

Reflections

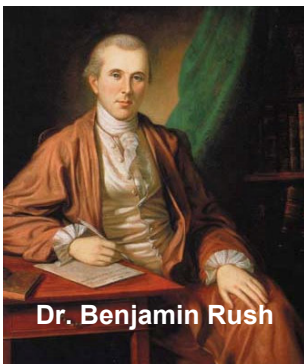
Lawrence P. Grayson

The Origins of American Democracy Part 2: Christianity and the Enlightenment

Christianity shaped the worldview of those who established this nation. Americans in the 18th century were, by and large, practicing Christians -- Methodists, Episcopalians, Calvinists, Puritans, Quakers, Congregationalists, Unitarians. They were well acquainted with the Bible and its teachings, which they referred to frequently in their writings and speech. Christianity provided those who established this nation with a common moral consciousness that shaped their thinking on temporal and secular matters, allowing them to agree upon fundamental principles to develop a democratic government.

The Founding Fathers understood the necessity of a moral basis for the continuance of a democracy, as the character weaknesses and self-interest of men were obvious – even among themselves. John Hancock, who served as president of the Second Continental Congress that declared this nation’s independence, was a convicted smuggler. Benjamin Franklin was a known philanderer. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and many other of these early Americans, were slave owners. Samuel Adams incited the Boston Tea Party in which private property was destroyed to make a political point. A form of government in which power was vested in the people could only survive if the citizenry was virtuous. The greatness of the Founders was in creating a governmental structure that distributed power and provided checks and balances to deal with venality, self-interest and radical desires of men.

Christianity instilled in them a belief in an omnipotent God who oversees the affairs of men, universal moral laws that transcend those of mankind, the dignity, worth and equality of the individual who is made in God’s image, the primacy of inner values over external ones, the immortality of the soul, and divine justice after death with reward and punishment meted out based on one’s actions in life. These tenets were reflected in the fundamental documents of this nation: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights.



Dr. Benjamin Rush

In his Farewell Address from the Presidency, George Washington stated, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, stated that “the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty.” Even Thomas Jefferson, a deist with no professed religious affiliation, recognized the importance of religion to shape the behavior of the populace in a democracy. He stated, “Of all the systems of morality, ancient or modern,

which have come under my observation, none appear to me so pure as that of Jesus.”

The 18th century saw an increase in an exclusive application of reason to the development of political economy, government, and science. Many traditional ideas such as the Divine Right of Kings, hereditary status, and rights based on social class were challenged and replaced by an emphasis on freedom, justice, and tolerance. There was an evolving understanding that certain individual rights pre-existed the state, that government exists to protect those innate rights, that a constitution should protect individual autonomy from other individuals and governmental power, and in private property. Society was viewed as an implicit social contract between the state and its citizens regarding the rights and responsibilities of each. John Locke, one of the most influential of the 17th century Enlightenment philosophers, argued that a government could only be legitimate if it received the consent of the governed and protected the natural rights of life, liberty, and estate. If such consent were not given or if the leaders betray the agreements implicit in the sovereign-subject relationship then the people have a right to overthrow their leaders. This gave rise to the belief that America should be formed as a republic in which sovereignty is invested in the people, rather than in a hereditary elite.

With these concepts in mind, this nation’s founders sought to replace the omnipotent rule of a monarch with government based on reason and on the will of the people. Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* asserted that King George III failed to protect the rights of colonists and hence a revolution was justified. When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, he included a litany of “Injuries and Usurpations” committed by the King as a justification for severing all political bonds with Great Britain. These ideas also formed the philosophical basis for the arguments presented in the *Federalist Papers* which proposed creating a form of government that would balance individual liberty with community order. These early Americans recognized that conflicts would inevitably arise as a result of differing self-interest among the States and among individuals, and that the best way to preserve the rights of people was to place power in the hands of the people through a central government. The result is a uniquely American political philosophy of government, practical in nature, founded on experience, rooted in developments that began in classical Athens and ancient Rome, tempered by the Enlightenment, and based on the beliefs of a particular religious tradition.

In the tumultuous global discord of today, open, honest and fruitful dialogue between American democracy and other world cultures can only occur if this nation maintains the moral basis for its culture, which is rooted in Judeo-Christian principles.

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