


# A Gradual Disentangling:

God and Caesar in  
Massachusetts from  
1750–1834

Timothy Castner

# Goals

- ◆ Revisit the questions of whether the United States was founded as a Christian Nation
  - ◆ Explore the role of religion in the Imperial Crisis in Massachusetts
  - ◆ Trace the gradual separation of church and town in Massachusetts through 1834
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- A stylized, dark teal silhouette of a mountain range is positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, extending from the right edge towards the center.

# Opening Question

- ◆ What worries you more, the state interfering with the church or the church interfering with the state?
- ◆ Bonus Question: Why did the town of Lexington object to the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780?

# Christian America Revisited

- Noll, Hatch, and Marsden, *The Search for Christian America*.
- Lambert, Frank. *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*.
- Who is Sovereign, God or We the People?
- Washington's Farewell Address:  
"Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National Morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."



# Christian America II

- ◆ Jefferson's Inaugural: "The liberties of a nation [cannot] be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that their liberties are a gift of God."
- ◆ Massachusetts Constitution:
- ◆ It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe.
- ◆ As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality. . .

# An Alternate Preamble?

- ◆ We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, and His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government and, in order to form a more perfect union . . .

# Adams to Hezekiah Niles

- ◆ The Usual Quotation
- ◆ “The [American] Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. . . .”

# The Full Quotation

- ◆ The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people, a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations. While the king, and all in authority under him, were believed to govern in justice and mercy according to the laws and constitution derived to them from the God of nature, and transmitted to them by their ancestors, they thought themselves bound to pray for the king and queen and all the royal family, and all in authority under them, as ministers ordained of God for their good. But when they saw those powers renouncing all the principles of authority, and bent upon the destruction of all the securities of their lives, liberties, and properties, they thought it their duty to pray for the Continental Congress and all the thirteen state congresses, etc.

# Thesis

- ◆ The combined forces of church and state were an important factor in the struggle for independence in Massachusetts, but the long term effects of the revolution led to political and religious democratization. Ultimately church and state were gradually disentangled, culminating with the end of taxpayer subsidized churches in 1834.

# Jonathan Mayhew

- ◆ The Contributions of the Clergy to Revolutionary Ideology and Protest
- ◆ Seen in the Context of
  - The Great Awakening
  - King George's War – Protestant New England against Catholic and "tyrannical" France



# Mayhew's Actions

- ◆ *Discourse on Unlimited Submission*
  - Provides the theological justification for resistance to unjust governments.
  - Becomes most influential sermon of the revolutionary period.
- ◆ Mayhew – Apthorp Controversy
  - British effort to install an Archbishop in the colonies seen as part of larger threat against liberty
- ◆ Stamp Act Riots
  - One of Mayhew's sermons may have provided impetus for the razing of Hutchinson's house.

# Adams and Religious Liberty

- ◆ It excited a general and just apprehension that bishops and dioceses and churches and priests and tithes were to be imposed upon us by Parliament. It was known that neither king, nor ministry, nor archbishops could appoint bishops in America without an act of Parliament; and if Parliament could tax us they could establish the Church of England with all its creeds, articles, tests, ceremonies, and tithes, and prohibit all other churches as conventicles and schism shops.



# Religion and the Massachusetts Provincial Congress

- ◆ Call for a day of Thanksgiving
  - Imperial Crisis seen as God's judgment on the people's sins.
  - Personal reformation the key
- ◆ Appeal to the Ministers
  - The Clergy should urge their parishioners to obey the Continental Congress.
  - The Goal is the restoration of harmony and "lasting happiness."

# Provincial Congress 1775

- ◆ Call for Prayer and Fasting
  - British seen as a combination of the forces of Earth and Hell against the Church to take away civil and religious liberty.
- ◆ Alliance between Church and State
  - Ministers promise to become chaplains and help spread the revolutionary message
  - State calls for stricter observance of Sabbath in MA and in army.

# Provincial Congress at War

- ◆ Call for Prayer and Fasting
  - Issued after Battles of Lexington and Concord, and Bunker Hill
  - Joseph Warren, President of Congress killed at Bunker Hill
  - Prayed to the “Lord of Hosts and God of Armies.”
  - Called upon the people to renew their covenantal relationship with God.

# Isaac Backus

- Baptists like Backus use the Revolution as a pretext to fight for complete liberty of Conscience
- *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*
- Trip to Continental Congress
- Appeal to Provincial Congress

# Backus on Religion Liberty

- ◆ “The church is armed with *light and truth* to pull down the strongholds of iniquity. . . gain souls to Christ” and exclude those who will not submit to the authority of the Church. The state, on the other hand, “is armed with the *sword* to guard the peace and the civil rights of all persons and societies and to punish those who violate the same.”


# The Returns of the Towns

- ◆ Reports of individual town meetings provides a window to the views about church and state of a broader range of people.

- Major Themes

- ◆ Anti-Catholicism - “we Mean Not to have any but Protestants to Rule us”
- ◆ Framingham denied that good government needed Christianity and feared too much connection of Church and State.
- ◆ Others wanted much stronger religious language

# MA Constitution of 1780

- Provides opportunity for Baptists and others to secure religious freedom
  - Instead the Standing Order, maintaining close ties to the revolutionary government strengthened their political influence.
  - While provided theoretical equality for all Protestants, it guaranteed tax support for Congregational Churches and Sabbath attendance laws.
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# Samuel Cooper

- ◆ Sermon to commemorate the New Constitution
  - The People of Massachusetts are like the People of Israel
  - We are living in the fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy
  - MA Government modeled after the Israelite Republic under the Judges
  - The success of the Government depends on the religious character of the people.



# The Barnes Case (1810)


- ◆ Important Case that clarified the rights of dissenters to receive tax dollars
  - Parson's ruling proved that the ideology of the Standing Order was alive and well thirty years into the constitution.
  - An unincorporated church could not receive get tax dollars.
  - Universalists were upset that they needed permission from the state to be a recognized church.

# Religious Freedom Act of 1811

## ◆ *An Act Respecting Public Worship and Religious Freedom*

- Effectively overturned the Barnes Case
- Gave unincorporated churches the right to receive tax dollars
- Itinerant ministers also eligible for support.
- Gave churches the right to own and manage money without a charter.

# Constitutional Convention of 1820

- Separation from Maine necessitated a new Constitutional Convention
  - Daniel Webster argued that religion was “the only security of the good order of society, [and] the basis of the moral character of the community, [and] the only protection of a free government.”
  - Proved unable to generate adequate support for a compromise amendment.
  - But, it did drop all religious oaths and requirements for holding government office.
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# Dedham Case

- Symbolized the growing rift between Unitarians and conservatives in Eastern Massachusetts.
- The Court ruled that the parish (town) had the right to hire ministers, control the meeting house and other property.
- The Trinitarian Church lost control of itself to the Unitarian town.
- As a result Trinitarian Congregationalists stopped supporting the Standing Order

# Final Collapse - 1833

## – Thomas Whittemore – Universalist Publisher

- ◆ “In order for Religion to do any good [it] must operate on his heart; it must regulate his affections; it must subdue his passions; it must impress its likeness on his soul: but this a mere artificial support can never do; this a legal enactment never will affect.”
- ◆ The People agreed and the 11<sup>th</sup> amendment overwhelmingly ended state taxation in support of religion.

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