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# The Spirit of Seventy Six:

## Christian or Secular?

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At some time each of us has seen the picture entitled "The Spirit of Seventy Six." The artist, through the determined stride of the three and a bandage on the head of the fife player, manages to convey the impression of an intrepid "spirit," one that presumably carried the early patriots through to the successful prosecution of the Revolutionary War. But for all that, we may well ask, What specifically was the Spirit of Seventy Six? What attitude of mind and heart did it reflect?

In his book The Anatomy of Revolution,<sup>1</sup> Crane Brinton begins with this line, "Revolution is one of the looser words." Following the discussion of the subject as suggested by my title, it turns out that we run into several loose words, such as "spirit," "Christian," and perhaps "philosophy." Looking at the earlier histories of the American Revolution and the development which led to the Declaration of Independence, we find that historians have dealt with the motives, for the most part, and have not looked into the wellsprings of theology, philosophy, and morals which

formed the spirit of Seventy Six, using the word spirit now in a more fundamental sense than merely esprit de corps as the painting wants to suggest.

### Historiography

Historiography shows that each generation likes to do a rewrite of the past in order to have it fit in with the present perspective. So also with the American Revolution. In the two hundred years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, historians have assigned various motives to those who fought for independence. Obviously, the events as they took place cannot change after the fact, so we have to conclude that different interpretations arise out of the changing historical perspectives according to the interests of the historian. In so saying, I am implying that what follows cannot be objective. In a sense that is true, as I would have to insist that objectivity is a will-of-the-wisp which we can pursue only within rather narrow limits and then with

only a modicum of success. I can only say that my conclusions are not preconceived conclusions and I hope that documentation will give them ample credence.

George Bancroft's massive History of the United States set it down that all efforts and actions culminating in the successful American Revolution were part of a concerted striving for democracy, that is, self-government and freedom from British control. Bancroft's interpretation had an unusually long run because Americans liked that explanation. It set the halo of success aglow with lofty motives and added splendor to the past.

In 1931 the British historian Herbert Butterfield dealt the Bancroft thesis a body blow when he published his The Whig Interpretation of History. By its very title, Butterfield's work branded Bancroft's work as politically slanted. And even worse, he suggested that Bancroft was loaded with anachronisms and oversimplifications. Americans might have ignored Butterfield's barrage as a blast from an English twentieth-century neo-colonialist had not Bancroft's simplistic explanation been under earlier attack.

Around the turn of the century, C. H. Lincoln's The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania (1901) and Carl Becker's History of Political Parties in the Province of New York (1909) showed that there had not been a general meeting of the minds as to revolutionary aims and that at the least there was a good bit of infighting in the various geographic areas over the question of who was to control this democratic movement which was in the making.

Further studies show that ...the debate with Britain had everywhere been accompanied by an internal struggle for democracy between groups representing mutually antagonistic sectional and class interests, and that such a struggle was the distinguishing feature of early American politics.<sup>2</sup>

The Lincoln-Becker thesis was corroborated in 1931 by the appearance of Charles and Mary Beard's The Rise of

American Civilization and Vernon Louis Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought. These, along with the work of Herbert Butterfield already mentioned, surely gave the coup de grace to the Bancroft thesis, and undermined the previous influence of Bancroft's work.

Since the early thirties up to the present, historians have followed a variety of tacks. There is some opinion that in the last four decades, four typologies have emerged by way of characterizing colonial revolutionary opinion and interests. (1) Chaotic factionalism: a ruthless competition among rival groups of leading men. (2) Stable factionalism: the emergence of two semi-permanent opposing interest groups. (3) Domination by a single unified group: a single elite bound together by common economic interests, religious beliefs, patronage and kinship ties, or some combination of these factors. (4) Faction free: Maximum dispersal of political opportunity within the dominant group composed of the elite and potential members of the elite.

No doubt all of the above interpretations would find some time and place in the colonial development towards independence.<sup>3</sup> And if one were to go along with Charles Beard's An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, one could conclude that there was a shift from (4) to (3) in the typologies between the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the framing of the Constitution of the United States. One would also conclude that whatever elitist economic principles found embodiment in the Constitution, they only temporarily checked the forward surge of democracy for the common man as fostered in the "Age of Jackson."

Though I believe that this bicentennial year would be a good time to make an assessment of the theses which have dominated the writing of our past two hundred years of history, I would like to go on to the general revolutionary mind that produced the Declaration of Independence. In the main, what kind of mind was it? Christian or secular? Is it at all accurate

or appropriate to talk about the Christian foundations of our political system and then to refer specifically to the men in Independence Hall in 1776 and label them Christian?

First of all, we should take account of the fact that the men who lent their signatures to the Declaration were without exception not formal professional philosophers. Neither were there men there in the capacity of professional theologians. They were men of affairs. If we can in any way associate any with philosophy, it would have to be after the model of the French philosophes of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, who were first of all men of affairs busy with practical problems one way or another. Fact is, when the men of the Revolution were called upon to bring in theory, they called on some of the recently acquired ideas of John Locke or went back to the ancient Greeks and Romans where they found political theory ready made.

There may be professional philosophers who would like to enhance the prestige of their vocation by suggesting that the American Revolution was the self-conscious effort of self-conscious revolutionaries with pat theories to work out in practice. But that kind of claim just will not hold up. Moreover, any Neo-Marxist claim that the colonists worked out of a self-conscious revolutionary theory as theoretic revolutionists cannot be substantiated either. The short survey of American historiography sufficiently discredits any such thesis. Marxist anachronisms are as ill-fitting as any other kind and perhaps more pernicious in intent.

Paul K. Conkin says that Benjamin Franklin

...despite his versatility, was never a philosopher and, in our contemporary sense of the word, never aspired to be one. Thus, at least, he was never a poor philosopher. But if one wants all men to be philosophers fully self-conscious, then they must

condemn Franklin. Even if they ask for unbending intellectual honesty, they will have to reject Franklin along with the vast unphilosophic majority of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Franklin organized a junto in 1742 and called it a philosophic society, but its expressed purpose was "to solve problems in medicine, agriculture, engineering and other practical arts."

Carl Becker suggested that Revolutionists formulate the sort of philosophy which brings their actions, despite its conflict with established law and custom, into harmony with a rightly ordered universe, and enables them to think of themselves as having chosen the nobler part. They invoke a 'higher law' which may be a law of God, or of conscience or of nature.<sup>5</sup>

When the authors of the Declaration of Independence thought about the "pursuit of happiness," they did not relate it to some specific principles of hedonism as did J. S. Mill in his Utilitarianism, pointedly requiring the "greatest good for the greatest number." Conkin writes,

Adams and Jefferson talked about happiness as the goal of political economy but rarely explored the experiential attributes of such happiness or tangled with the problems of widely variant tastes and attitudes.... They left 'happiness' and other related goals as vague symbols of what they, perhaps naively, believed everyone really wanted.<sup>6</sup>

Henry Steele Commager writes, Americans, too, embraced the doctrine of progress, but they produced no analytical treatises, no formal programs, no utopian models. That is not because they were not conscious of progress, but because they took it for granted.... The formal literature

which Americans produced on progress is negligible, but the idea of progress suffuses much of the writing of the day, and shows forth with special radiance from the writings of Franklin, Jefferson, Tom Paine, Joel Barlow, Dr. Rush, even from the writings of stout conservatives like Ezra Stiles and Timothy Dwight.<sup>7</sup>

### Enlightenment Theology

If Jefferson's and Adams' ideas of progress and happiness were vague, it may be because their theology had become vague. Jefferson had remodeled the Bible to suit his rationalistic and Enlightenment needs. Roughly, it followed the lines of deism rather than Christian theism, though it might go by other names.

The complacent sense of living in better times which characterized enlightened thought underlay a religious outlook that may be designated as benevolent and humanistic theism. Jefferson and Paine conceived of God as a master workman or builder who was known to men through his works. There was no sense of spiritual conversion and consequent moral reformation in enlightened religion. The typical thinkers did not connect morality with piety. Religion, in short, was reduced to natural religion.<sup>8</sup>

Franklin also had a God of his own making. It was a God that had to fit into Franklin's practical specifications.

Franklin was the epitome of irreverence, a man of pride, self-satisfaction and even arrogance. He was a smug little god, living already in a veritable heaven. As such he was in rebellion against God. If Franklin had accidentally met God on Market Street he would have shook

hands. Although he often gave his vote to Christianity as the best religion, he never used the label in a doctrinal way. He revered Jesus, but did not accept him as Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Because he came from Puritan New England, we sometimes like to think that John Adams might have spoken with a more specifically Christian voice. But there is no basis for that kind of claim either.

Adams' insistence upon his Christianity had little substance except loyalty to the past. In one revealing statement, so typical of the Enlightenment, he said all good men were Christian. Clearly, the term carried a moral rather than a doctrinal connotation.<sup>10</sup>

### Puritan Theology

The defection of John Adams from the God of the Scriptures does not give us a warrant to conclude that Puritanism generally had suffered a similar decline. Though imposing an oligarchy, the Puritans had lived and governed so close to what they believed was a biblical pattern that the result was called a "theocracy." They had lived according to biblical principles with such singlemindedness that those who want to impose a Nature-Grace cleavage in the history of modern cultures must look in vain for one in the practices of pristine Puritanism in early New England.<sup>11</sup> That does not mean that one cannot sift out some inconsistencies from some of the writings of English and New England Puritans.

Practically, I would agree that the Puritan in rejecting the feudal merger of church and state repudiated the Catholic and Anglican tradition. But he just as emphatically rejected the separatist Anabaptist tradition which required a complete separation not only of church and state,

but of religion and a secular political order.<sup>12</sup> Religion was not a department or phase of social life; it was the end and the aim of all life, and to it, consequently, all institutions were subordinated.<sup>13</sup>

Having cited these estimations of early Puritanism, we must quickly add that Puritanism quickly underwent a change away from strict Scriptural principles and observances. Already in 1668, the so-called Halfway Covenant was approved, which allowed people who were church members by baptism only to have their children baptized in turn. These baptized members were those who could not or thought it was not necessary to attest to a conversion experience in order to qualify for church membership.

This change of practice indicated that Puritan theology was becoming diluted with both Arminianism and Liberalism. Even in the early days of Puritanism it was customary to preach election sermons that dealt with political elections and not the biblical doctrine of election as formulated in the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election to salvation. But by the time we come to the middle of the eighteenth century, men are standing in New England Congregational pulpits who are not preaching moral principles from the Scriptures, but are preaching moralism and universalism.

The Great Awakening had spread throughout the American colonies, but it had peaked by 1740 and was in decline by 1776. Even so, revivalism became a permanent part of the American scene. Revival did not "take" with men of political influence. In fact, they equated it with emotional instability. It was also politically suspect for the same reason. As they saw it, yielding to "enthusiasm" was dangerous both religiously and politically.

We cannot expand this writing to include the numerous quotations that could be cited to convey the ever-widening flow of liberal opinion that was now coming from former Puritan pulpits. Many were

busy repudiating the central message of the Scriptures, that is, salvation by grace alone. In 1757 Samuel Webster carried on

A Winter Evening's Conversation upon the Doctrine of Original Sin wherein the notion of our having sinned in Adam and on that account only liable to eternal damnation is proved to be an unscriptural, irrational and dangerous tendency.

Long convinced of the correctness of his opinion and no longer fearing for his position because of public disapproval, in 1782 Jonathon Mayhew published his The Salvation of All Men. It was a frank but tardy recognition of a change in theology. And it has also been suggested that "the dispensations of God's providence were at last adjusted to the devotions of his people."<sup>14</sup> Herbert Schneider describes this process of change from Puritan orthodoxy to liberalism as follows:

While the elect were gathered in their handsome pews, listening to the Puritan gospel, the people of the galleries were deserting the faith of their fathers and crowding to hear the more hopeful message of universalists and republicans. Puritanism had become perfectly genteel.<sup>15</sup>

What can one say about men like Livingstone and Witherspoon who were associated with what were still largely orthodox and evangelical churches? Apparently, no strong Christian voice came from them. At least not enough to influence the language and the meanings of the Declaration of Independence. Later, when the constitutional convention came to an impasse, Franklin suggested that they invoke the "Divine Being." Only four members supported him in that suggestion and at least one peremptorily told him that they were not in need of any "foreign" intervention.

John Witherspoon, president of the then Presbyterian College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, is sometimes

offered as an example of an orthodox stalwart. But even he did not seem to be inclined to relate the foundations of personal ethics, let alone political ethics, to the God of the Scriptures. It was the custom of college presidents in those days to reserve the course in Moral Philosophy for themselves. And so we have preserved for us Witherspoon's "Lectures on Moral Philosophy."

After reviewing some of the various approaches to ethical foundations, in his fourth lecture Witherspoon sets down the following:

If I were to lay down a few propositions on the foundation of virtue, as a philosopher, they should be the following. 1. From reason, contemplation, sentiment and tradition, the Being and infinite perfection and excellence of God may be deduced; and therefore what he is, and commands, is virtue and duty. Whatever he has implanted in the uncorrupted nature as a principle, is to be received as his will. Propensities resisted and contradicted by the inward principle of conscience, are to be considered as inherent or contracted vice.<sup>16</sup> (Emphasis mine. N.V.T.)

It is obvious that however much Witherspoon might use the Scriptures to abet his theological knowledge, he seems to be satisfied to base his ethics on nature and reason. As a philosopher he seems to be willing to share the tent of the Philistines, men of the Enlightenment, who were his colleagues in the effort towards political independence.

If there were any lonely voices speaking up for biblical principles, they received little support and no expression in Independence Hall in 1776.

The evangelical insistence on the reality of religious experience was acutely embarrassing to more worldly contemporaries. This was the kind of experience one would prefer not to acknowledge,

and so evangelicals were driven underground and denied a place among the official spokesmen of the age.<sup>17</sup>

## The God of the Declaration of Independence

Even as it is a mistake to interpret all cases of "God" in print as making reference to the God of the Scriptures, so, I believe, it is anachronistic, wishful thinking to insist that the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the Constitution of the United States were God-fearing men in any sense in which the word "God" approaches a Scriptural meaning: a covenant-keeping God, whom one can claim as his God through the atoning work of Christ.

It is also noteworthy that more than half of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were members of the Anglican Church, as were members of the great Virginia dynasty. But this affiliation is readily explained not by way of positive religious influence but by the absence of church discipline and by liberal doctrine. In fact, the Anglicans were so free from religious control as to be strongly inclined to secular and rational influences.

Moreover, the prevailing voices in the movement for independence were those of men who were Freemasons. The Masonic directory of the day read like a Who's Who of the political leaders who had a hand in formulating the Declaration of Independence as well as the Constitution of the United States, beginning with George Washington and going on down to the lesser lights in early American government. A conscientious student of the Scriptures, in the Reformed tradition, is bound to conclude that distinctions had become blurred and loyalties ambivalent for those who covered the theology of the lodge with the same hat as that of the Scriptures and housed such disparate confessions hospitably within the same heart.

We should not find it surprising, then, that the Declaration of Independence "in-

voked the sanctions of 'Nature's God,' 'the Creator' and 'the Supreme Judge of the world,' and this inserted a clause of piety in the general democratic creed."<sup>18</sup> Ralph Barton Perry observes that

The public piety of American democracy embraced that portion of Christianity which was founded on reason, leaving the field of revelation to the private faith of divers churches and sects.<sup>19</sup>

Assuming that Perry is right as to the piety of American democracy but wrong as to the foundations of Christianity, we have to conclude that the piety of American democracy is not based on Christianity, because Christianity is not founded on reason.

Perry holds the commonly accepted misconception that there is a kind of common core of Christianity which can be discovered through reason. So it is sectarian to go to the Scriptures in search of some particular brand of Christianity. Such a search will also lead to emotional and subjective vagaries. By accepting a presumed rational core, one can join in fraternal unions and political associations without bringing in the demands of doctrines received by revelation. Having formulated his own brand of theism, labeled "Boston Personalism," for his school, the University of Boston, Perry subscribes to a reason-revelation dichotomy as the source of his theology, choosing reason as his theological legislator. So the piety of the Declaration of Independence is at its worst and at its best the piety of an American civil religion which has grown out of a natural and rationalistic theology.

In his book The Puritan Mind, from which we have already quoted, Herbert Schnieder has a chapter entitled "Ungodly Puritans." In a sense, that is as much a contradiction in designations as it is to speak of rational Christianity or "the rational nucleus of Christianity." In view of our foregoing discussion, I believe it is also an attempt to join two incompatibles

to characterize American democracy in its eighteenth-century development as Christian democracy.<sup>20</sup>

One need not conclude, however, that the political structure of a democracy has to be non-Christian per se. I think Hendrik Hart made that mistake by implication when he entitled his pamphlet The Democratic Way of Death.<sup>21</sup> While one may want to choose a striking if not startling title for a publication, this does not give one license to obliterate necessary distinctions.

The possible structure of democracy does not stand as an unassociated fact any more than any other fact does. Particularly those who do not want to maintain a nature-grace dichotomy in their thinking and doing should be the last to relegate democracy irrevocably to the realm of the secular as a route for political action.

If I have now successfully established the thesis that the piety of the Declaration of Independence is not Christian piety, and that the religion of the Declaration of Independence is not the Christian religion, what can that mean for us of Reformed persuasion? I think that it must imply the following:

1. Christians should stop indulging themselves in the fantasy that they stand in a tradition of Christian government.

2. Christians should stop assuming that our democracy or any democracy by its very form or structure is in the nature of the case Christian and should be honored as such. (That does not mean that we do not give due respect and obedience to those placed in authority over us.)

3. In spite of the non-Christian character of our government, Christians should not fail to thank God for the blessings of liberty and prosperity in this land, which by God's sovereign and conserving grace, He maintains as a place of political and religious freedom. We should not so absolutize apostasy in process, as some are tempted to do, that we find no mitigating difference between the American



humanistic democratic system and the Russian totalitarian communistic system.

4. Christians should stop doing what they often want to do, that is, create a mythical Christian government for their country from the past so that they can rest on undeserved laurels, and so resting, fail to rouse themselves to the task of bringing the current political situation in captivity to the rule of Christ. By creating the fantasy that it has already been done, we perpetuate the error that we don't have to get busy and do it.

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*In a future writing I hope to explore the ethical and political philosophy that stood in the background of the Declaration of Independence.*

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#### Footnotes

1. Crane Brinton, The Anatomy of Revolution, Vintage Books, New York, 1955, p. 3.

2. Jack P. Greene, "Changing Interpretation of Early American Politics," American Themes: Essays in Historiography, Edited by Frank Otto Gatell and Allan Weinstein, Oxford U. Press, London, 1968, p. 28.

3. Robert E. Brown, in Middle Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780, argued in 1955 that there was no inequality in Massachusetts with 97% of adult males having the vote and farmers outnumbering the commercial interests. Apparently some imbalance had set in very quickly after the 1780 to account for the farm support of Shay's Rebellion in the area of Springfield in 1786. (Cf. Greene, Op. cit., p. 31.)

4. Paul K. Conkin, Puritans and Pragmatists: Eight Eminent American Thinkers, Dodd and Mead and Co., New York, 1968, p. 80.

5. Ralph Barton Perry, Puritanism and Democracy, Vanguard Press, New

York, 1944, p. 128.

6. Conkin, Op. cit., p. 127.

7. Henry Steele Commager, Jefferson, Nationalism, and Enlightenment, George Braziller, New York, 1975, p. 24.

8. Stow Persons, American Minds: A History of Ideas, Henry Holt and Co., N. Y. 1958, p. 77.

9. Conkin, Op. cit., p. 83.

10. Ibid., p. 121.

11. Rockne McCarthy in a working paper for History 251, a Centennial History Course, Eighteenth Century American History, maintained that the Puritans succumbed to a nature-grace dualism as soon as "the early zeal died down." I think that is true, but then one should specify an exact time frame and also decide who speaks for the Puritans. As late as 1724 Cotton Mather was still holding out for a unified approach that would bring all of life under grace.

12. Conkin, Op. cit., p. 25.

13. Herbert Schneider, The Puritan Mind, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1958, p. 23.

14. Ibid., p. 202.

15. Ibid., p. 200.

16. John Witherspoon, "Lectures on Moral Philosophy," The Development of American Philosophy; Editors, Muelder, Sears, and Schlabach, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1960, p. 102.

17. Persons, Op. cit., p. 77.

18. Perry, Op. cit., p. 251.

19. Ibid., p. 17.

20. No doubt there will be many attempts to read Puritan piety directly into the Declaration of Independence as, for example, Lester De Koster does in favorable comment on a so-called Patriots Bible put out by Orbis Books. To connect John Winthrop directly with the Declaration is to ignore one hundred years of intervening time, and to fly in the face of the facts as far as subsequent Puritan influence is concerned. (See The Banner, January 2, 1976.)

21. Hendrik Hart, The Democratic Way of Death, C. J. L. Foundation, Rexdale, Ontario, Canada, 1967, 16 pages.