and concord but gave some appearance of faction."²¹ This disunity explains the great importance and need for agreement before disembarking in order to insure the better ordering and survival of their new society.

When the passengers on the Mayflower stated they would "covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid" they were telegraphing they clearly understood the Christian worldview of man and were acting upon that understanding and instituting a protective measure based upon what would become social contract theory a half century later. As Travers points out, it did not create democracy in the new world but far more importantly it was the first step of many that would lead to the American republic and was clearly based upon the Christian worldview. These ideas would have enormous implications to Colonial American political thought in the years to come. Although Locke's treatises on civil government would not be

¹⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government*, Early American Imprints, Series I, Evans. Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1773, accessed May 6, 2018, 3 & 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ William Bradford and Harold Paget, *Of Plymouth Plantation: Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608-1650*, (San Antonio, TX: Vision Forum, 2002), 75.

²¹ William Bradford, Edward Winslow, and Henry Martyn Dexter, *Mourt's Relation, or, Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth*, (Boston: J.K. Wiggin, 1865), 66.

written for another 49 years, the Mayflower Compact bears the imprint of understanding of the social contract theory.

Lastly, the Compact also outlines the clear intent for the Christian worldview to positively impact the settlement in its purpose statement. It is noteworthy to point out the words “and furtherance of the ends aforesaid” previously mentioned. Those “ends” were the advancement of the Christian faith stated at the outset of the document.²² The English Separatists made it clear their intent was not to simply escape religious persecution in England, but to advance the Christian faith in the new world. It is clear that the Christian beliefs of the English Separatists impacted one of the very first forms of government in what would become the United States of America. Even secular historian Nathaniel Philbrick in his book *Mayflower, a Story of Courage, Community, and War* puts the Compact in the ranks of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.²³

III. Fundamental Orders of Connecticut

Another major founding document that reveals Christianity’s imprint on Colonial America and the founding era is the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. This document, known as the first written constitution in America, followed on the heels of the Mayflower Compact in 1639. Constitutional scholar and author Michael Farris argues that to learn the real beginning of American constitutional government one must start with the reverend Thomas Hooker.²⁴ In 1636, Hooker was a Puritan pastor who left the Massachusetts Bay Colony and founded a settlement along the Connecticut River near modern day Hartford with about one hundred men, women, and

²² *Mayflower Compact*, From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed April 12, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp.

²³ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 42.

²⁴ Michael Farris, *Constitutional Law for Christian Students*, (Purcellville, VA: Home School Legal Defense Association, 1998), 5.

children from his Cambridge, MA congregation.²⁵ Michael Besso in his journal article “Thomas Hooker and His May 1638 Sermon” points out that on May 31, 1638, Hooker preached what has been noted as among the most important sermons in colonial New England.²⁶ Pastor Hooker’s sermon was based upon Deuteronomy 1:13—a passage that states “Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads.” In this sermon Hooker preached that God had ordained the principles of self-government.²⁷

Perhaps it was because Pastor Hooker was thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean from the crown, but it appears that in the free wilderness of Colonial America Hooker was able to look into the scriptures and mine the Christian worldview of civil government.²⁸ Within a year the men of the surrounding towns drafted the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. Not only were the Orders the first written constitution in America, notably they contain more direct references to biblical principles and to the social contract theory. The connection between Hooker’s sermon and the Fundamental Orders has long been the subject of much study and commentary by several noted historians.²⁹ However, what is not in dispute is the remarkable timing between the two. The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut are clearly a radical departure from the predominant political ideology of the day—the Divine Right of Kings—and point directly back to what we know of Hooker’s sermon from the surviving notes.³⁰

Contained in the preamble to the Orders is the statement “well knowing where a people are gathered together the word of God requires that to maintain the peace and union of such a people there should be an orderly and decent Government established according to God, to order

²⁵ Edward Hooker, *The Life of Thomas Hooker*, (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath school society, 1849), 93.

²⁶ Michael Besso, “Thomas Hooker and His May 1638 Sermon”, *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 194-225, 194.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁸ Michael Farris, *Constitutional Law for Christian Students*, 5.

²⁹ Michael Besso, “Thomas Hooker and His May 1638 Sermon”, 195.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

and dispose of the affairs of the people at all seasons as occasion shall require.”³¹ Notice the point made that wherever a people are gathered together, the word of God requires that there should be an “orderly government” established according to God. By implication the government ought to be subordinate to the rule of law rather than the rule of man. It is important to point out the connection made in this document just like in the Mayflower Compact to the social contract theory that would come from Locke later on. The phrase “the word of God requires that to maintain the peace and union of such a people” is a clear reference to the doctrine of the depravity of man. The Orders went on to outline the guidelines for electing magistrates, creating General Assemblies, and establishing courts of law. There was even a provision for a court to recall a magistrate for misdemeanors; the court also had the power to grant what might be referred to as the early precursor to freedom of speech. This might not sound like much today, but these were radical notions in the early seventeenth century.

The Fundamental Orders created a government, gave it limited power, and established certain rights. The Orders not only bear the clear imprint of the message from Hooker’s sermon concerning God’s plan for self-government in the first chapter of Deuteronomy—by extension, they provide strong support for the thesis argument that Christianity had a profound impact upon Colonial America and the founding of the nation.

IV. The Bible and Colonial Life in America

The phrase “City on a Hill” entered the American lexicon early in colonial history from a sermon titled “A Model of Christian Charity” written in 1630 by Puritan John Winthrop while aboard the ship *Arbella* in which he had sailed across the Atlantic into Massachusetts Bay.

Winthrop encouraged the future Massachusetts Bay colonists that their new settlement would be

³¹ *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut*, from Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed May 5, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/order.asp.

“as a city upon a hill,” watched by the world.³² Winthrop, drawing his vision for the new settlement directly from the scripture “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14) was unknowingly setting the standard for centuries to come for illustrating the vision for a national people that would be a lighthouse for the world. American Presidents from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have either directly used the phrase or made reference to it. This vision taken directly from the scriptures would be a driving force on the Puritans and Colonial America into the founding era.

From Puritan New England’s call for a “City on a Hill, Colonial America became immersed in the Bible. As will be seen, the scriptures had a tremendous impact upon the overall worldview of its inhabitants and would produce the seedbed for generations of leaders to come. It is important to mention at this juncture, the thesis argument of this research does not make the case that all of Colonial America was regenerate and beholden to the Christian worldview. Rather, the argument is that in general the Christian worldview permeated the mindset of a large majority in Colonial America and thus had a tremendous impact regardless of whether an individual was regenerate in the theological sense or not.

There are many anecdotal examples that can be found in both notable and obscure primary documents recording the everyday life of colonials. One such example is found during one of the most brutal of the early Indian wars. One of the classics of colonial history, *The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* provides one of many examples of Christian piety among early Colonial American settlers. The wife of a frontier pastor in Massachusetts, Mary Rowlandson was captured by Indians during King Philips War. Her record of these events is a riveting firsthand account of the brutality of colonial-Indian

³² John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity 1630*, From Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston 1838), 3rd series 7:31-48, Hanover Historical Texts Collection, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

warfare in the first century of English colonization in America. What is also evident and very relevant to the thesis argument is the role that faith and the Bible played in her life, which serves as a microcosm of sorts for the vast majority of colonists in the early years of the new settlements, especially in the New England region. During her long ordeal with her Nipmuc Indian captors, Rowlandson witnessed and suffered horrific tragedy including the loss of her baby to musket ball as she was moved about the New England wilderness not knowing whether or not she would ever see her husband or other children again. At the point of utmost discouragement and depression she recounts that she could not but “take notice of the wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible. One of the Indians that came from Medfield fight, had brought some plunder, came to me, and asked me, if I would have a Bible, he had got one in his basket.”³³ Mary Rowlandson is deep in the wilderness in 1675, at the height of a savage war on the American frontier; her narrative provides us a glimpse into her life at a time when she was physically and emotionally at the end of her rope. It is important to remember that at that time Bibles were not a plentiful item, especially in the frontier wilderness. During the depth of her despair, Mary Rowlandson is given a Bible literally out of nowhere and she reckons this set of events as “God’s wonderful mercy.” This would be indicative of the faith that would become so powerful in the settling of the colonies and the formation of the nation to come.

The Bible and by extension, Christianity, had a much more direct impact upon Colonial America through education. The New England Primer introduced in Boston in 1690 by Benjamin Harris was America’s most famous schoolbook.³⁴ It was used broadly in Colonial America to

³³ Mary Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson 1682*, reprint, (Lancaster, MA: [n.p.], 1953. Later reprint, Sandwich, MA: Chapman Billies, 1998), 19.

³⁴ Gillian Avery, “Origins and English Predecessors of the New England Primer”, *Proceedings of The American Antiquarian Society* 108, no. 1 (April 1998), 34.

teach reading and writing and went through many reprints. The significance of the use of the New England Primer lies in how it was used to teach these skills. It began with the alphabet and then showed students how to make syllables and how to put the syllables together. The entire textbook taught students how to read and write using scripture and later the Westminster Shorter Catechism.³⁵ Due to the nature of the textbook there is little doubt that colonial education was awash in the scripture which had to have had a profound influence on the worldview of those instructed with it.

V. Great Awakening Impact

One of the most profound examples of the influence of Christianity upon Colonial America and the founding of the nation can be seen in the great spiritual movement of revivals referred to as the Great Awakening. These revivals took place episodically in the early eighteenth century until they began to escalate in the 1730's and 1740's as evangelical preachers began to cooperate over long distances.³⁶ Led by a combination of evangelical preachers of differing denominations, the Great Awakening spread across the colonies and strengthened moving north to south.

Patricia Bonomi's *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* provides a look at the influence and impact of religion, specifically Christianity, on Colonial America leading up to the American Revolution. She argues that the fervor created during the Great Awakening increased religious thinking and behavior in the middle colonies and into the Chesapeake region.³⁷ Her thesis not only argues that religion had a significant role in

³⁵ *The New England Primer*. Early American Imprints, Series I, Evans. Boston: S. Kneeland & T. Green, 1727. Accessed May 7, 2018.

³⁶ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), 346.

³⁷ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 168.

the culture and society of the era, but that it also had a tremendous impact upon political thought that led to the American Revolution. Perhaps these sentiments are best summed up by Ambrose Serle, secretary to British general Sir William Howe, who wrote in late 1776 from occupied New York City that “Presbyterianism is really at the Bottom of this whole Conspiracy, has supplied it with Vigor, and will never rest.”³⁸

There is another impact from the Great Awakening that although subtler in interpretation, nonetheless provides support for the thesis argument. Contemporary and historical accounts agree that the Awakening was the most momentous intercolonial popular movement before the Revolution.³⁹ David Ramsay notes that “before a republican vocabulary could communicate radical social meanings, a new rhetoric had to appear in which familiar terms were used to express unfamiliar thoughts.”⁴⁰ The Great Awakening provided the vehicle for this training in “new rhetoric” with its mass assemblies led by preachers like George Whitefield, Theodore Frelinghuysen, Gilbert and John Tennant, William Tennant Jr., and Samuel Davies. Despite the differences in substance between the Great Awakening revivals and the American Revolution, Stout argues they both exhibited a close rhetorical affinity that became sort of the seedbed for a convergence of religious and political ideas that would be brought to bear in political thought leading to the rebellion.⁴¹

It would be fair at this point to interject that there are opposing ideas as to the impact of the Great Awakening and whether or not there was even a coherent movement at all. Jon Butler’s article “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction”

³⁸ Patricia U. Bonomi, “‘Hippocrates’ Twins’: Religion and Politics in the American Revolution”, *The History Teacher* 29, no. 2 (February 1996), 142.

³⁹ Harry S. Stout, “Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution”, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 1977), 520.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁴¹ Harry S. Stout, “Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution”, 521.

contains an opposing historiographical viewpoint pertaining to the Great Awakening. The article examines the dominant historical interpretations of the Great Awakening and takes a decidedly stretched interpretation of the movement. Butler argues that the Great Awakening as a whole is a modern historiographical invention.⁴² He uses a series of examples to support his argument in light of a wealth of historical evidence to the contrary. Probably one of his larger stretches is his position that the Great Awakening had little impact upon people as a whole. The historical evidence is quite contrary to his position. Benjamin Franklin, a non-convert by his own admission would not be one to embellish a position that advances a conspiracy to misstate the effect of revival events. Franklin records observing the differences in townspeople and citizens after hearing George Whitefield preach saying that it was “wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants.”⁴³

VI. Declaration of Independence

It would be remiss to complete a thesis pertaining to Christianity’s impact in Colonial America and the founding of the United States to not mention America’s Declaration of Independence. The Declaration contains the Biblical principle that all men stand before God as equals created in His image: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Those words form the bedrock for the charter of the American Republic.

Sixty-one years after the signing of the Unanimous Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, John Quincy Adams during a 4th of July speech in the town of

⁴² Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction”, *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 2 (September 1982), 307.

⁴³ Benjamin Franklin, “Benjamin Franklin Listens to His Friend George Whitfield,” in *Major Problems in American Colonial History*, edited by Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 266-269, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 266.

Newburyport, MA would make the ultimate connection between the founding documents and Christianity.

Why is it that, next to the birthday of the Savior of the World, your most joyous and venerated festival returns on this day [4th of July]?” “Is it not that, in the chain of human events, the birthday of the nation is indissolubly linked with the birthday of the Savior? That it forms a leading event in the progress of the gospel dispensation? Is it not that the Declaration of Independence first organized the social compact on the foundation of the Redeemer’s mission upon earth? That it laid the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity?⁴⁴

On the surface, John Quincy Adams’ statement almost sounds heretical. It sounds as if Adams is equating the birth of the nation with the birth of Christ. However, it is of great importance to take note of Adams’ technique of asking and answering questions with questions. His second question mentioning the “chain of events” indicates his belief in God’s providential and guiding hand in the affairs of men. Then he connects the dots by explaining the linkage between the social compact, the founding of the nation, and the dispensation of the gospel. Adams makes the bold argument that the purpose of the founding of America was for it to be used by God to spread the Christian gospel. Adams orating in 1837 looking back on the Declaration could not have possibly imagined the United States would one day become the largest exporter of Christian gospel missionaries around the world!

Today, there seems to be endless debate among believers as to the spiritual condition of the founders. Although there is no way to fully determine the spiritual condition of the hearts of the Committee of Five that drafted the Declaration, what is abundantly clear from its content and design is that it had been influenced by the Christian worldview of the founders.

⁴⁴ John Quincy Adams, *An Oration Delivered Before the Inhabitants of the Town of Newburyport, at Their Request: on the Sixty-First Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1837* (Newburyport, MA: Morss and Brewster, 1837), 5-6.

Conclusion

The impact of Christianity in Colonial America and the founding of the nation can be seen in a multitude of ways beginning with the Protestant Reformation even before the first English settlements in North America. It could even be argued that the cause of American self-government did not begin in 1776, but rather it began with the Protestant Reformation, indeed one could argue it began with the scriptures themselves! That impact was felt in America's first founding documents and all through colonial life and into the Great Awakening. Indeed, the Christian worldview permeated Colonial America and the founding era in such a dramatic way that it had a profound impact not only on the culture but also in the movement to independence and the founding of the constitutional republic that followed. Bonomi's strong words emphasize this idea: "In an age of political moderation, when many colonials hesitated at the brink of civil war, patriotic clergymen told their congregations that failure to oppose British tyranny would be an offense in the sight of heaven."⁴⁵

After touring America in the early 1830's following the colonial era, the words of French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville in his work *Democracy in America* are most fitting. Tocqueville analyzed the improved living conditions and social conditions of individuals, as well as their relationship to the market and state and declared, "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*, 216.

⁴⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, Phillips Bradley, Francis Bowen, and Henry Reeve. *Democracy in America*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 314.

Bibliography

Primary

- Adams, John, and Charles Francis Adams. *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1850.
- Adams, John Quincy. *An Oration Delivered Before the Inhabitants of the Town of Newburyport, at Their Request: on the Sixty-First Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1837*. Newburyport, MA: Morss and Brewster, 1837.
- Bradford, William, Edward Winslow, and Henry Martyn Dexter. *Mourt's Relation, or, Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth*. Boston: J.K. Wiggin, 1865.
- Bradford, William, and Harold Paget. *Of Plymouth Plantation: Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608-1650*. San Antonio, TX: Vision Forum, 2002.
- Foxe, John. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. 1563. Reprint, Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1981.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "Benjamin Franklin Listens to His Friend George Whitfield." In *Major Problems in American Colonial History*, edited by Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 266-269. 3rd ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2013.
- Fundamental Orders of Connecticut*. From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library. *Avalon Project*. Accessed May 5, 2018. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/order.asp.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government*. Early American Imprints, Series I, Evans. Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1773. Accessed May 6, 2018.
- Mayflower Compact*. From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library. *Avalon Project*. Accessed April 12, 2018. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp.
- Rowlandson, Mary. *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson 1682*. Reprint, Lancaster, MA: [n.p.], 1953. Later reprint, Sandwich, MA: Chapman Billies, 1998.
- Rutherford, Samuel. *Lex, Rex, or, the Law and the Prince: A Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People*. 1644. Reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Portage Publications, Inc., 2009.
- The New England Primer*. Early American Imprints, Series I, Evans. Boston: S. Kneeland & T. Green, 1727. Accessed May 7, 2018.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de, Phillips Bradley, Francis Bowen, and Henry Reeve. *Democracy in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1956.
- Winthrop, John. *A Model of Christian Charity 1630*. From Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston 1838), 3rd series 7:31-48. Hanover Historical Texts Collection. Accessed May 3, 2018. <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

Secondary Books

- Bonomi, Patricia U. *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Farris, Michael. *Constitutional Law for Christian Students*. Purcellville, VA: Home School Legal Defense Association, 1998.
- Farris, Michael. *From Tyndale to Madison*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007.
- Hall, David W. *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005.
- Hooker, Edward W. *The Life of Thomas Hooker*. Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath school society, 1849.
- Philbrick, Nathaniel. *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.
- Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. New York: Penguin Group, 2001.
- Witte, John. *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Secondary Journal Articles

- Avery, Gillian. "Origins and English Predecessors of the New England Primer." *Proceedings of The American Antiquarian Society* 108, no. 1 (April 1998): 33-61.
- Besso, Michael. "Thomas Hooker and His May 1638 Sermon." *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 194-225.
- Bonomi, Patricia U. "'Hippocrates' Twins": Religion and Politics in the American Revolution." *The History Teacher* 29, no. 2 (February 1996): 137-44.
- Butler, Jon. "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction." *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 2 (September 1982): 305-25.
- Kessler, Sanford. "Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding." *The Journal of Politics* 54, no. 3 (August 1992): 776-92.
- Koppel, David. "Origins of the Declaration of Independence: Samuel Rutherford's 'Lex, Rex.'" *Washington Post*. July 2, 2016, Opinion section.
- Liberty University History Department. "Biblical Principles & The Study of History." Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/arts-sciences/history/?PID=18375>.
- Smith, Samuel. HIUS 510 Presentation: "Religion in Colonial America." Accessed May 1, 2018. https://learn.liberty.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_409346_1&content_id=_21872587_1.

Stout, Harry S. "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 1977): 519-41.

Travers, Len. Documentary: "Desperate Crossing: The Untold Story of the Mayflower." Lisa Wolfinger, Producer. New York: A&E Television Networks, 2006. Accessed May 3, 2018. https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity|video_work|1785558.