

The Influence of Protestant Christianity in America

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Abstract: Although the United States of America is by no means a Christian nation, religion virtually has been playing a very important role in American lives. Religion is a significant part of the culture of the United States. Among them Christianity has a profound influence on everyday life of Americans. There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America. A quick look at the development of religion in the nation will help us know more about the diversity of it as well as different teachings and practices of religion.

Key Words: Orthodox Calvinists; Protestant Universalism; Unitarianism

When it comes to the religion in America, there are various religious groups. Their beliefs and practices differ from one another. What caused this religious diversity? Perhaps the major cause is the Protestant belief that the individual, not the organized church, should be the center of religious life.^[1] This idea was brought to America and firmly established by European Protestants, and it is one of the reasons why no single church has become the center of religious life in the nation. American religious tradition has encouraged not only the development of numerous denominations but also a tolerance and acceptance of all faiths that express the religious preferences of different individual. This climate of religious freedom has, of course, strengthened the development of cultural pluralism in the United States. But there is one thing for sure, that is Christianity's dynamic spirit is showing signs of life in every aspect of American life. The statistics show that 87 percent of Americans call themselves Christian and more than 75 percent

Americans claim they actually pray to God on a daily basis, and 33 percent say they manage to get to church every week. The number of churches in this country is even larger than that of McDonalds. Church attendance rate is 42 percent in the year of 2003. Americans remain a profoundly religious people. The phrase "In God We Trust" is inscribed on U. S. currency and the U. S. Pledge of Allegiance says that the U. S. is "one nation under God." There was the perceptive French visitor who once said that there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.

First, we must make one point clear, and that is, we can not deny the fact that the United States of America is not a Christian nation. As we all know, most of the earliest settlers were British puritans. They came to the Colonies for the sake of religious freedom. That is to say, the desire for religious freedom was one of the strongest reasons why many colonial settlers came to America. Furthermore, the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution also says that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise. When the Constitution was adopted in 1789, the government was forbidden to establish a national church. In 1797, America declared that the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion. And the separation of church and state is also an American principle supported not only by minorities, such as Jews, Moslems, and unbelievers, but applauded by most Protestant churches that recognize that it has allowed religion to flourish in this nation. It keeps the majority from pressuring the minority. In America, The great diversity of ethnic background has produced religious pluralism; almost all of the religions of the world are now practiced in the United States. But the truth is that the founding fathers of the United States did not create a secular government because they disliked Christianity. Many were believers themselves. For example, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of America clearly believed that America was a gift from God and that it was God himself who granted Americans the ability to reason and properly live American lives. America was founded on Christian principles. However, Americans were aware of the dangers of church-state union. ^[2] They had studied and even seen difficulties that church-state partnerships caused in Europe. During the American colonial period, alliances between religion and government

produced oppression and tyranny. That is why the idea of separation of church and state became accepted.

Although we shall bear in mind that America is not a Christian nation due to all the historical reasons, the overwhelming majority of Americans are Christians. Only seven percent say they have no religious preferences or beliefs. Of the 87 percent who are Christian, 59 percent are Protestant, 27 percent Catholic, and 1 percent Eastern Orthodox. This is a pattern that persisted for decades. The religion is still practiced and studied today, particularly for their teachings about living in harmony with nature. Actually, from the beginning, Christianity makes important contributions to the American culture. To someone not familiar with the Protestant faith, the religious scene in the United States is hard to understand. The various protestant denominations have completely separate organization, and although there are many similarities, there are also significant differences in their religious teaching and belief. Some protestant denominations forbid dancing, playing cards, and drinking alcohol. Americans have developed a number of formal practices that combine national patriotism with religion. A number of scholars have referred to these practices as the “national religion” of the United States. The main function of the national religion is to provide support for the dominant values of the nation.^[3] Thus, it does in an informal and less organized way what nationally organized churches did for European nations in earlier times.

In order to understand all the phenomena, let us take a quick look at the development of religion in this nation.

The Catholic faith was first brought to the North American continent by the Spanish in the 1500s. For the following years, Catholic missionaries and settlers from Spain and then Latin America came to what are now California and the Southwest. Although most European settlers who began establishing colonies along east coast of North America were some Catholics, the vast majority of them are Protestants. As we can see two-thirds of all Americans are Protestants. As the new nation formed, it was the protestant branch of the Christian that has the strongest effect on the development of the religious climates in the United States. Owing to important differences in religious beliefs, the Protestant branch broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. At the time of the protestant Reformation,

the Protestants insisted that all individuals must stand alone before God. They can save their souls by talking to God. We know that there is an age-old question that had plagued Protestantism for centuries: What role can the individual play in earning salvation? Orthodox Calvinists had long argued that people could neither earn nor choose salvation on their own. What's more, a predetermined decision was beyond human understanding or control. In contrast to the belief, a new doctrine is raised. If people sinned, they should seek their forgiveness directly from God rather than a priest. This meant that every individual was solely responsible for his or her own relationship with God. [4]

Here, we have to mention Deism, which arose in eighteenth-century Europe, and carried the logic of Isaac Newton's image of the world as a smoothly operating machine to its logical conclusion. The God of the Deist had planned the universe, built it, set it in motion, and then left it to its own fate. By the use of reason people might grasp the natural laws governing the universe. So Paine defined the deistic religious duties as doing justice, loving mercy and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy. Many leaders of Revolutionary War Era, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, were Deists, and even nominally attached to existent churches. We can say that Enlightenment rationalism soon began to make deep inroads into American Protestantism. We can see that religion in America is a kind of rational religion. In the eyes of many American citizens, the new nation has a mission to stand as an example to the world; however, as we all know the country stood as an example to erring humanity. But at the same time, we can not deny the fact that America has a special mission that carries spiritual overtones; the religious fervor quickened in all kinds of movements like in Great Awakening began to reinforce the idea of national purpose. [5] In turn the sense of high calling infused the national character with an element of perfectionism. The combination of religious belief and social idealism brought major reforms and advances in human rights. It also brought disappointments that sometimes festered into cynicism and alienation.

By the end of the eighteenth century, many New Englanders were drifting into Unitarianism, a belief that emphasized the oneness and benevolence of God, the inherent goodness of humankind, and the primacy of reason and conscience over

established creeds and confessions. People were not inherently depraved, Unitarians stressed; they were capable of doing tremendous good, and all were eligible for salvation. The American Unitarian Association in 1826 had 125 churches. Someone once said that all literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarian; all the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches. Meanwhile, a parallel movement, Universalism, attracted a different social group: working-class people of humble status. Universalism stressed the salvation of all men and women, not just a predestined few. God, they taught, was too merciful to condemn anyone to eternal punishment. The unregenerate would suffer in proportion to their sins, but eventually all souls would come into harmony with God. Therefore, Unitarianism and Universalism were in fundamental agreement. The Universalists hold that God was too good to damn man; the Unitarians insist that man was too good to be damned. [6]

In today's America, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and those with no religion continue to have a greater preference for the Democratic Party over the Republican—much as they did in 1990. Evangelical or Born Again Christians and Mormons are the most apt to identify as Republicans. Buddhists and those with no religion are most likely to be political independents. Despite the growing diversity nationally, some religious groups clearly occupy a dominant demographic position in particular states. For instance, Catholics are the majority of the population in Massachusetts and Rhode Island as are Mormons in Utah and Baptists in Mississippi. Catholics comprise over 40% of the population in Vermont, New Mexico, New York and New Jersey, while Baptists are over 40% of the population in several southern states such as South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, Alabama and Georgia.

American politicians often proclaim their religions when they have campaigns. Thus, they can win the support from people who have the same religion as theirs. At the time, most religious figures are highly politically active and they often participate in political affairs. There are Christians in both the Democratic Parties and Republican Parties. Due to their different political preferences, evangelical Christians are likely to support the Republican Parties while secular voters prefer supporting the Democratic Parties. And if we take a look at the family background

of all the American presidents, we will find that almost every president was brought up in a family with affiliation with Protestant Christianity. Among them, John F. Kennedy is an exception and he is a Roman Catholic. Several early presidents were Deists and at least four presidents are Unitarians.

As for the common Americans, Women describe their outlook as religious more than men do. Compared to young Americans, older Americans are likely to describe their outlook as "religious." Asian Americans tend to regard themselves as secular more than black Americans do. People belong to the main religious groups are likely to get married than those who have no religion.

Some observers of American society believe that various practices that are called the national religion can have harmful effects. Sometimes these practices can help to create a climate in which disagreement with current national practices is discouraged or not tolerated. In the 1960s, for example, some citizens considered the young people who protested against the war in Vietnam to be "un-American." They told the young protesters, "America—love it or leave it." This phrase became a slogan that illustrated their excessive patriotism. Expressions of the national religion can also be seen when the United States sends military forces overseas; the Gulf War provided good examples of the mixing of prayer and patriotism. Patriotic songs such as *God Bless America*, *America the Beautiful* are as well known to most Americans as their national anthem. These songs are sung frequently on public occasions and may also be sung at Protestant worship services, expressing the idea that the United States has received God's special blessing. [8]

The national religion can have a harmful effect because it encourages the total conformity with national practices. As we mentioned earlier, it also aroused Americans' extreme patriotism. However, it does some good to American society. The belief gives Americans confidence that they are blessed by God and they will succeed. The national religion reminds them of their heritage. It is definitely a useful means of maintaining their national confidence in such a rapidly changing world.

Although many Protestant denominations exist in the United States today, all of them share a common heritage that has been a powerful force in shaping the values and beliefs of Americans. America's Protestant heritage seems to have

encouraged certain basic values that members of many diverse non-Protestant faiths find easy to accept. For example, American Protestantism, however, has never encouraged the idea of fainting wealth without hard work and self discipline. ^[9] Many scholars believe that the emphasis of Protestantism on those two values made an important contribution to the industrial growth of the United States. The protestant view of hard work and discipline differed from the older tradition of the Catholic church where the most highly valued work was that performed by priests and those whose lives were given completely to the organized church. The work and self-discipline of those whose occupations were outside the church might have been considered admirable but not holy. Protestant leaders brought about a different attitude, toward work, first in Europe, and later in the New World, by viewing the work of all people—farmers, merchants, and laborers as holy!

Protestants also believed that capacity for self-discipline was a holy characteristic blessed by god. Self-discipline was often defined as the willingness to save and invest one's money rather than spend it on immediate pleasures. Protestant tradition, therefore may have played an important part in creating a good climate for the industrial growth of the United States, which depended on hard work and willingness to save and invest money. ^[10] The belief in hard work and self-discipline in pursuit of material gain and other goals is often referred to as "the protestant work ethic" or "the puritan work ethic."

It is important to understand that this work ethic has had an influence far beyond the protestant church. Many religious groups in the United States share belief in what is called the protestant work ethic. Americans who have no attachment to a particular church, protestant or catholic, have still been influenced by the work ethic in their daily lives.

It is interesting to note that in the last few decades, there has been a shift both in the work ethic and in the meaning of work. Researchers report that most Americans did not expect their work to be interesting or enjoyable in the 1950s, for example, most people saw their jobs primarily as a source of income. Now, by a margin of four to one, they expect their work to give them a sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment in a tradition to their income. Some people are also beginning to question whether working long hours to have success and material

wealth is really worth the sacrifice. Perhaps less might be better.

Some of the extremely wealthy Americans have made generous contributions to help others. Historically, in the early 1900s, for example, Andrew Carnegie, a famous American businessman, gave away more than 300 million dollars to help support schools and universities and to build public libraries in thousands of communities in the United States. John D. Rockefeller, another famous businessman, in explaining why he gave a large sum from his private fortune to establish a university, said: "The good Lord gave me my money, so how could I withhold it from the University of Chicago?"^[11] The motive for humanitarianism and volunteerism is strong: Many Americans believe that they must devote part of their time and wealth to religious or humanitarian causes in order to be acceptable in the eyes of God and in the eyes of other Americans. Many businesses encourage their employees to do volunteer work, and individuals may get tax credits for money given to charity.

Protestant Christianity like Roman Catholic Christianity often emphasizes the natural sinfulness of human nature. However, since Protestants do not go to priests for forgiveness of their sins, individual are left alone before God to improve themselves or suffer eternal punishment by God for their sinful acts, In this way, Protestantism encourages a strong and restless desire for self-improvement.

The protestant idea of self-improvement includes more than achieving material gain through hard work and self-discipline. It includes the idea of improving oneself by helping others. Individuals, in other words, make themselves into better persons by contributing some of their time or money to charitable, educational, or religious causes that are designed to help others. The philosophy is sometimes called humanitarianism. This has helped to unite many different religious groups in the United States without requiring any to abandon their faiths.^[12] Cultural and religious pluralism has also created a context of tolerance that further strengthens the American reality of many different religions living peacefully within a single nation.

All in all, religion will continue to play an important role in the American life no matter how developed the country will be.

Notes:

- [1] Parker, William, *American Religion*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965, p. 36.
- [2] David, *American History*, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 6-9.
- [3] George Brown and David E. Shi, *America a Narrative History*, Norton Company, 2003, pp. 537-548.
- [4] 王佐良,《欧洲文化入门》,北京:外语教学与研究出版社,2004,第73-74页。
- [5] Johnson, *Western Culture*, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 67-69.
- [6] Galbraith, John Kenneth, *The Culture of Contentment*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992, p. 23.
- [7] Greeley, Andrew M., *World Religions in America*, John Knox Press, 1994, p. 112.
- [8] Elizabeth Coppolino, *The American Ways*, Prentice Hall Regents, 1999, pp. 63-70.
- [9] Martin E., *Protestant Christianity in the World and in America*, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 161-163.
- [10] Gonzalez, Justo L., *The Religious World of Hispanic Americans*, John Knox Press, 1994, pp. 83-85.
- [11] Lasch, Christopher, *The Culture of Narcissism*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1988, p. 43.
- [12] Tauber, Peter, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Boston: Little Brown, 1993, pp. 75-77.