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RADICALS IN THE REVOLUTION: THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS DURING
THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

By Kevan D. Keane

This paper explores the plight of radical Christians in Pennsylvania during the American Revolution. Pennsylvania, up until the American Revolution, was governed by Quakers, and home to people of many denominational backgrounds, including various Anabaptist sects, such as the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren. Both Quakers and Anabaptists adhered to the most conservative interpretation of Jesus's teachings on not resisting an evil person (Matthew 5:38-42) and the swearing of oaths (Matthew 5:33-37). When Protestant revolutionaries took over the Pennsylvania government during the War, they required all residents of Pennsylvania to take an oath of allegiance to the Colony. The Quakers and Anabaptists, because of their conscientious objection to the War and to swearing oaths, refused to do so. The revolutionaries, as a result, treated them as if they were the worst of traitors. The irony, however, is that religious freedom was one of the causes for which they fought. As a supplement, it further explores how conscientious objectors were treated in future wars, in order to show that events such as this set a precedent for the way America has interpreted religious freedom. In order to truly study history, both sides of a given issue must be examined, whether they be positive or negative.

INTRODUCTION

When the Revolutionary War broke out in 1776, many Americans were ready to stand up and fight for their freedoms. After all, they had been resisting British taxation and enforcement thereof for more than a decade. But not all Americans necessarily supported the Revolution even if they were against the new taxes, let alone the notion of war in order to solve their problems. In fact, there were some groups of devout Christians who would rather die than take the sword. In particular among these were the Quakers and those known as Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonites, Brethren, etc.). These Christians went against the grain of the dominant thinking patterns of their day. Moreover, they paid a high price for it. In the process of refusing to resist evil, these peace-loving Christians were met with severe persecution from their patriotic neighbors. In the process of defending what they believed were their freedoms by divine right, the Colonists, in their treatment of these Christians, tyrannically deprived their peaceful neighbors of some of those necessary freedoms in order to gain their own.

In order to be honest with history, its students must be able to examine both sides of the same story. There will be positive and negative findings. One cannot preserve a credible viewpoint without giving equal weight to both. That is, one cannot ignore the dark spots of history while overly praising the grandest of accomplishments. This is especially true of America's Christian heritage. After all, "the story of Christianity in America is never just the story of American (or patriotic) Christianity."¹ It also includes the story of those who did not fare well during or benefit from the American Revolution.

¹ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 132.

RADICAL CHRISTIANS AND THE FOUNDING OF PENNSYLVANIA

To briefly introduce the Anabaptists, these were a group of devout Christians whose origins date back to the period of the Reformation in Europe. Unlike the Reformers, who were only willing to go as far as the state would allow them on matters pertaining to religion (such as infant baptism, nonresistance, etc.), they were willing to take only the Bible as their limit for faith and practice. Some of their early leaders were men such as Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, Michael Sattler, and others who shared similar convictions. Eventually they took on names such as the Amish, Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, Brethren, and others, depending on their origins. Unfortunately, they have not always been able to live as one large religious body, and have had many schisms since their spread throughout Europe and America. **For their unique views and refusal to conform, they were persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike in some of the most violent forms of persecution in the history of Christianity.**²

The Quakers, on the other hand, owe their origins to a man named George Fox, who lived in England during and after the English Civil War. He was raised an Anglican like everyone else, but eventually came to emphasize following the “inner light” within (believing it came directly from God) and preached a revolutionary message with the same depth as the Anabaptists, except that physical sacraments such as baptism and the Lord's Supper were disregarded in favor of a teaching on the inner reality of these two things (namely, baptism of the Holy Spirit and real participation in Christ's body and blood). They were persecuted greatly in England also for their beliefs, and eventually came to settle in Pennsylvania.³

Common Resolve to Nonresistance

What these various groups had in common was a firm belief that Jesus's teachings on nonresistance required obedience exactly as they were written. Jesus taught:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away (Matthew 5:38-42).⁴

² For more information on the Anabaptists, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).

³ For more information about the Quakers, see William Penn, *A Brief Account of the Rise and Progress of the People called Quakers*, (Harrison and Crosfield, 1834), Electronic Edition; David W. Bercot, “The Kingdom Banner Arises Anew,” *The Kingdom that Turned the World Upside Down*, (Tyler, TX: Scroll Publishing Company, 2003).

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references will be in the *King James Version* (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 1999).

They all believed that this teaching of Jesus did not merely apply to personal conflict but also applied to times of war. To these Christians, there was never an acceptable time to take the life of another human being, even if the government ordered them to do it.

In addition, Europe experienced many wars from the time of Constantine through the Reformation era on down to the time in which this generation of Christians lived who settled in the American Colonies. Many of those wars saw professing Christians fighting and killing one another. These people wanted no part of killing anyone, but especially not their fellow Christians. This would be a betrayal to their Lord in their eyes.⁵ In fact, a Quaker among them by the name of Anthony Benezet had this to say on the subject:

[Christ] positively enjoins us, to love our enemies, to bless them that curse us; to do good to those that hate us, and pray for them which despitefully use and persecute us.... On the other hand, War requires of its votaries that they kill, destroy, lay waste, and to the utmost of their power distress and annoy, and in every way and manner deprive those they esteem their enemies of support and comfort.⁶

THE “HOLY” EXPERIMENT

When these non-resistant Christians finally settled in the Thirteen Colonies, they lived mostly in Pennsylvania, as noted above.⁷ At a time when most of the Colonies followed the European pattern of having a state church, Pennsylvania was among those who did not officially have a state church, but allowed for a little more religious freedom than their Protestant neighbors in other Colonies. William Penn, himself a Quaker, acquired the charter for the land from King Charles II as payment of a debt owed to Penn's father.⁸ Penn, in the charter, made religious freedom the first priority in the provisions he named. Penn was a firm believer that only one's relationship with God determined one's standing with Him, and so it was not for the state to

⁵ For more information on this subject, see David W. Bercot, *The Kingdom that Turned the World Upside Down*, (Tyler, TX: Scroll Publishing Company, 2003).

⁶ Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 132.

⁷ While some did settle in New Netherland (present-day New York), Pennsylvania was the only one of the Thirteen Colonies that they directly controlled. In New Netherland and other colonies where they attempted to settle, such as the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they were not always treated as equals. The Puritans did not tolerate Quakers, and expelled and/or punished them several times. In New Netherland, Peter Stuyvesant, the last governor-general before the English took over the colony in 1664, targeted several groups of dissidents for persecution and/or expulsion. He participated in the hanging of two Quakers in New Netherland, and imprisoned several others. The town of modern-day Flushing, NY, resisted Stuyvesant with the Flushing Remonstrance. For more information on the Flushing Remonstrance and the actions of Peter Stuyvesant, see Edward Hart, “Remonstrance of the Residents of the Town of Flushing to Governor Stuyvesant, December 27, 1657”, <http://www.nnym.org/flushing/remons.html>, accessed October 15, 2015; Ric Burns (dir.), *New York: A Documentary Film*, (Public Broadcasting Services: 2001), (DVD); Randall H. Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion: Dutch Religion and English Culture in the Middle Colonies*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989). For more information on the treatment of Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, see Horatio Rogers, *Mary Dyer of Rhode Island: The Quaker Martyr that was Hanged on Boston Common, June 1, 1660* (Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2009); Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers, from 1650 to 1689* (London, UK: Luke Hinde, 1753), vol. 2.

⁸ David W. Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, (Amberson, PA: Scroll Publishing, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 1108.

decide how one should worship God.⁹ It was because of this that the Quakers and Anabaptists of Pennsylvania enjoyed a mostly quiet life free from persecution from state churches. It is noteworthy also that it was not just members of what we now know today as the “Peace Churches” that came to Pennsylvania but also Catholics and Protestants were allowed. While Quakers lived in America well before Pennsylvania’s founding, Penn’s new colony gave them a place in America that they could call their permanent home.¹⁰

This “Holy Experiment” as Penn called it,¹¹ was among the only Colonies where religion was legally diverse and there was no established state church. The others were Rhode Island,¹² whose founder, Roger Williams, was a refugee from the Puritan/Congregationalist Massachusetts Bay Colony seeking freedom to practice a more Separatist form of Christianity, and New York,¹³ originally a colony of the Dutch which had only loose adherence to the Dutch Reformed Church, allowing for a broad array of religious beliefs.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this did not mean that New York was a land where religious revival was likely. Robert Middlekauff has noted that “**The Great Awakening** largely left New York cold. There were small revivals in Manhattan and Staten Island, but elsewhere revival failed.”¹⁵ Maryland was restrictive only in the sense that it adhered to principles that were biblically-inspired. A wider variety of expressions of Christianity was allowed and its laws resonated in some form with those seeking to establish a Christian colony.¹⁶ But in Pennsylvania, religion was not only dominant but very diverse.

⁹ William Penn, et. al. “Pennsylvania Charter of Priveleges”, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/charter.htm>.

¹⁰ Mark A. Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, (Washington, D.C.: Christian University Press, 1977), 125. As noted above, Quakers attempted settling in other places, but were not always treated kindly.

¹¹ James A. Quinn, “The End of the Holy Experiment”, *Gwynedd Friends Meeting*, 2011, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://www.gwyneddmeeting.org/history/holyexperiment.html>.

¹² “Rhode Island”, *The History Channel*, <http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/rhode-island>, accessed October 5, 2014.

¹³ “New York Colony”, *New York Colony Facts on File*, 2014, [accessed October 8, 2014, http://www.landofthebrave.info/new-york-colony.htm](http://www.landofthebrave.info/new-york-colony.htm). This did not mean, however, that no revivals existed in New York. Thomas Kidd notes that by the time of the Great Awakening, James Davenport and Jonathan Barber both led a series of revivals on Long Island, and sparked the interest of George Whitefield, whose preaching also drew a large crowd there (Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), Online Kindle Edition, Location 997-999).

¹⁴ For more information on New Netherland/New York, see Burns (dir.), *New York*, 2001, and Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York: A History*, (New York, NY: Charles Schribner’s Sons, 1975). As noted above, Peter Stuyvesant did attempt to establish some form of religious supremacy, but he did not succeed. New York, for most of its colonial history, tolerated a multitude of different religions within its borders.

¹⁵ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1982), 48.

¹⁶ “Maryland Toleration Act”, *Christianity.com*, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1601-1700/maryland-toleration-act-11630122.html>.

King George III had allowed the Pennsylvania colony to continue as it was, just as Charles II had before him. So, these persecuted Christians were able to find a safe refuge from all of the European nations that had persecuted them since their founding. For once they had a land in which they could express their religious beliefs without fear of being hunted and/or executed by the government in the brutal fashion that they had been in Europe. The government of Pennsylvania itself was composed of non-resistant Quakers, which helped the settlers to even more appreciate the freedoms they enjoyed. All of this, however, changed very suddenly when revolution broke out.

THE REVOLUTION COMES TO PENNSYLVANIA

In the eighteenth century, the American colonies became fed up with Great Britain's desire to enforce payment of taxes. Protests against the taxes often took on a violent shape.¹⁷ As time progressed, no resolution seemed to be in sight. As one attempted to navigate the spiritual waters of colonial soil, even Protestant churches were almost unanimously in favor of revolution. One Congregationalist minister opposed the conflict, and his congregation forced him to resign.¹⁸ While Jesus said in response to Pharisees who had posed the question of whether or not the Romans had any right to tax the Jews, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mark 12:17, Matthew 22:21). However, as Bercot notes, “The clergy not only failed to deter the colonists in their rebellion, they actually egged them on.”¹⁹ Bercot goes on to detail all of the ways in which ministers who were in favor of the Revolution used the Bible to help justify the American Revolution. They frequently used Scripture as a means to convince their fellow colonists that the revolution had God’s blessing, and that He was clearly on the side of the revolutionaries.²⁰ So, the churches in effect became places of political stirring toward and mustering troops for rebellion against England, which took on a more fierce shape as it continued to grow larger.

This tumultuous chain of events ultimately culminated in America declaring its independence from Great Britain on July 4, 1776. The cause given in the Declaration of Independence of their declared separation from Britain is telling.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights governments are

¹⁷ For example, to resist the Stamp Act of 1765, the colonists often used mob violence, including tarring and feathering their tax collectors. The Sons of Liberty, to protest the Tea Act, refused to allow the granting of a ship’s passage in the Boston Harbor, and proceeded to invade the ship and dump the entire shipment of tea thereon into the harbor. The Sons of Liberty were primarily responsible for propagating the American Revolution and enforcing its advancement, which often was the result of the threat of violence against all dissent. For more information on the methods used to spread the Revolution, see Bercot, *In God We Don’t Trust*, Location 1817-1911, 2122-2154, and Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2005).

¹⁸ Mark A. Noll, *One Nation Under God?*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1988), 48; quoted in Bercot, *In God We Don’t Trust*, Location 2613.

¹⁹ Bercot, *In God We Don’t Trust*, Location 2613.

²⁰ Bercot, “Preachers to ‘Tickle the Ears’”, *In God We Don’t Trust*, Location 2559-2725.

instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,--That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.²¹

It was widely believed in the Colonies that the British government violated each and every one of the above-mentioned rights. So, they felt they were not only justified in breaking off from England, but in forming a new government that would uphold these rights. But whether or not the revolutionaries would practice what they preached would be determined by the violent conflict that lay ahead.

The Revolutionary Coup

The Anabaptists and Quakers of Pennsylvania would soon find their whole world change amidst the growing chaos. As war erupted throughout the Colonies, they found themselves caught in the storm. David Bercot notes that “on the eve of the Revolution, the kingdom Christians in Pennsylvania...were generally content with the British government. Like everyone else, they preferred not to have any extra taxes...as committed Christians, their 'yes' meant 'yes' and that was that! (Matthew 5:37). They had signed a solemn declaration of loyalty to the King of England, and they were not about to go back on their word.”²² The revolutionaries had already proven themselves intolerant of any political opposition to their cause,²³ even if said opposition meant no harm to the revolutionaries themselves.

As noted above, non-resistant Christians were not the only residents of Pennsylvania. Others came from the very nations that established state churches, including Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, etc. Pennsylvania's policy of religious toleration provided for this, and each side had to struggle for political power in the colony. While political squabbles between the non-resistant Quakers and Protestants who did not oppose war raged over the years prior to the American Revolution, each side maintained its particular religious beliefs, even if no compromise between the two sides was reached.²⁴ Even if they did not agree with each other, they maintained enough civility not to go to war prior to the American Revolution. However, with the outbreak of the War, a political shift occurred in the government of Pennsylvania. A new revolutionary government composed of various types of Protestants rapidly took over Pennsylvania and established a host of new wartime laws, which put all of the conscientious objectors in a very trying position. It would be a fiery test for all of their dearly held religious convictions.

The Oath of Allegiance

²¹ Thomas Jefferson, et. al., “The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” *Charters of Freedom*, 1776, accessed October 8, 2014, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.

²² Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 3392.

²³ *Ibid.*, Location 3369, 3379.

²⁴ Wilbur J. Bender, “Pacifism Among the Mennonites, Amish Mennonites and Schwenkfelders to 1783”, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, (July 1927): 22-35.

These wartime laws required those loyal to George III to compromise that loyalty. Among other things was a conscription (which carried with it a heavy fine for refusing to enlist).²⁵ In addition, the revolutionary government required an oath of allegiance from all residents of Pennsylvania, which read:

I, , do swear (or affirm) that I renounce and refuse all allegiance to George III, king of Great Britain, his heirs and successors; and that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a free and independent State, and that I will not at any time, do or cause to be done any matter or thing that will be prejudicial, or injurious to the freedom and independence thereof;...as declared by Congress, and also, that I will discover and make known to some justice of the peace of said State all treasons or traitorous conspiracies which I now know or hereafter shall know to be formed against this or any of the United States of America.²⁶

This directly went against the religious convictions of the Quakers and Anabaptists, who believed firmly that Jesus had forbade any and all swearing of oaths, as noted above. Even if there was a provision in the oath to allow for affirmation rather than swearing, these people had more than just opposition to oath-swearing to stand behind when refusing to take this oath.

Ever since King Charles II was on the British throne, these Christians enjoyed freedom from European persecution, and, as Bercot notes, had no reason to take up arms against a government that had done them no wrong whatsoever²⁷. Even though their residence in the Colonies was not always without conflict, they did not have to face execution for their religious beliefs. They always knew, though, that one day an outbreak of war would test their convictions. “As the flames of war mount higher and higher, no man can tell whether the Cross and persecution of the defenseless Christians will not soon come, and it is, therefore, of supreme importance to prepare ourselves for such circumstances with patience and resignation, and to use all available means that can encourage steadfastness and strengthen faith.”²⁸ Already they willingly suffered the loss of all things when necessary during the French and Indian War (Seven Years' War) two decades earlier. They were going to follow Jesus as they understood even if that meant paying the ultimate price. Their convictions were not just ideals to talk about during times of peace, but to be followed in any and all circumstances no matter what.

So, also, in addition to nonresistance, they forsook all swearing of oaths. As Jesus said, their yes meant yes and their no meant no (see Matthew 5:33-37). No matter what happened, their word was so reliable, that an oath was simply unnecessary and should be treated as such. Yet still, as noted above, even if this new revolutionary government was insisting absolute loyalty to their cause against Great Britain, they saw no justifiable reason, for conscience's sake in matters pertaining to their religion as well as loyalty to Britain, to take this oath. But the oath

²⁵ Bender, “Pacifism”, Part II, 21-27.

²⁶ “Oath of Allegiance”, *Templin Family Rootsweb*, <http://templin.rootsweb.com/oath.htm>, accessed October 8, 2014.

²⁷ Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 3419.

²⁸ Margaret E. Hirst and Jones, Rufus M., *The Quakers in Peace and War*, (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 50; quoted in Bender, “Pacifism Among the Mennonites, Amish Mennonites, and Schwenkfelders to 1783,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, (October 1927): 32-33.

carried with it an even heavier punishment for refusal that proved devastating to conscientious Christians.

As Wilbur Bender notes, this oath gave all residents of Pennsylvania a clear choice of life or death. “Those not taking the oath were declared incapable of serving on juries, suing for debts, voting or holding office, buying or selling lands, tenements or hereditaments, and possessing arms. Every one travelling outside his own city or country without having taken the oath was to be clapped in jail till he took it.”²⁹ The revolutionaries, who earlier claimed that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were the freedoms they fought for, were more than willing to take these freedoms away from those who refused to declare their utmost allegiance. Some of these freedoms were not ones that were of the character of the Anabaptists to take on (such as suing for debt), but others were freedoms they thoroughly enjoyed. But in addition to the principles on which the Anabaptists firmly stood, they also were unwilling to take the oath because of how closely it resembled the mark of the beast as described in the book of Revelation.³⁰ They were not only unwilling to compromise about Jesus’s teachings, but they also did not want to seemingly sell their souls. The oath seemed to contradict everything they stood for.

A NEW LOOK AT COLONIAL PATRIOTISM AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

What is noteworthy here is the Declaration of Independence's statement about the nature of King George III as a monarch. “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.”³¹ Yet, how is what the revolutionaries did to the Anabaptists and Quakers different from that accusation? Is it not tyrannical to take away someone's basic rights in the name of defending freedom? Most people today would give a unanimous 'yes' answer to that question. However, the revolutionaries had a limited concept of application of this principle. They had an agenda, and those who failed to comply were regarded as mortal enemies to the cause, despite never having taken up arms against anyone, friend or foe.

The punishments for dissent took on many cruel forms. It is important to note, however, before discussing the punishments that the Quakers and Anabaptists endured, that the dominance of revolutionary thought did not just take shape in religious persecution. Even Christians who were not opposed to war, but who were still loyal in some form to Great Britain, were targeted.³² As noted above, the Sons of Liberty regularly employed mob violence to silence all opposition to the cause of the Revolution, whether against the tax collectors for the Stamp Act of 1765 or against people who were simply not opposed to King George III.³³

²⁹ Bender, “Pacifism”, Part II, 27-28.

³⁰ David W. Bercot, “The Treatment of Kingdom Christians during the American Revolution”, Audio Teaching CD, (Amberson, PA: Scroll Publishing Company, 2010).

³¹ Jefferson, et. al., “Declaration of Independence.”

³² Loyalists were the original targets of the aforesaid measures, and nonresistant Christians were caught in the crossfire.

³³ Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 2122-2376, 3369-3483.

The Plight of the Loyalists

Several colonists remained loyal to Great Britain during the War. Mark Noll notes that “somewhere between a fifth and a third of the residents in the thirteen colonies either remained loyal to Great Britain during the Revolution or harbored loyalist sentiments of some sort.”³⁴ These “Loyalists”, as they were called, who were not opposed to war for any sort of religious convictions, but saw no reason to go against George III, Parliament, etc., also were persecuted.³⁵

To be loyal to Great Britain came at a serious price. Some Loyalists paid the price with all they had as a result. One in particular, Grace Growden Galloway, was evicted from her home in Philadelphia simply because her husband was a Loyalist who escaped Pennsylvania.³⁶ The revolutionaries also fought some of the major battles of the War for Independence against the Loyalists, who, naturally, sided with Great Britain. As Bercot notes, even after the end of the War, the Loyalists still could not count on all being forgiven and just being able to come home peacefully without any retaliation from their victorious neighbors, and were actually regarded in a more negative light even than the losing nation they supported.³⁷ The losers of this conflict had to bear the heavy weight of their losses, and the victors had a message that was clearly designed to ensure that no further opposition would be raised. William Franklin, the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin, was among them. When he was imprisoned for his loyalty to the crown, his father took no action, and even after he was released from prison, Franklin would not forgive his son’s siding with the British.³⁸ The colonists’ desire for absolute loyalty to their cause even took hold in family structure. Loyalty to one’s country led to everything else being secondary.

Loyalty to Country Above All Else

This, however, should not be a surprise. As noted earlier, the clergy were already keeping the fires of revolution burning among the typical Protestant flock. One in particular, an Anglican parson named John Hurt, proclaimed on the one hand that “Americans would never accept British tyranny ‘while the cause of religion, the cause of nature, and of nature’s God cry aloud’.”³⁹ On the other hand, “Hurt told the troops that ‘the love of your country’ should be ‘the governing principle of your soul’.”⁴⁰ Jesus clearly stated that “no man can serve two masters”

³⁴ Noll, *One Nation Under God?*, 122.

³⁵ Bercot, “Loyalists and Black Slaves”, *In God We Don’t Trust*, Location 3618-3695; Noll, *One Nation Under God?*, 122-130

³⁶ Jennifer Keene, et. al., *Visions of America: A History of the United States*, vol. 1, (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc., 2013), 113.

³⁷ Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 3684.

³⁸ John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 224.

³⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 122.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

(Matthew 6:24a). Here, Hurt exhorts the troops to make their patriotism their first duty, even apart from loving God, as Thomas Kidd notes.⁴¹ All that mattered to most people was breaking off from Great Britain by any means. Thus, while patriotic clergymen exhorted the colonial armies to have their patriotism as their chief loyalty, this meant that they had to crush all Loyalist opposition.

While this was certainly not the end of America's conflicts with Great Britain, one had to question just how free from tyranny America really was if this was how they handled dissent. As their neighbors who shared similar hesitations to them, the Quakers and Anabaptists soon found themselves the latest targets of the American Revolution. Refusing to sign the oath, as noted earlier, may as well have said that death would be the sentence. John L. Ruth notes that some people were executed for their stance, and this in spite of the fact that numerous residents appealed to their fellow Christians running the government to consider the implications of such actions. One of these in particular was an elderly Quaker.⁴² But what would prompt those who claimed to follow Jesus to execute innocent people? The answer lies in the mentality of the new government.

Pennsylvania also was home to plenty of Loyalists and others who supported the British, and these were the people who the revolutionaries considered a threat. So, "in the quest for revenge on such people suspicion sometimes ranked as proof, and the innocent were occasionally victimized."⁴³ So, if a person did not pledge absolute loyalty to the cause, that automatically made them suspect. To their credit, one active political leader in Pennsylvania under the new regime, urged the government to only prosecute active Loyalists and allow non-resistant Christians an exemption from the draft, but it was all to no avail.⁴⁴

Those who were not executed suffered a very trying existence during the War. As noted earlier, speaking against the Revolution or the actions of the colonists was generally retaliated against. In Pennsylvania, the press had an anti-War voice in the form of Christopher Sauer II, a Brethren bishop and printer who was the son of a printer of the same name. Leroy Beachy details what happened to Sauer as a result of his stance against the Revolutionary War and subsequent refusal to take the Oath. Already the revolutionary government was on the hunt for possible Loyalists in Pennsylvania. Sauer's anti-war preaching brought him the attention of the revolutionary government. When he refused to take the oath, "the prisoner suffered indignities, among them the removal of his 'remarkable and full-grown beard.' On another occasion, American soldiers stripped him of his clothes, then redressed him in tattered army uniforms."⁴⁵ Beachy notes that he lost all that he had to the government⁴⁶, including copies of a German Bible he helped to print, some parts of which literally became ammunition for the

⁴¹ Kidd comments on Hurt's exhortation: "It might seem strange for a Christian minister to have made such a statement (shouldn't the love of God be a Christian's governing principle?), but Hurt insisted that no other loyalty should compete with love of nation" (Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 122).

⁴² John L. Ruth, *'Twas Seeding Time*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 167.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Richard K. MacMaster, et. al. *Conscience in Crisis*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 429.

⁴⁵ Leroy Beachy, *Unser Leit...The Story of the Amish*, (Millersburg, OH: Goodly Heritage Books, 2011), vol. 1, 339.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 340.

colonial army.⁴⁷ Using a religious text for ammunition was not unheard of, as the Anabaptist retelling of all of their martyrdoms, known as the *Martyr's Mirror*, was also used as ammunition at one point.⁴⁸ One might wonder how committed Christians could use the Bible as ammunition for weaponry. However, patriotism truly reached an extreme with the colonists' desire to win the war.

Other innocent Christians also lost their property, were thrown into prison, or even made exiles.⁴⁹ In some of these noteworthy cases, little to no care was shown to those who would suffer starvation as a result of government confiscation of property.

'From some of them all the provisions were taken and not even a morsel of bread left them for their children.' Since all their iron stoves were taken from them, though fastened to the floors, 'they are deprived of every means of keeping their children warm in the approaching winter, especially at nights, being obliged to sleep on the floor without any beds.'⁵⁰

These were the words of a petition by Eve Yoder and Esther Bachman, two wives of imprisoned farmers, who attempted to get the Pennsylvania Assembly to put a stop to this. As Ruth notes, the Pennsylvania Assembly did look into the matter, but the reparations they made were a small fraction of the losses incurred.⁵¹ Others, fleeing the onslaught, went into exile in the wilderness.⁵² Even their exile was not particularly safe. They struggled from the dangers of both armies and the Native Americans of the wilderness.⁵³

As Christians who took literally Jesus's teachings on nonresistance, these people naturally highly valued human life. This was so true that war could not decide for them whose life mattered. This too caused the peace churches to come into conflict with the revolutionaries. Mark Noll recounts an example of this toward the end of the war. "Three Mennonite farmers aided destitute British prisoners escaping from the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, barracks...they received lengthy prison sentences and very heavy fines."⁵⁴ To the revolutionaries' credit, when the prisoners petitioned George Washington, he assisted in their release from prison and lightened the debt they had to pay.⁵⁵ However, it only further showed that the driving force was

⁴⁷ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, (New York, NY: Weathervane Books, 2011, 411-412); Quoted in Beachy 340.

⁴⁸ Bender, "Pacifism", Part I, 33; Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 3474.

⁴⁹ Ruth, *'Twas Seeding Time*, 167-173.

⁵⁰ Ruth, *'Twas Seeding Time*, 172.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁵² Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 3464.

⁵³ Bercot, *In God We Don't Trust*, Location 3464.

⁵⁴ Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 138.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

patriotism, even if doing so required violation of conscience and allowing someone to die who could otherwise be helped.

Pennsylvania was not alone in this tragic shift into persecution. Richard K. MacMaster and some of his colleagues note that “shifting some of the cost of war onto the shoulders of those who would not bear arms proved so popular a measure that other colonies followed Pennsylvania's example.”⁵⁶ MacMaster then goes on to detail how all of the colonies began to follow suit. By now, several of them had allowed the Anabaptists and Quakers freedom from having to go against their consciences by serving in the military, but these states began changing their course and fining the Anabaptists for refusing to serve.⁵⁷ This war was just as trying for the Anabaptists and Quakers as any other through which they lived, if not more so.

PRECEDENT SET FOR FUTURE WARS

While persecution of the Anabaptists and Quakers in Pennsylvania did not continue after the war, and the government at least made an attempt at making reparations, it no doubt set a precedent that America continued to follow. Though America has yet to see Christians executed simply for professing Christianity by their fellow countrymen, **nonresistant Christians have suffered much throughout U.S. history, even death, for their convictions (usually at the hands of their fellow Christians).** During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln followed the practice of initiating a draft with a heavy fine attached for refusal, and even declared martial law to stop protests against his measures that turned ugly, resulting in many a night's misery for even suspicion.⁵⁸ During World War I, conscientious objectors were treated with as much shaming as possible. Many went to prison and were treated as the worst of traitors.

One of the cruelest instances of mistreatment occurred when an objector in Alcatraz was transferred to Leavenworth and later died. He had refused to wear a military uniform and was given no other clothing option. In the damp and chilly cell, he contracted pneumonia, received no medical care, and died. For his refusal to compromise his beliefs, the Army sent his body home in a military uniform.⁵⁹

In World War II, “one out of every six men in U.S. prisons during World War II was a draft resister...War resisters found themselves behind bars for up to six years. Some were even held up to two years after the war ended.”⁶⁰ While the typical lessons taught in school place great emphasis on the incredible victory of the soldiers who fought, and sometimes even died on

⁵⁶ MacMaster, *Conscience in Crisis*, 224.

⁵⁷ MacMaster, *Conscience in Crisis*, 224-225.

⁵⁸ Keene, *Visions of America*, 389-391. See also Lillian Schissel, *Conscience in America: A Documentary History of Conscientious Objection in America, 1757-1967* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1968).

⁵⁹ “World War I: The CO Problem”, *The Civilian Public Service Story: Living Peace in a Time of War*, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://civilianpublicservice.org/storybegins/krehbiel/world-war-1>. See also Stephen Kohn, *Jailed for Peace: The History of American Draft Law Violators, 1658-1985* (Westport, CT: Praeger Paperback, 1987).

⁶⁰ “The Good War and Those who Refused to Fight it”, Public Broadcasting Services, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar/bars.html>.

behalf of the people, nonresistant Christians fought their own battles while enduring much mistreatment for their refusal to take a patriotic stance and go against their convictions.

It was Jesus who said “he who is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30). However, the precedent of America since the beginning, taking after all other nations before it, is similar to the call of Jesus. It is either the citizens cooperate regardless of what bothers their consciences, or they face a harsh penalty for their refusal. For those following the teaching of nonresistance, it was a clear choice between two sides, both of which called for absolute allegiance or heavy consequences. For the Quakers and Anabaptists, **the choice was to obey Jesus's teaching, no matter what suffering that would entail.**

It is with great irony that the Bill of Rights makes provision for freedom of religion when its country has a long history of mistreating those who hold radically different religious convictions from mainstream thought. Even secular philosophers such as William James note the futility of attempting to force one's particular viewpoint on another. “If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what right have we of the majority to order him to live in another way? We can throw him into a prison or a madhouse—but we cannot change his mind...”⁶¹ James here attempts to reason from a more secular viewpoint of why people should not attempt to force others to change their convictions. “Prisons and madhouses” seem to be the last stronghold society has to coerce change of conviction. It is the closest the world can get to defeating resolute determination in someone, even if it is necessary to kill people who do not conform.

REFLECTIONS

In the process of completing this paper, I learned a different perspective about the American Revolution. While there is no country in which I would rather live than America, simultaneously, America has, from its beginning, limited religious freedom only to those who conform to popular agenda. The same can be said of the gay marriage issue raging through the media and the political spectrum today. It showed me above all else that Jesus's teaching to expect persecution applies even here in America. I also learned quite a bit about colonial Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was an early example of religious freedom in America for most of its colonial history. Its early colonists attempted as best as possible to incorporate their Christian faith into their politics, but in a way more radical than others. It also gave me a bird's eye view into the Loyalists' point of view, since Pennsylvania had a large population of Loyalists, and certainly the Amish, Mennonites, Quakers, etc., were included in that, although they were nonviolent.

The easiest thing about writing this article was that I already had information readily available. Three years prior to my matriculation at Liberty University, I had listened to a teaching series by David Bercot, and read his book, *In God We Don't Trust*, from which this research originated. When I first moved to Lynchburg, VA, I had some close friends who were Mennonites who had access to some of the materials I needed in Pennsylvania and brought them to my home for use in this project. The most difficult part of the project was the editing process. As it was my first long research paper at Liberty University, my style needed polishing. I had to switch disciplinary modes from church history to history. I had to heavily edit the paper in order to insert some well-respected Christian historians to show the issue in light of its relationship to

⁶¹ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, (Huntington, MA: Seven Treasures Publications, 2009), 178.

the colonists' conflict with the Loyalists. I also had to remove some obviously biased phraseology I had initially employed, and only kept original phrases deemed absolutely necessary to make this article effective.

This research has a lot of significance to the Christian faith in general in America. Today, most conservative Christians are firmly devoted both to God and country. However, **Jesus came to preach the kingdom of God.** Consequently, when Satan told Jesus that he controlled all of the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:6), that included every nation. Even the United States of America, which has allowed Christians more freedoms than most nations, is not completely innocent of persecuting Christians. Since the American Revolution is a part of history that most are familiar with, **it shows Christians an example of what happens when one's country comes first.** After all, Jesus said "no one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). Consequently, this topic is relevant to the church because it is a further reminder that **as Christians, we are citizens of a different kingdom.** While we can certainly appreciate the freedoms God has provided for us in America, it is simultaneously only temporary, and we should not be surprised when persecution does come. **When a critical issue such as the American Revolution does strike, how we respond will determine which master we have ultimately chosen, whether God or country.** This challenges me much in my faith because persecution is a notion so foreign to most of us here in America that the events that the heroes of the revolutionary war partook in was shocking at first. It shook any preconceived notions I had on the issue, and taught me not to believe everything I hear, but to do the research and to see for myself how things actually were in a given time period by researching primary sources and secondary sources that were being honest with the primary source material.

CONCLUSION

The treatment of non-resistant Christians during the Revolutionary War sheds a dark light on American history from its beginning. America continued to follow similar patterns to those of the Revolution when dealing with religious conscientious objectors. It makes one wonder which direction America will go in the future, as the world gets darker and darker. Today, the tragic persecutions of the Revolutionary War era are "considered unimportant or marginal by historians of the Revolution."⁶² In the world today, there is rarely an unbiased viewpoint. Much gets written as a means to an end, often to recruit to a certain viewpoint. The way historians often tell the story of the American Revolution is to celebrate the achievements of its victors, paying little to no attention to the "losers", or people who otherwise fared poorly during the War. While this may not uphold the ultimately virtuous image the average citizen would have of the revolutionaries, it unveils both sides of the story as unbiased as possible, no matter the consequences for modern points of view.

In conclusion, the Colonists won much with the Revolutionary War. The new nation was now independent of Great Britain and, though its beginnings were humble, everyone on the winning side could now regroup and determine the next step. It ultimately took the remainder of the 1780s for the Founding Fathers to realize the necessary makeup of the Constitution. But for the freedoms they fought for, one has to wonder, how much freedom were they willing to guarantee others? After all, during the War, some people lost their basic freedoms defended in the Declaration of Independence. In the process of fighting for freedom, the Colonists failed to

⁶² Ruth, *'Twas Seeding Time*, 7.

ensure that everyone would get that freedom, and were very selective in their definition thereof. **Anything other than absolute loyalty to the cause of the Revolution meant retribution.** In Pennsylvania, freedom was supposed to include religious beliefs. However, freedom was, in practice, limited to loyalty to the Revolution. In the end, the Anabaptists and Quakers of Pennsylvania could tell the story of the cost of discipleship from the point of view of suffering during the Revolution. Sadly, this is how non-resistant Christians have been treated in nearly every conflict that broke out since. While today's government provides for military exemption for strong conscientious objectors who can prove their case, one can observe that to the primitive United States of America, religious freedom can only be upheld in such a way as not to affect anyone else's rights and privileges, and a shining example is popular opinion of conscientious objectors.

Since this article uses the plight of the nonresistant Christians during the American Revolution as a springboard for research on the treatment of conscientious objectors throughout American history, more research is needed on the imprisonment of conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War. In addition, more research is necessary on the American Civil War, as it was only briefly touched on in this article. It will also be helpful to do some research on the negative relationship of Benjamin Franklin with Christopher Sauer II, as this may have led to some bias during the American Revolution against his printing business. More research is also needed on the role of the Sons of Liberty in the propagation of revolutionary ideals. Many believe that if it were not for Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty, the American Revolution may never have happened. This would not have only affected nonresistant Christians, but also Loyalists even before the war broke out.

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