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Political Foundations of the Declaration of Independence: Christian or Secular?

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Mr. Van Til received his A.B. from Calvin College. Subsequent to military service in World War II he spent a semester at Westminster Theological Seminary in the study of Apologetics. Thereafter he received M.A. degrees from the University of Michigan in both history and philosophy and followed further graduate studies in philosophy at Michigan State University.

In this Bicentennial year, most Americans point with pride to the Declaration of Independence which stands as a kind of Magna Charta of liberation for the United States. So it is not unusual either that many want to claim some

input into the political thought expressed in the Declaration as having some lineage from the particular political or theological ideas which they espouse. It seems to be the case that while we firmly repudiate guilt by association, we like to appropriate

accolades by the same method.

It surely is a truism that in the study of history we must take time seriously. Yet, in seeking to associate Puritan "Calvinism" with the Declaration of Independence, some associate John Winthrop with the document as if there were no intervening one hundred and forty six years between 1630 when Winthrop was writing his "A Modell of Christian Charity"¹ aboard the *Arabella* in passage to Massachusetts and the penning of the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson in Philadelphia in 1776. Though it may be "superficial and misleading to seek the origins of the Declaration in the deism of Jefferson himself,"² it is even more misleading and inaccurate to make any kind of direct association between the Declaration of Independence and John Calvin, or whatever Calvinism carried on

The Ancients

Scattered among the colonies at the time of the Declaration were some two thousand graduates of Harvard and Yale with maybe three hundred from the College of New Jersey (Princeton). For example, James Madison was a graduate of the latter school where he had sat at the feet of John Witherspoon. These college graduates were for the most part ministers and lawyers, and many were politically active. They were also thoroughly grounded in the extant works of the ancients since they had had a "classical" education. Therefore they were well acquainted with the histories beginning with Herodotus, with political writings from Plato on down and with the literature which began with the epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

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Four basic political ideas are directly expressed or else insinuated in the Declaration: (1) political equality (2) government by compact or contract (3) the right of representation (4) the right to revolt. One or more of these may be found in most any of the sources which woven together, form the cord by which the Declaration is supported.³ We can take these in order, beginning with those sources which are most remote in time. So we go first to Greece and Rome.

Space prevents us from making any kind of complete listing of the ancient works which were constantly cited in the colonial writings, but those writings were profusely interlarded with the wisdom of the ancients. "It was an obscure pamphleteer indeed who could not muster at least one classical analogy or one ancient precept."⁴

Athens was celebrated as the ancient cradle of democracy, with the citizens expressing themselves in the assembly of the people. They had a direct voice in

political decision-making. While this beginning was lauded as the initiation of the method whereby the people had a direct voice in government, it was also criticized. John Cotton, the leading clergyman of the Massachusetts colony immediately after settlement, insisted that God did not approve of the Athenian type democracy. James Madison in his contribution to the Federalist Papers pointed up the weakness of direct democracy; it was subject to the factions which were generated by artful demagogues. A federal system, according to Madison, would cure that weakness.

The history of Rome was often used as a kind of before-and-after comparison. The England of the Revolutionary period was compared to the Rome of the dissolute emperors, whereas the colonies by contrast were an example of the sterling qualities which had characterized Rome of the period of the Republic. The colonists also empathized with the sardonic Tacitus eulogizing Teutonic freedom and denouncing the decadence of Rome. England, the young John Dickenson wrote from London in 1774, is like Sallust's Rome, "Easy to be bought if there is but a purchaser."⁵

Britain, it would soon become clear, was to America what Caesar was to Rome--the hand of dictatorship.

Among the ancients, Cicero was a basic source for the concept of natural law as it related to politics. The idea of the law of reason as the law of nature came from the Stoics. Cicero applied it to politics particularly in his De Officiis (concerning offices). For the colonists the words of the ancients and their history was not to be taken so much as prescriptive as it was illustrative.

Calvin and Bullinger

John Calvin in Geneva and Henry Bullinger in Zurich stand in the background of American political thought because

some English Puritans, who influenced later political Whigs, fled to Geneva and Zurich as the so-called Marian Exiles during the reign of Mary Tudor, Bloody Mary. These men returned to England after the Protestant settlement under Elizabeth I.

Both Calvin and Bullinger took a position with respect to the right of revolt. For them this came under the heading, "How to Deal with Tyrants." Calvin had maintained that other, lesser magistrates might have a calling to do the Lord's work in removing a tyrant. Thereafter, the action of the provincial stadthouders in the Netherlands in their resistance to Philip II of Spain became an early model for the application of Calvin's principle.

Bullinger hesitates to recommend tyrannicide even though he finds a clear example in the Book of Judges. In contrast to such later theologians as Emil Brunner, Bullinger argues that the political office of power is a good institution of God. Political power is not inherently evil. Men pervert the office to evil.⁶ According to Bullinger, a tyranny may be God's way of calling a people to repentance and prayer. So those would be the first actions required in opposition to tyranny.

Moreover, Bullinger was by no means ready to separate the political and the ecclesiastical spheres. He maintained that "the Lord commandeth the magistrate to make trial of doctrines, and to kill those that do stubbornly teach against the Scriptures and draw the people from the true God."⁷ Bullinger's writing furnished a prescription for the Puritan Oligarchy in early Massachusetts, a prescription that had attained obsolescence by 1776.

John Locke

No doubt the greatest single influence on liberal political opinion both in America and in Europe was John Locke. His most influential writings were his Two Treatises on Government. Locke touches on all four points of political theory that we mentioned earlier.

Attempts have been made to place Locke in the camp of evangelical Christians of Calvinist persuasion, even calling him "a distinctly Biblical Christian and in many respects a markedly evangelical Christian." The fact is that in no respect can Locke be classified as an evangelical Christian. Locke denies the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Without that, there is no evangel, hence, no evangelical Christianity. Merely subscribing to some Biblical moral precepts does not make one an evangelical Christian.

Locke, as a Socinian, denied man's depravity. According to Locke, Jesus did not come for atonement, but to reveal to man the fact that God is merciful and does not expect man to keep the Mosaic law perfectly. Jesus was a moral Messiah and not "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Whatever tenets of evangelical Christianity Locke was willing to appropriate after he repudiated the heart of the Christian message were principles that had to be acceptable to reason.

There are also some who want to place Locke in the camp of the agnostic rationalists. That would also be contrary to an exact assessment of Locke's position. Locke's unbiblical theism should not be confused with the kind of atheistic materialism that was espoused by Thomas Hobbes. Often, wrong categories are chosen when assessing Locke's thinking concerning man in the state of nature. First, Locke is criticized because presumably there never was a situation in actual history that corresponded with Locke's idea of man in the state of nature. Secondly, and more importantly, it is assumed that Locke completely secularized the context of man's political origins. That assumption can only be maintained if we decide that Locke's rationalism is a completely atheistic rationalism.

In discussing the state of nature in which man presumably finds himself before he contracts to have a government over himself, Locke acknowledges that God

(Locke's god) is the Creator of that state of nature.⁹ Though it is true that Locke's theism is not Christian theism, neither does his theology fit the categories of deism, pantheism, or atheism.

One cannot strictly join Locke to the eighteenth-century rationalistic empiricist who held that sense and reason together were a sufficient source of all knowledge. Locke believed that we need revelation to know all that we should know

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about the will of God. But Locke was rationalistic in the sense that he was convinced that all interpretation of the Scriptures should meet the test of reason. It was this basic approach that prompted him to write The Reasonableness of Christianity. That kind of rationalism also pervaded his plea for toleration and controlled his political thinking. For Locke, then, men equal in the state of nature formed a political contract which implied representation and that, in turn, conferred the right to repudiate the chosen representatives. It was all entirely reasonable, with more of an emphasis on common sense than on strict logic.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights--life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness--he was quoting from Locke, except that he broadened the last term. Where Locke had referred to property rights, Jefferson substituted the pursuit of happiness. This was a broadening

principle, for presumably some in a commonwealth would have negligible property holdings, but all would have some goals as to their own felicity. Right of that pursuit should be controlled by the specifications of the political contract whereby one could pursue his own goals as long as he did not illegitimately interfere with the goals of his neighbor.

Locke was cited more frequently than any other political writer as the colonists argued against English "tyranny." Infringement of their rights as Englishmen as guaranteed by the English constitution¹⁰ could be proved by reference to Locke. "The work of Locke was summoned to expound the tautology that illegality was illegal."¹¹ "The Adamses and Jefferson, Dickenson and Franklin, Otis and Madison had come to read the Two Treatises (published in England in 1690) with gradually consolidated political intentions."¹² These intentions were the establishment of a rationale for revolution and these men were the ones who formulated the Declaration as it was signed in Philadelphia. So one may conclude that Locke's non-biblical rationalism was the most immediate and dominant source of the ideology of the Declaration whereas Calvin's biblical theism was at best no nearer than its New England remnants. As I showed in an earlier article,¹³ even John Witherspoon, who preached the Gospel while president of College of New Jersey, lapsed into rationalism and used arguments from natural law when he moved from preaching to teaching ethics or political theory.

The Enlightenment

The influence of the Enlightenment in France in the second and third quarter of the eighteenth century did not add much to the basics of political theory as formulated by John Locke. In fact, Locke was one of the major influences that formed Enlightenment opinion. Some of the colonists appropriated a kind of agnostic rationalism which came from men like Montaigne and other Enlightenment

"philosophes." Such may have been the case with a man like Ethen Allen. Of greater immediate influence on political thinking were the writings of Voltaire and Montesquieu.

Voltaire came in handy when the colonists were inveighing against the tyranny of the ecclesiastical and political establishment. Both the Church and the monarchy had felt the bite of Voltaire's satire as he leveled his barbs against the misdeeds of those established institutions under the Ancien Regime. According to Voltaire, they had to be toppled if the age of liberty, equality and fraternity were to be ushered in under the new French tricolor as that banner represented those three requisites to human dignity.

Montesquieu in his The Spirit of the Laws had outlined a system of checks and balances for government which he had mistakenly assumed were to be found in the system outlined by the English cabinet system. So Montesquieu was useful in showing how imbalance of power could be corrected and his model would serve as a model for later constitution making. Adams, for example, did not subscribe to the optimistic kind of view of man that was held by Locke and the Enlightenment. He was, therefore, a strong proponent of the idea of checks and balances.

The Radical British

The American revolutionist pamphleteers felt a strong affinity for their counterparts in England, the early eighteenth century radicals. These men applied the ideas of their predecessors to the political situation in England, as they felt it needed radical change. The most important publicists in Britain were the spokesmen for extreme libertarianism, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Trenchard was a west country squire of ample means, but with radical ideas. Gordon was a Scot from Aberdeen University, who came to London to make his fortune.

Trenchard and Gordon collaborated on a weekly publication, The Independent

Whig. Fifty three papers from this publication were published in book form in 1721. Their Cato's Letters, first published serially, had come out in book form in 1720. The Letters were a searing indictment of eighteenth-century English politics and society.

Incorporating in their colorful, slashing, superbly readable pages the major themes of the "left" opposition under Walpole, they left an indelible imprint on the "country" mind everywhere in the English speaking world. In America, where they were re-published entire or in part again and again, "quoted in every colonial newspaper from Boston to Savannah."¹⁵

The writings of Trenchard and Gordon ranked next to those of Locke as the most authoritative statement of the nature of political liberty and above Locke as an exposition of the social sources of early eighteenth-century threats to liberty in England.

It is a notable fact that Cato's Letters made an early trans-atlantic voyage and were available to Franklin by 1722. In that year Franklin concluded an attack on the Mather (Puritan) establishment in Boston with a long quotation from the "English Cato," castigating "wonderful pious persons" who were, in fact, "public Robbers," plundering "a Fund of Subscriptions for Charitable use."¹⁶

More names could be added to the list of radicals in England. Benjamin Hoadly was celebrated as the "best hated clergyman of the century" amongst his order. "He came to embody physically, the continuity of the conglomerate tradition of English radical and opposition thought."¹⁷ Hoadly lived on to 1761, so in his old age he associated with the radicals of Jefferson's age and established contact in America with libertarians like Jonathan Mayhew, one of the liberal Massachusetts preachers who at midcentury was using his pulpit to oppose British control over the colonies.

The English Jurists

It was particularly the common lawyers in the colonies who appealed to the English legal tradition. In so doing they appealed to the jurists of the past. Further, they also differed markedly from those who were enamored of Enlightenment ideas, ideas which led to an attempted clean break with the past.

Pre-eminent among the earlier English jurists with an American following was Sir Edward Coke, counting among his proteges, Roger Williams. Their association preceded William's move to Massachusetts. Coke was constantly cited by colonial lawyers and others as well. "The citations are almost as frequent, and occasionally even less precise than those to Locke, Montesquieu and Voltaire."¹⁸

In the later years of the period leading up to the Revolution William Blackstone's Commentaries and the opinions of Chief Justice Camden became standard authorities. Otis and Hutchinson both "worshipped" Coke. For the colonists English common law was a history "of experience in human dealings embodying the principles of justice, equity, and rights."¹⁹ It was not a science of what to do in the future, but it legitimized precedent. It was like a brake on a cog preventing it from slipping back a notch.

The Puritans

For the Puritans political union was the idea of the Biblical covenant applied to social organization. The Mayflower Compact was an early expedient representing that kind of transfer. John Winthrop, as the political head, and John Cotton as the virtual ecclesiastical head of the first Massachusetts Puritans, fostered the ideas of covenant and calling in their writing on politics. Both supported the idea of a church-state oligarchy after the pattern of Calvin in Geneva. Neither of the two would have agreed with any kind of natural law foundation for political organization as it filtered down from the Stoics,

Cicero's De Officiis and on to the Enlightenment "philosophes," as well as the authors of the Declaration. Political equality had its origin in God's law at creation. This was the basis for covenanting. Violation of the covenant by a magistrate or monarch was not a violation of a law of God second-hand through nature, but a direct affront to God's commands revealed in the Scriptures.

In application, the idea of equality and covenant caused the Puritans to limit suffrage to professing members of the church. The selective nature of this arrangement violated the spirit of the Declaration of Independence which under secularizing influence by 1776 had fully appropriated the principle of religious toleration. Though the Puritans recognized a kind of creational equality, through their ideas of Providence they accepted social inequality as foreordained. In 1630 John Winthrop wrote that God in his

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providence had so disposed that "some must be riche, some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others mean and in subjecion."²⁰

Calling was also a prominent Puritan idea that could be readily adapted to politics. This concept also had a lineage back to Calvin. John Cotton saw in the working of the democracy of Athens a confusion in the concept of calling. "If the people be governors who shall be governed?"²¹

While working according to their own modifications of the principle of equality and accepting representation through selectmen as part of the political covenant, the Puritans did not have to deal with the possibility of deposing magistrates for they had annual elections. John Winthrop was a man of such stature and character that he served as governor for a total of twelve years. That which was distinctive about Puritan political practice was repudiated in the colonies by 1776. What was common to Puritan practice and English common law was retained. But those influences cannot be attributed to either the Puritans or any residue of Calvinistic influence.

Roger Williams

To Roger Williams belongs the distinction of trying to prove from the Scriptures a principle of political equality that would yield religious toleration. He saw the need to separate the ecclesiastical and political spheres to attain that end. Roger Williams deserves high praise because he took up the cause of toleration more than a half century before Locke began to write on the subject.

His (William's) study, The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience, was a direct assault upon the principles of the Massachusetts colony, and particularly on the point of view of his former friend, John Cotton. But the attack drove further than John Cotton; it reached all the way to John Calvin himself.²²

Williams began by positing a clearcut division of powers between the political and the ecclesiastical spheres as to jurisdiction and competence. Membership in a church was no longer to be a prerequisite for participation in the political processes. Williams virtually demanded what Abraham Kuyper championed as sphere sovereignty more than two centuries later. For Williams, "The religious society sought the spiritual peace of the Lord. The civil

society was framed, however, for a less heavenly end, the human peace and civility of the community here on earth."²³

To Williams fell the difficult task of trying to obtain a charter for his Rhode Island colony based on the principles he had enunciated, that is, equality before the law, regardless of religious affiliation. The task was difficult for he made the effort in 1644 just when Charles I was trying to maintain a maximum of royal prerogatives against what he saw as the encroachments of Parliament. At that time Williams could not appeal to a well formulated body of political writings which would support his cause, as he preceded the Glorious Revolution and the writings of John Locke by a half century. The latter were, of course, in the political heritage of the colonists by 1776, the time of the Declaration of Independence. By then generally accepted, the principle of the separation of church and state was written into some of the colonial (state) constitutions in May before the Declaration was drafted by the Second Continental Congress and signed on July four.

At this point, we may well call attention to the fact that the New Light evangelicals, who had their origins in the Great Awakening of the 1730's, also lent strong support to the principle of religious toleration. They supported the cause of Revolution because they felt that a clean break with the corrupt influences of Great Britain was a necessary condition for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as they anticipated it.

The rationalists commonly defended most of existing society as they sought to restrain this or that British oppression, while the evangelicals sought a society as radically transformed as they conceived man to be when he experienced the Holy Spirit in his heart.²³

Beyond the foregoing, there was a kind of bonus effect coming out of the New Light movement. It was an aid in the propaganda of the Revolution. It

promoted the oratorical style which was used by men like Patrick Henry. Henry had learned it from Samuel Davies, a dissenting preacher in Virginia. For some twelve years Henry was exposed to Davies' style at the behest of his mother. While rationalists and liberals along with Thomas Paine were bringing up the reasonable and "Common Sense" arguments, the New Lighters were supporting it with "enthusiasm," a characteristic which the liberals detested. Nevertheless, Benjamin Rush delivered this accolade: "Only evangelical religion 'affords motives agreeable, powerful and irresistible to induce mankind to act upon truths that might be discovered through reason.'"²⁴ So the "New Lighters" furnished what the "Old Lighters" lacked, enthusiasm.

There are doubtless even smaller tributaries which contributed to the mainstream of Revolutionary and Declaration thought. Some might be taken up in a more detailed study. It is certain that the irresistible tide of Revolution, which was summed up in the Declaration of Independence, did not receive all its momentum from only two sources: the residue of Puritan thought and the rationalism of Locke and/or the Enlightenment "philosophes."

Those who stand in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition cannot appropriate, with any warrantable historical claim any belated congratulations on the assumption that the followers of Calvin had a voice in the expression of the ideas found in the Declaration. To the contrary, we should decry the fact that, between the time of John Winthrop and Thomas Jefferson, Calvinism had gone into a lamentable eclipse in the colonies. And going beyond that, we may be thankful that the misguided confusion of the political and ecclesiastical spheres which had dominated the Geneva of Calvin and the Massachusetts of Winthrop had been dispelled in favor of religious toleration by 1776. Meanwhile, though keeping the ecclesia and the polis separated, we should be working mightily for the renewal of politics through the

influence and the "enthusiasm" of religion, that is, of evangelical, Biblical Christianity.

Footnotes

1. "Winthrop's Journal," History of New England, (1630-49) Vol. II, p. 239.

2. Cf. Lester De Koster's Editorial in The Banner, March 19, 1976, p. 6.

3. A very concise and readable study of this subject is Bernard Bailyn's The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, Harvard U. Press, Cambridge, 1967.

4. Charles F. Mullett, "Classical Influences on the American Revolution," Classical Journal, 35 (1939-40) p. 93, 94 as cited by Bailyn Op. cit., p. 24.

5. "A Pennsylvania Farmer at the Court of King George" John Dickenson's London Letters (1754-1756).

6. Edmund S. Morgan, "Henry Bulfinger on the Duties of Rulers and Subjects," Puritan Political Ideas, Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., N.Y., 1965, p. 18.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

8. Herbert Foster in a 1927 issue of The American Historical Review as quoted approvingly by Lester De Koster in The Banner, April 9, 1976, p. 7.

9. The Second Treatise on Government. Chapter II, Sec. 6. With respect to his concepts concerning the "state of nature," Douglas Vande Griend, in an individual studies research paper (spring of 1976), rightly criticizes some of the assessments of Locke. He takes exception to the evaluation of E. L. Hebden Taylor, and I think correctly, when Taylor categorizes The Second Treatise on Government as an "infamous, humanist treatise" and asserts that Locke "also taught that there are no social laws prescribed either by God or by nature. Hence no alternative remained for Locke but to regard the laws of ecclesiastical and civil government as mere conventions having their sole authority in the private introspectively-given mental substance and their joint majority consent." The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State, Craig Press, Nutley, N.J.,

1966, p. 204-205. We may note that when the sovereignty under God is exercised by a king it is often considered to be a biblical kind of transfer but when the sovereignty is exercised by the people then it is assumed to be secularized and may be considered a descent to huamism. Obviously, that is not *ipso facto* the case.

10. The concept "constitution" as found in English writings should not be construed to mean "Constitution" in the American sense. For the English "constitution" means "a deliberately contrived design of government and a specification of rights beyond the ordinary legislature's right to alter...the existing arrangement of government together with the principles and goals that animated them." Bailyn Op. cit., p. 67.

11. John Dunn, "The Politics of Locke in England and America," John Locke: Problems and Perspectives, John W. Yolton, Ed., Harvard U. Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 75.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

13. See my "The Spirit of Seventy-Six: Christian or Secular?" Pro Rege, March 1976.

14. Bailyn, Op. cit., p. 37.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

16. Ralph Ketchum, From Colony to Country: The Revolution in American Thought, Macmillan Co., N.Y., 1974, p. 57.

17. Bailyn, Op. cit., p. 38.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

20. "Christian Charity" written aboard the *Arabella* in route to Massachusetts in 1630.

21. John Cotton in a letter to the English gentlemen Lord Seye and Sele when they were contemplating coming to Massachusetts and were concerned about what would happen to their social status in the leveling atmosphere of the colonies.

22. Alan Pendelton Grimes, American Political Thought, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, N.Y., 1967, p. 41.

23. Ketchum, Op. cit., p. 51.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 49.