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A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE EARLY U. S. GOVERNMENT

Countless people have always sought for a position on religion when it comes to its part on the government. To some, religion does not need to be one of the 'ruling' factors within the government; while others say otherwise. In America, particularly in the building up of its government, the impact of religion is evident. This particular paper will discuss the part religion took place especially in the founding period of the American government.

In the summer of 1787, Philadelphia adopted the Constitution of the United States. The Constitution didn't say much regarding religion, except for the Article IV which states that "no religious Test shall ever be required as qualification", but resulted into a division of the American into two groups: those who desired the new means of the government to give faith a larger part in the society and those who are afraid that it would do so. Throughout the development of the American government, religion was deemed to either be a negative factor in society or be a beneficial one. So it would be necessary that one should look at how religion went in to the American society.

Before the period of the American colonization, the Elizabethan Settlement defined religious faith and freedom in England. Since various beliefs have been widely spread in different societies through the ancestral people, religious strife also became prominent. In particular, the churches of the two prominent religious beliefs - Protestantism and Catholicism - are the ones who are greatly involved. In fact, religious wars that devastated France in

the 16th century and Germany in the 17th century was somehow [directly] ignited by the persecution of the Protestants and the Catholics. Thus, Elizabeth I, in 1550s, decided to end this up by establishing the Church of England. She deemed this as the official religion of the kingdom, and the public is required to support this although they are still allowed to observe their private beliefs. However, many of the Catholics and Protestants could not acknowledge the church as the “ true” faith worthy of their commitment. In turn, these people sought their way into the land of America in order to have religious freedom. Thus, North America is deemed as the ‘ religious refuge’ during the 16th century and the 17th century. The colonization period started in these times, and many European countries were greatly compelled to plant churches in the ‘ New World’ - which is in the land of America. The successors of Elizabeth I even supported colonizing expeditions for various purposes. Nevertheless, inspired by the religious character of these newly established colonies, most of the colonizers/travellers didn’t only bring themselves into the American for glory or gold but mainly for the purpose of populating it.

The first colonies established in the American soil manifested the diversity of the religious transplantations. For instance, the Virginia Company of London transplanted the Church of England in the Chesapeake in 1607, and the Massachusetts Bay Company established Puritanism in New England in 1629. In every colony, they sought ways to make religion deemed as the ‘ true faith’. Although there are still many dissenters in every religion, the large land of America brought greater religious liberty than in England. If one doesn’t like a particular religious belief, he/she goes to the other one without

even having punished by the previous religious body. However, many – mostly the Protestants – believed that the unrestrained religious freedom led to religious lewdness since all the religions were deemed equal to one another. Nevertheless, the main point here is that religion at the very start of the American society has already been a great factor in the development of America.

In this period, this diversity in the early colonies brought in the sense of plurality. The states included in the United States of America are the fruit of this emergence of various ‘religious’ colonies. These are characterized by having their own religious beliefs practiced on their own public places of worship, without much hindrance from other ‘religious’ colonies. However, due to the [unrestrained] increase in population – which could be due to migration or family growth – religious beliefs made another impact on the American society. And this is concerning the Bill of Rights.

The American Revolution (1775-1783) is one of the greatest pictures in the American history. It was due to the collision of the individual rights of each state government. At the time of the founding, these individual rights were a very important element of America’s political culture. In fact, they embodied the principles that justified the American Revolution. Although most of the state government when the U. S. Constitution was created in 1787, the final draft of the Constitution still had to make a formal statement of the rights, in order to not leave out any important thing or whatsoever. In these times, as population increased, people having new ideas about faith and freedom sought changed, and clash between those who advocate for wider religious freedom and those who long for religious uniformity in America begun. In

fact, the Protestant community played a highly influenced role when it comes to the sectors of the government. In turn, the other religions didn't find their rights addressed every time their religious practices conflicted with public policies. Another example is the Puritans who used the law courts to harass and punish some Quakers and Baptists among their community. Thus, the First Amendment took place. It states, " Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof: " Thomas Jefferson described the First Amendment as one which erected a " wall of separation" between the state and the church. Many argued that if the government be driven by a religion, it could most likely be unfair to those who do not belong to that religion. Likewise, when religion - its beliefs and practices - will be controlled by the government, freedom will not be available. Having or committing to a religion has something to do with the freedom of choice. Thus, religion is not just about churches or communities, but about the person himself/herself that believes in it. So in a sense, if religion will be the driving factor of the government and its sector, the government will be instituted according to personal preferences and not of the public. If the government will be taken under such control, it is no government at all. Partiality is not promoted in this; otherwise, even justice in America will be unfair to other people. The First Amendment freed religion from the government, and the government from religion.

Another way in which religion had its impact on the government of America in its founding period is the impartation of ideology into the society. Religion is not the main cause of the American Revolution; nevertheless, it made a very significant support on it. This support came most from the

Congregationalists, Baptists, Southern lay Anglicans, and Presbyterians, who are basically identified as Calvinists. Calvinism in the early America was not deemed as a system of doctrines, but as a means of effort to resolve series of fundamental tensions in society – both in politics and in religious sect. Calvinism's support that pertains to the American Revolution can be brought down into two basic themes. First, the Revolution points to the experiential approach to salvation, with its uneasy connection to the necessity of righteous behavior in the world. It implies that a Revolution is not a negative event in a sense since it is true that in the salvation of man, he experiences hardship with his surroundings. When a man is saved, he will be required to still deal with anything that hinders him from living the righteous life. This is a very important social and political ideology religion imparted upon the American government and its sects. In any effort to achieve a better – if not the best – form of government, the leaders and the whole society will have to endure many hardships along the way. To establish a government that runs at its best, it will certainly have to experience financial crises, political errors, and so on. Indeed, America for decades has been viewed by many as having a good government, but it is certain that it went through various conflicts and hardships. Second, the Revolution points to the “ definition of an elect community with a secular history overseen by Providence.” This theme of Calvinism implies that the Revolution is part of their history. This imparts the idea that God in His sovereignty allows such things to happen. Nevertheless, even if God allows such conflict and hardships in their government, God is watching over them. This is one important teaching in Calvinism. No matter what happened the regard of God upon His people

never changes. This has been imparted into the American government in a form of social and political ideology. It gives hope to the entire society in the midst of various degree of living. Although this may no longer be prominent today, such ideology was passed on for generations to other sects of the government. For instance, the U. S. Armed Forces had a proclamation stating, " In God We Trust". As they go out to war, what gives them hope for what would happen is their trust in God. The U. S. currency even has this proclamation. It could most likely imply that the financial status of the American government will only have its hope of security and prosperity in God. Though times may seem to lead them into financial breakdown, God is in control. The Supreme Court even opens every court session to a marshal's proclamation: " God save this honourable court!" Moreover, inaugural addresses of presidents of the American government ends with the phrase, " God bless America". Again, this may no longer be prominent today but such ideology has been passed on into American society.

Lastly, the most important role religion had in the founding of the American government has something to do with the presence of virtue and morality in society and politics. The American Founders and many people in general acknowledge God and often express the idea that virtue and morality - which is an essential element in any human society - need the care of religion to keep it energized. As a proponent of religion, Franklin says about its importance.

How great a proportion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced and inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their

virtue and retain them in the practice of it until it becomes habitual, which is the great point for its security. If men are so wicked as we now see them with religion, what would they be if without it.

Religion became the reinforcement element of the Founders' desire to establish a moral and virtuous America. Morality is very important; otherwise, any human society will only find itself having unresolved conflicts, wars, corruption, crime, and so on. In 1786, a Pennsylvanian acknowledged that the idea of religion being the most valuable security to every state, due to its general influence on the lives of men of various characters and conditions, is "an opinion held not only by all good and wise in the world [but by] truly great minds in every age and country." The first two presidents of America - George Washington and John Adams - are proponents of having religion part of social and political aspects of the government. In his farewell address, George Washington said that "National morality could not exist in exclusion of religious principle".

Throughout the 18th century, the public discussion advocating morality and virtue mostly came from clergymen and laymen, having assumed that political liberty depends on a virtuous society. The American people and the government wanted liberty mainly because lack of freedom is not a characteristic of their religion. The government instituted its Constitution not in partiality mainly because their religions promote goodness and fairness. Crime and corruption can be refrained with the support of the religious principle of having fear of God.

In conclusion, religion is a great part in the founding of the American in its entirety. It caused the people to long for liberty, which resulted to the

establishment of the states in the American soil. It became a reinforcing element for the Bill of Rights. Furthermore, it is the main support for the presence of virtue and morality in society.