

CLERGY - The Call for Independence

...by Rev. Richard W. Davies

Who in the 21st century would think that most Christian clergy in the 18th century had a major role in preparing for the Declaration of Independence? The prelude to revolution was not limited to just political, diplomatic and secular factors. The roles of clergy and religion built significant support for independence and freedom.

Background

The French and Indian War, which ended in southwestern Pennsylvania in 1763, gave England enormous costs in both human life and money. When England levied several taxes on the colonists to recoup the financial costs of the War, a spirit of revolution began because Parliament enacted "taxation without representation." Many clergy shared resentment against the revenue acts, but their cry for independence also was voiced because of other pressures in colonial America.

Three religious factors

Colonial clergy faced three conflicts: (1) the differences between the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment. (2) the resentment over the mandatory tithe, or tax, supporting the Established churches, and (3) the fear of Anglican bishops as the suspected agents of the British throne.

(1) A spiritual war of sorts had already begun in the early 1700's. Coming out of the earlier Renaissance, European writers and thinkers, known as humanists, sought to glorify mankind and the power of human reasoning. One effect was to question the dogmas and authoritative basis of the Christian religion. Humanists stressed freedom, logic, observation and skepticism in their search for truth, rather than faith and revelation. This ideology took on the name of The Enlightenment. Some 18th century advocates were Locke, Hume, Jefferson, Franklin and Paine. The challenge of ideology versus theology, between "head" or "heart," awakened clergy to stand firm to protect their faith.

(2) Coming out of the earlier Reformation of the church, 17th century Puritans and the Huguenots began to emigrate to America to escape the anguish of religious oppression and the Enlightenment. In the 18th century, a revival movement called The Great Awakening was launched by prominent Protestant clergy leaders, including Jonathan Edwards, John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and the teachings of the earlier John Calvin. The objective of this spiritual revival in the colonies was to arouse the spiritual "heart" enthusiasms to counteract the rational "head" approach of the Enlightenment. Colleges, including today's Princeton in 1746 and Columbia in 1754, etc., were begun to educate and enthuse the evangelical clergy. Southern colonies, such as Virginia, had the established Church of England which was supported by the mandatory tithe. Clergy serving the non-established denominations and enlightened colonists sought the end of this practice.

(3) Some Protestant clergy feared that the King of England would send Anglican bishops here, who were suspected to be agents of the King of England. (The Episcopal Church, renamed from the Church of England, did not have their first bishop until after the Revolution, 1784.) Congregationalists in 1762 protested "No Lords, Spiritual or Temporal in New England!" One

minister in Massachusetts said he did not want to have the Church of England poison, or "episcopise," the colonies with the King's bishops. The attitude was growing that no single denomination would be primary.

The power in preaching

The political objections of colonists to English pressures were printed in the newspapers and in pamphlets. However, these publications could not and did not exceed the number and power of the oral and printed sermon. Sermons did fire the heart and mind of colonists in each colony. The patriot enlightened clergy preached about religious freedom, resistance to the tyrant King of England, and the glorious future age freedom could bring. The enlightened as well as the evangelical clergy gave the impetus to resist any threat against religious freedom. This kind of preaching became part of the moral sanction for independence, and the political revolution against England.

However, a significant number of Anglican clergy were loyal toward England and the Bishop of London, who oversaw the colonial church until 1784. The more the pressure to reject the King's authority was felt, the harder it became for loyalist clergy to minister in the colonies and to continue to pray for the King and the Parliament. Clergy who could not in conscience rebel against England left their congregations and fled to Canada or back to Gt. Britain.

When the Committee of Five - Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin - drafted a Declaration of Independence in 1776, they did so with a populace primed and almost ready to be free of any English domination. Thomas Paine then wrote "Common Sense," which some say was written with a sermonic flair, to put a final touch to the determination of the colonists to suffer fear and loss to gain independence.

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References and Resources::

"*The American Enlightenment*" by Robert A Ferguson, 1994

"*The American Scripture*" by Pauline Maier, 1997

National Humanities Center: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us

www.wsu.edu:8080/brians/hum_303/enlightenment.html

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