

The role and impact of religion on early america



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BUSTER**

The Role and Impact of Religion on Early America Throughout the history of the human race, we have striven to find an explanation as to why we are here, how we got here, and if there is some sort of “ spirit in the sky” or other supernatural force that could possibly guide us or have an influence in our daily lives. In America, the dominant religion we have been associated with is Christianity. However, Christianity didn’t even exist in America until the European presence began to take over.

There was a great clashing of societies and religious beliefs when Early European immigrants believed they could convert Native American populations to Christianity. In this document, I will briefly explain the evolution and influence of religion in America, and how that influence has interlaced itself with our political ideals as well. Our story must first begin with the early interactions of the Native Americans and Early European explorers.

Although Christopher Columbus (a European Christian) seemed to make some effort to coexist peacefully with the Native Americans who he mistakenly identified as “ Indians”, the purpose of his visit was clear. On page 139 of our text, he discusses bartering items such hawk’s bells, glass beads, and pieces of gold (Lauter). Of course, the Native Americans had religious beliefs of their own, and our text goes into great detail to document many of those accounts.

On page 109, in the poem “ My Breath (Netsilik Eskimo-Inuit)” the words and emotions are based largely on the respect and sacrifice of the animals the Inuit depended upon to survive: “ I bring to mind the great white one, / the polar bear, / approaching with raised hind-quarters, / his nose in the snow-- /

convinced, as he rushed at me, / that of the two of us, / he was the only male! (Lauter)” The poem goes on to describe “ the great blubbery one”, a fjord-seal that the Inuit also sacrifices for the survival of himself and his family.

Much of the Native American writings were based upon nature, as was much of the Native American spirituality. While there were some very poignant examples of Native Americans and Early European settlers working together, it was clear that there would be a clashing of these two very different worlds. While Jamestown, Virginia was built using the mostly harmonious collaboration of the Powhatan Indians and early British settlers, it quickly became obvious that competition for natural resources was going to become a problem.

A simple example of this was the colonist’s desire to mow the grass (to feed horses and livestock) while pigs destroyed clam reserves. Whether intentional or not, the white man was changing the environment, and the situation for the Native Americans deteriorated. Niki Phan does a great job of explaining one such incident with her response to the question as to what led to the Pueblo Revolt: The Pueblo Revolt occurred on August 13, 1680. It was a revolt “ to throw off Spanish military and religious oppression. The revolt occurred because of the abuse and exploitation of the Spanish against the Pueblo people of New Mexico. It derived from a poorly planned expedition to New Mexico which made them want to drain all they could from the Pueblos. After an unsuccessful attempt at converting the natives to Christianity, they decided to make their presence known by violently taking over the Pueblo people. Decades of abuse and mistreatment led to a revolt against the

Spanish overlords. It seems that the Pueblo culture was dependent on Spanish military from outside raiders.

The Pueblos did not have a central point of authority which was one of the main reasons why they took so long to organize a revolt. The reason why the Spanish stayed in New Mexico for a long time is because it was economical to do so. The location and resources made it ideal for a military establishment. Fast-forward to 1776 and our formal Declaration of Independence. Although this was formally an independence from Great Britain, it was almost as strong of a split from the Native Americans as it was from the British. In fact, I would argue that it was (albeit more gradual at times) an even stronger separation.

History has shown us that when either religious or political views differ among humans, chances are they both differ. Regardless, it was clear that as of 1776, any political affiliation with the British or the Native Americans was essentially over. The words, credited mostly to Thomas Jefferson, were poetic, soft, and powerful at the same time. " We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with CERTAIN [inherent and] inalienable rights; that among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... (Lauter 1089).

While fitting such a rich topic as the interdependence of religion and politics into 1000 words or less is nearly impossible, it is also as simple as the reaction that we as humans have to creatures that do not look or think like us. It is no coincidence, in my opinion, that most wars are fought between people that not only look different, but also follow completely different religious and cultural guidelines. The First Amendment solidified America's

official separation of church and state. However, in all reality, this is a battle that continues today.

In my own opinion, I have seen more religious influence on politics in the past 15 years than I had in the entire first half of my life. In George W. Bush, we had a President who claimed to be "guided by God." I often argue with my friends that America would elect an openly homosexual candidate before they would elect an openly Atheist candidate. However, all one has to do is open a book or a website, and it is very clear that the vast majority of our founding fathers wanted religion to have no part in politics.

It scares me that something like a third of America's citizens believes that The Constitution was LITERALLY inspired by God, yet founding father after founding father has decried the notion of such a theocracy. As Dr. Boon said, if you want a government based on religion, move to Iran. As Thomas Jefferson said, "I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstition (Christianity) one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded upon fables and mythologies. The Christian God is a being of terrific character -- cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust... While we can debate the existence of a God or a Spaghetti Monster until we are blue in the face, there is no debate that while our history is not always pretty at times, our founding fathers did get at least one thing right. Religion and politics are like oil and water. And pretty soon, if we don't clean up the mess we've already created, we will have a mess that makes the BP Oil Rig Explosion look like a fruit fight. Works Cited Lauter, Paul, et al. Heath Anthology of American Literature. 6th. Boston: Wadsworth, 2009. Paperback.