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## Religion in the American Revolution

Historian Paul Johnson writes that “the American Revolution, in its origins, was a religious event” inspired by both the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> The Great Awakening proclaimed the new birth as God’s gift—it was a spiritual declaration of independence from human authorities, civil and ecclesiastical. And the Enlightenment preached progress, even if old institutions had to be overturned. Here the contrast between Europe and America is striking. Europeans of that era typically combined religion with monarchy so that loyalty to the Crown was a religious obligation. For example, in 1775 John Wesley wrote a pamphlet admonishing Christians in the colonies that it was

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**Box 2.10: John Witherspoon**

*John Witherspoon was a Presbyterian minister, president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), signer of the Declaration of Independence, and member of the Continental Congress. "No minister played as prominent a role in the political rebellion as . . . John Witherspoon," notes historian Thomas Kidd. Witherspoon "believed that only sincere Christianity could sustain the purity of the republic."\* In his May 1776 sermon, "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men" Witherspoon expressed both spiritual and political convictions.*

In the first place, I would take the opportunity on this occasion, and from this subject, to press every hearer to a sincere concern for his own soul's salvation. There are times when the mind may be expected to be more awake to divine truth, and the conscience more open to the arrows of conviction than at others. A season of public judgment is of this kind. Can you have a clearer view of the sinfulness of your nature, than when the rod of the oppressor is lifted up, and when you see men putting on the habit of the warrior, and collecting on every hand the weapons of hostility and instruments of death? I do not blame your ardor in preparing for the resolute defense of your temporal rights; but consider, I beseech you, the truly infinite importance of the salvation of your souls. . . . [The middle part of the sermon pleads with people to seek their eternal salvation, especially soldiers going into battle.]

If your cause is just, you may look with confidence to the Lord, and entreat him to plead it as his own. You are all my witnesses, that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season, however, it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature. So far as we have hitherto proceeded, I am satisfied that the confederacy of the colonies has not been the effect of pride, resentment, or sedition, but of a deep and general conviction that our civil and religious liberties, and consequently in a great measure the temporal and eternal happiness of us and our posterity, depended on the issue. The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely confined to those parts of the earth where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen, and great were the difficulties with which they had to struggle, from the imperfection of human society, and the unjust decisions of usurped authority. There is not a single instance in history, in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.

\*. Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 297.

their God-given duty to remain loyal to the Crown. Wesley believed that the king's authority came from God; therefore, rebellion against the Crown was incompatible with Christianity. Likewise, European revolutionaries saw the cross and the Crown as two sides of a coin. In the French and later the Russian revolution, zealots sought to destroy Christianity along with monarchy.

Not so with the American Revolution. Historian Mark Noll writes that "American

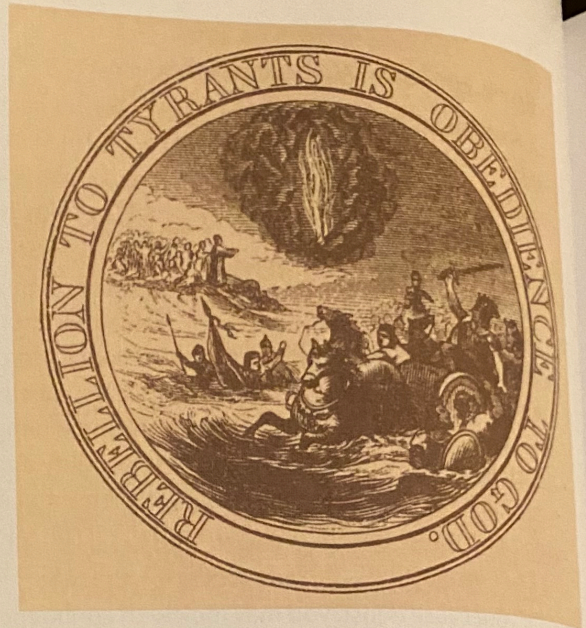
Christians, despite substantial conflicts among themselves, took for granted a fundamental compatibility between orthodox Protestant religion and republican [nonmonarchical] principles of government."<sup>18</sup> Instead of seeing the Christian faith as wedded to royal power, many Americans saw Christianity as their ally *against* monarchy. Nowhere is this stated more clearly than on a national seal devised by Jefferson, Franklin, and others during the Revolutionary War. The seal pictures the Americans (like the

Israelites of old) crossing the Red Sea as Pharaoh's (England's) chariots are destroyed. The motto reads, "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God."

In the Revolutionary era and its aftermath, many Americans believed that God was using their struggle to usher in a new phase of history, in which democracy and Christianity would join forces to spread the light of truth and progress throughout the world. By the 1830s, the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville saw that "for Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other."<sup>19</sup>

Before the Revolution, Americans feared that an Anglican bishop would be sent to the colonies, strengthening the Church of England here and tightening British control. The slogan "No bishop, no king!" rejected any alliance of monarchy and episcopacy. Back in England, however, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel pressed for an Anglican bishop to be sent to the colonies. David Holmes, writing on the Anglican tradition in America, says that the bishop issue "may properly be seen as one of the contributing causes of the American War of Independence."<sup>20</sup> No Anglican bishop was sent to the colonies before the Revolution, but the mere prospect rankled many.

When the Revolution came, New England clergy supported independence so strongly that the British called these ministers "the black regiment" (referring to their black ministerial robes). Most New England ministers hewed closely to scriptural themes in their Sunday morning sermons. But in special recruiting services, some preachers came close to making independence from England a kind of salvation, and obeisance to the Crown a kind of idolatry.<sup>21</sup> One of the most popular anthems of



**Fig. 2.7** On July 4, 1776, Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams to design a seal or symbol for the United States of America. The result was this seal. Though never officially adopted, its use of biblical symbolism was significant. It compared the American Revolution to the biblical story of the exodus, in which God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. The seal depicts the Hebrew slaves (now the Americans) in the upper left. The large object in the upper center is the "pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night" that led God's people through the wilderness. In the foreground, the Egyptian (now English) army is overwhelmed by the flood. The king with his sword and his crown (symbolizing monarchy) will soon be engulfed by the sea.

the Revolutionary era, written by the Puritan composer William Billings, captures the spirit of the times: "Let tyrants shake their iron rods; let slavery clank her galling chains! We fear them not, we trust in God. New England's God forever reigns."

New Englanders of Puritan stock were not the only religious patriots. Throughout the colonies, ministers from many traditions left their parishes to serve as army chaplains. Chaplains prayed with wounded soldiers and visited the sick. In their preaching, they sought to inspire courage, instill personal discipline, and justify

the patriot cause. But preaching to soldiers in camp or before battle was not like preaching in a church; historian Charles Royster notes that drunkenness and profanity were rife in the army. Soldiers were often cold and ill-fed, and many battles brought defeat. Soldiers sometimes showed their contempt for chaplains who said that God was on their side.<sup>22</sup>

Church of England clergy who served in the colonies found themselves in a tough spot. Anglican priests had vowed, at their ordinations, to “maintain the King’s supremacy in

Church and State.” But during the Revolution, a minister who tried to keep that vow (for example, by praying for the king during Sunday worship) risked inciting mob violence. Many Anglican ministers returned to England, while Canada became a refuge for thousands of Anglicans, lay and clergy. Of the colonial churches, the Anglicans had the most to lose in the Revolution. But Anglican loyalty to the Crown was by no means a given. Many Anglicans, especially Virginians and South Carolinians, supported the Revolution, and “more than

### Box 2.11: Chester

*“Chester,”* by American composer William Billings (1746–1800). This song was very popular in the Revolution and beyond. Unofficially, it was the first American national anthem.

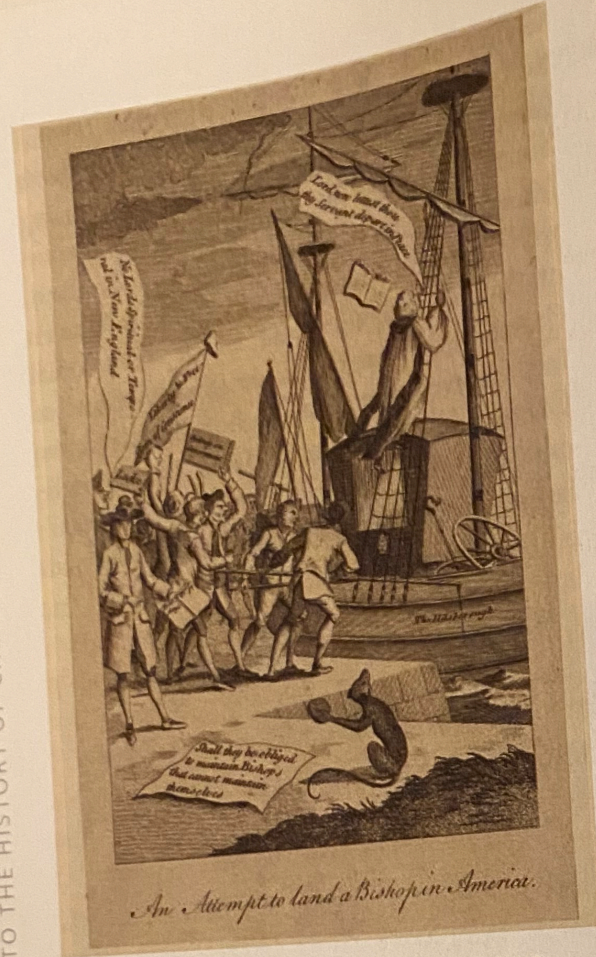
Let tyrants shake their iron rod,  
And Slav’ry clank her galling chains,  
We fear them not, we trust in God,  
New England’s God forever reigns.

Howe\* and Burgoyne\* and Clinton\* too,  
With Prescot\* and Cornwallis\* join’d,  
Together plot our Overthrow,  
In one Infernal league combin’d. (\* = British generals)

When God inspir’d us for the fight,  
Their ranks were broke, their lines were forc’d,  
Their ships were Shatter’d in our sight,  
Or swiftly driven from our Coast.

The Foe comes on with haughty Stride;  
Our troops advance with martial noise,  
Their Vet’rans flee before our Youth,  
And Gen’rals yield to beardless Boys.

What grateful Off’ring shall we bring?  
What shall we render to the Lord?  
Loud Halleluiahs let us Sing,  
And praise his name on ev’ry Chord.



**Fig. 2.8** Angry American colonists push the bishop's ship away from the dock. The colonists demand "No Lords Spiritual or Temporal in New England"; and "Liberty and Freedom of Conscience." Several books are hurled (or about to be hurled) at the bishop, including "Calvin's Works" and [the philosophy of] "Locke." In the foreground is the motto "Shall they [the colonists] be obliged to maintain bishops that cannot maintain themselves?" The bishop clings to the rigging and prays, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

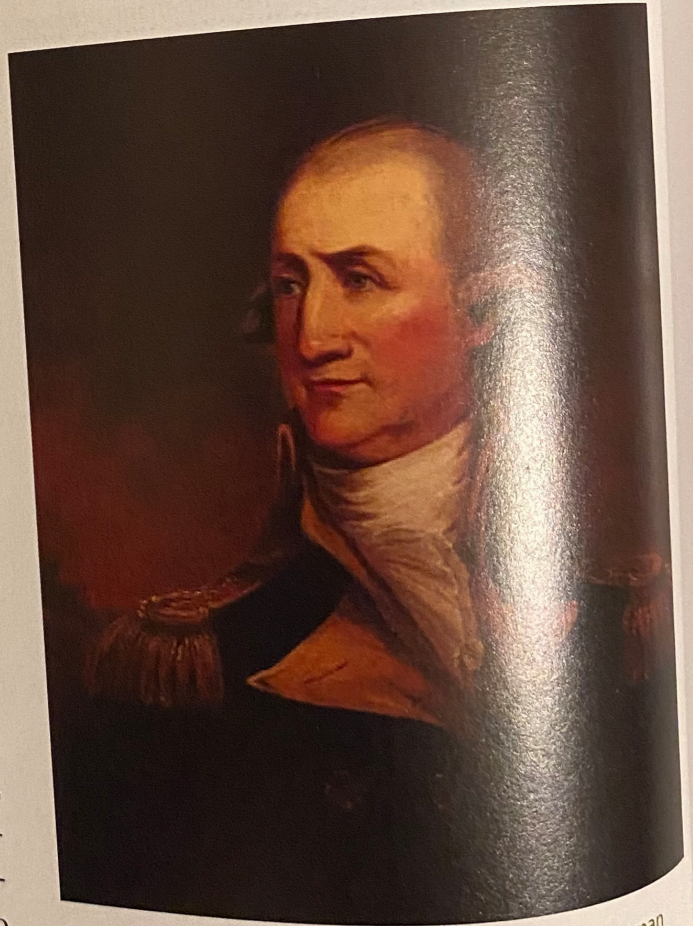
one half of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglicans."<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, some Christians made perhaps the most difficult choice of all: embracing pacifism. Out of religious conviction, such Christians refused to participate in the war except to care for wounded soldiers. Groups with roots in the radical Reformation (Quakers, Mennonites, and others) objected to the war on

religious grounds, but patriots often treated them as secret supporters of England.

In contrast to the pacifists and those who remained loyal to England, the Roman Catholics supported American independence with vigor. Catholics were then a small minority of about thirty thousand people. If America became independent, the Catholics—like the Baptists and other suppressed groups—stood to gain religious freedom and full participation in public life. Leading the way was Charles Carroll (1737–1832), a delegate to the Continental Congress and the only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Charles's cousin, the priest John Carroll (1735–1815), did much to shape American Catholicism in the Revolution and its



**Fig. 2.9** Peter Muhlenberg was a Lutheran clergyman who joined the Continental Army. During the Revolution he was a colonel before being breveted to major general. Later he served in the House of Representatives, and then in the United States Senate.

■ During the American Revolution, congregational life suffered in all churches, regardless of belief or stance toward the war. Many church buildings were abandoned, destroyed, or used for military purposes. Parishes struggled along without pastors as clergy joined the army or fled to Canada or England. Farms were destroyed, households were scattered, and trade was interrupted. In a country that could scarcely feed and clothe its army, resources were scarce. The war years are remembered as a low point for church life in America.



**Fig. 2.11** Christ Church in Philadelphia. "Numerous leaders and famous characters of the American Revolution—including George and Martha Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Betsy Ross, John Adams and Robert Morris—worshipped here. . . . Christ Church served as the first parish of the Church of England in colonial Pennsylvania. Absalom Jones, the first African-American priest of the Episcopal Church, was ordained here." Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

\* Museum of the American Revolution, <http://www.americanrevolutioncenter.org/connections/christ-church>