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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a four-part series on America and Christianity, adapted from a new book, "Faith, Stars, and Stripes" by A. Ronald Tonks and Charles W. Deweese, of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission. The material is used with the permission of Broadman Press, Nashville.

The Americanization Of Christianity

By Charles W. Deweese and A. Ronald Tonks
For Baptist Press

Although the United States has espoused and followed fairly faithfully the tenet of separation of church and state, still it has understood its history, ideals and destiny in religious terms.

Martin E. Marty prefacing his "The Pro and Con Book of Religious America: A Bicentennial Argument," states that if people can live with contradiction and paradox, they're able to learn more from extremes in national life:

"American history itself is full of extremes, of paradox, contradiction and complexity." This is especially true in religion in America. There are many times when individuals who claim to be Christian, for example, must ask, "Is this Christianity or is this culture?"

The issues of Kulturkampf (the struggle between the church/religion and the state/culture) in 19th Century Germany has, on a number of occasions, appeared in America in different clothing.

One area in which some aspect of the Americanization of Christianity has taken place is in theology. It is entirely fallacious to suggest that America produced neither a profound nor unique theology.

In considering the theological beginnings of America, it must be remembered: (1) no one group related to a single religious outlook originally settled in America. It is true that the Puritans tried for a theocracy, but it was not long until other groups appeared on the scene and pluralism became the hallmark of American religion; (2) separation of church and state and religious liberty were not universally accepted. Some would even suggest that these arose as a matter of political expediency to unite otherwise diverse colonies; and (3) American thought was seldom, if ever, considered in the context of a united nation. Gradually, the country came to see that in spite of differences, many concepts were commonly shared.

It is fair to suggest that precisely for these reasons of diversity, there was no alternative but to achieve a degree of unity in the country by accepting the separation of church and state and no laws respecting the establishment of an official religion.

Sydney Ahlstrom suggests there are three general observations that would be worthwhile premises to consider before beginning the study of American theology. (1) Theological diversity exists throughout America. (2) The theology of America is more derivative than most European theology. (3) The theological influence shifted from England to Germany in approximately 1815. He concludes by saying that we can be reasonably certain that "American churches will continue to champion their distinctive emphases on lay-stewardship, democracy in government, individual freedom and voluntarism."

The Americanization of Christianity is also to be noted in the study of the industrialization of America in the light of religion. Clearly, the Industrial Revolution arrived slightly later chronologically in America than in other parts of the Western World, but it did have and continues to have a profound effect upon the country. Religion and secular culture had allied themselves in the late 19th Century in a way they had not done since the Bill of Rights.

The church had usually exercised a prophetic voice of judgment on society in the early 19th Century, but after the Civil War, churches had lost much of their prophetic power. Some have suggested that the acceptance of racial and industrial divisions in the late 19th Century sapped the country's source of independent strength and effective outreach. The successful revival phenomena of the frontier could not be applied either easily or effectively to the urban industrial scene.

One of the leaders in America who tried to help the church meet the challenge of the urban centers and the industrial scene was Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist pastor.

Of German extraction but raised in America, he became concerned for the plight of the poor and deprived while serving as pastor in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York. It would appear that Rauschenbusch wanted to rally the middle class in America to a crusade that would bring in the Kingdom of God. In a sense, Rauschenbusch had the social optimism of a man-produced Christian state.

Reinhold Niebuhr, later in the 20th Century, provided a balanced corrective to Rauschenbusch's views. Niebuhr opposed identifying Christianity with the concept of social evolution, noting, "Changing the social structure will not eradicate evil, since man is its source and he defies radical alteration."

Most 19th Century Protestant churches in America identified with the business community because the bulk of their membership represented this social strata. The Roman Catholic church which grew dramatically in the 19th Century because of large numbers of immigrants usually represented the working classes. Although there were a few religious reformers who sought to bridge the gap between worker and owner, the gulf often widened and became a religious division as well as a socio-economic one.

It is inaccurate to assert that only theological liberals supported the social gospel concepts. The pioneer study of this subject was made by Timothy Smith in "Revivalism and Social Reform" through which he sought to show that evangelical Christianity was deeply concerned and anxious to improve social inequities before the Civil War. Although by the 1890's conservative Christianity had become wedded to American cultural values, there were efforts by many evangelicals to reach the whole man.

The church, although denying emphatically the teachings of Darwin with reference to physical evolution, accepted some of his concepts relating to the social realm in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The church tended to preach the established American social and cultural values as the best. The Protestant ethic was reaffirmed, and its character was equated with success. The harder one worked, the better one would be, and, hence the better they would fulfill the will of God. A hidden promise seemed to be that if one worked diligently, God would automatically reward him.

The statement "God helps those who help themselves" received almost Biblical canonization and authority. One conceives even on the part of many evangelicals a tacit and subtle acceptance of salvation by works rather than by grace.

The individualism of the early American, as well as that of the frontiersman, emerges again among Christians in the 20th Century in American churches. The layman has assumed a larger role in determining the basic emphasis of the churches. Paradoxical as it may seem, the liberty of the pulpit has not been challenged as long as the preacher does not "tread on toes," i.e. denounce free enterprise economics and success-oriented, competitive individualism or support expansion of the federal government or socialism.

The suburban church sometimes becomes a mutual admiration society rather than a way station to rescue lost sinners. This phenomenon among the conservative churches and denominations tends to dull their evangelistic outreach but even more the need for growth among those who had already been evangelized.

In a sense, in the 20th century classical Protestantism in America has adopted the "American dream" as its own. Christian ideals have been gradually submerged to the culture. Often the Christian is not sure which things in his life come from Christianity and which from his cultural pattern.

It has been easier in America, as elsewhere, to articulate Christian ideals and virtues, yet practice something far different. When this situation has occurred at the higher echelons of society, it has brought discredit upon true Christianity. There is always a need for "real" Christianity where Christian principles are believed, accepted, articulated and supported.

The American Christian of the 20th Century has frequently allowed his concern for material improvement and enjoyment of the better things in life to deaden, if not destroy, his Christian conscience and concern.

"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain" (Amos 6:1 RSV). (BP)

7. 'Fathers of America'
And What They Believed

By Charles W. Deweese and A. Ronald Tonks
For Baptist Press

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston in 1706. The fifteenth child of a candle maker, he was christened at Old South Church and dedicated to the Christian ministry.

Limited finances, however, prevented his receiving an education, so he learned the printer's trade. Boston's rigid Puritanism soon prompted him to run away to Philadelphia. He expressed a self-confident humanism divorced from both established religion and Christ-centered theology. Yet, during the heart of debate and controversy at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention it appeared the convention would dissolve in disunity, so Franklin declared:

"The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth--that God governs in the affairs of men. . ." Franklin fluctuated in his religious beliefs and accepted the moral system of Jesus but rejected the Messiah and Christ of the scriptures.

Franklin is one of seven "fathers of America" to note not because they are typical or atypical of the religious beliefs of all, but because each in his own way played a most important significant role in the young republic. The list is comprised also of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and John Dickinson. There are others, but these seven most significantly debated and framed the governmental instruments on which the U.S. has been built.

George Washington was a conciliator, and he, almost more than any other man in early America, held the new country together. In 1775 he ordered members of the army to "discontinue profane cursing, swearing and drunkenness." This theme was repeated throughout the orders he gave during the dark days of 1778. He saw patriotism as going beyond the political matters as far as loyalty to God: "We can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our Arms, if we insult it by our impiety and folly."

Washington was an Episcopalian, although after he became President he never partook of communion. His reasons were probably more political than religious. He did not want the newly formed country to become wedded to one single Christian group. He also had a strong sense of privacy, and this is one area he did not want exploited. Whatever his personal beliefs, he was certainly not an atheist as some have suggested. He was likely a deist with a strong overlay of frontier dissent.

Thomas Jefferson, like Washington, was raised in a devout Episcopal family. Much of his training was done by ministers. Although Jefferson has frequently been accused of holding no religious beliefs at all, nothing could be further from the truth. His insistence on individual rights which permitted a person to follow his or her beliefs was mistakenly interpreted as an attack on all denominational religion. Although author of the Virginia bill establishing religious freedom, he remained generally aloof from any specific denominational grouping.

Like Washington, Jefferson did not want any debate over his personal religious views while he was in the service of his country. After his retirement, he wrote frequently and specifically about religious matters. He prepared what he considered to be his "Bible," "The Life and Morals of Jesus," a collection of what he believed were the morals and teachings of Jesus.

Jefferson asserted his belief in Jesus was tied to his human accomplishments--a very low Christology and one most Baptists would assert was something less than the full knowledge of Christ, the divine human Lord of the New Testament.

James Madison perhaps more than any other person, helped make the Constitution workable. Madison remembered for his part in the Constitutional Convention and as President of the United States, worked vigorously on behalf of religious liberty. He secured acceptance in Virginia of Jefferson's statute on religious freedom, and, vigorously assisted by John Leland, a Virginia Baptist minister, the passage of the Bill of Rights or the first 10 amendments to the Constitution.

Madison was well-trained theologically and had studied for the ministry. Then later in his life, he continued his religious studies systematically. Despite his wide knowledge, he referred only rarely to his personal religious beliefs. He was apparently a deist, and, later a Unitarian. Clearly in his day, he was champion of the persecuted minority. The story of Madison and the Baptists has been related many times. In fact, without their combined influence, the story of religious liberty in America and throughout the world would be vastly different.

The consuming passion of Madison's religious life was religious freedom. He said, "Freedom to believe in a creed or religion or freedom not to believe must be a basic right in any democratic society."

At the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention, Alexander Hamilton made the major contribution of his life--the formulation of the federal system of government. In his early life, he seems to have given religion only passing thought although he wrote a short statement that seems to suggest a modified deism: "The superior being created man but at the same time endowed man with the right to personal liberty and personal safety." Hamilton never affiliated with any religious group, but in the 18th Century this would not have indicated a lack of piety.

John Jay, a New Yorker, was perhaps the most traditional in religion of all the founding fathers. His religious views were in sharp contrast to those of Jefferson, Franklin, or John Adams. When it was proposed that the sessions of the First Continental Congress be opened with prayer, Jay opposed such a move. He said there was too much religious diversity among the members for the prayers to be efficacious.

Jay attended church regularly and opposed deistic views. He was one of the early presidents of the American Bible Society, of which his son William was the founder. In his years at Bedford, New York, he attended the Presbyterian church, but he still continued to support Episcopal views.

John Dickinson was also an important founding father of the United States. Although he attended the Second Continental Congress and assisted in the preparation of some of the documents, he refused to sign the Declaration of Independence because he felt such a move was premature. Later he was largely responsible for formulating the Articles of Confederation which in turn led to the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention.

Dickinson did not widely circulate his religious views. Although he died a Quaker, he appears to have nominally accepted a modified deism. Dickinson makes mention of God but apparently almost as though he did not know him intimately.

The founding fathers' religion: myth and reality? Most acknowledged a divine being. There was as in most leadership groups a degree of egotism and self-glorification, but most believed both implicitly and explicitly that men free to believe as they wished in a free state was the ideal to attain. (BP)

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'Using Freedom Responsibly
No Easy Chore:' Historians

By Charles W. Deweese and A. Ronald Tonks
For Baptist Press

Freedom is not an automatic and inevitable achievement for Americans. Men and women have died in many wars to acquire and preserve freedom for the United States of America.

Colonial America witnessed the beatings of scores of people who endured dehumanizing treatment rather than conform to a state church.

The U.S. provides as many freedoms for its citizens as any country in the world--an affirmative note worth celebrating. Such freedom is not a worldwide reality, with millions of people still struggling for liberty.

Three principles are cited that will, hopefully, help generate wholesome understanding and constructive uses of freedom, followed by several guidelines on dealing creatively with religious liberty and the right to individual interpretation of scripture.

The first principle: "Persistent and sacrificial effort must be employed to gain and retain freedom." Aggressive action has been essential both to the procurement and maintenance of liberty. A word of caution for the future is in order, however. Present freedoms won't remain intact and new freedoms will never come into existence without constant work

It's imperative that Americans stay on guard. Citizens of tomorrow will live in slavery if citizens of today do not work as earnestly as their ancestors for freedom's sake.

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The second principle states, "Freedom is legitimate only when exercised within the context of authority and certain limitations."

The desire for freedom can never become such an obsession that it abandons necessary restrictions. Otherwise, laws are broken, social customs violated and moral codes set aside. Further, factionalism results when the desire for freedom overextends itself.

Individuals, groups and institutions, in this instance, "do their own thing," disharmony erupts, and relationships fracture as aimless freedom searchers cross paths and conflict.

Freedom can never be so free that it exists apart from authority. Typical constraints on freedom include the laws of the land, cultural patterns, institutional requirements and biblical mandates, among others. Psychologically, physically, morally, spiritually, social politically, it is essential that freedom operate within boundaries.

Consider, for example, a recent Tennessee Supreme Court ruling that made it illegal for a church to continue the practice of snake-handling as part of its religious services. The court's belief was that its ruling didn't violate separation of church and state but, rather, was designed to protect the church's members.

The five judges' mandate stressed that even religious liberty must be practiced with certain conditions and restrictions. In this instance, the authority of personal and social health took precedence over the continuing exercise of a dangerous form of freedom.

Further, to become free is to assume responsibility for the rights of others, not only self. For the U.S., this includes the rights of other nations, of minorities; for corporations, the rights of consumers; for individuals, the rights of other individuals.

Principle three declares; "Genuine freedom originates with God and makes sense only if related to the achievement of purpose in life."

God's identification of himself as "...the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect" (Lev. 26:13, RSV), makes explicit that liberation for the Israelites evolved directly out of God's initiative. The concept of walking erect suggests this freedom created a conducive environment in which the Israelites could fulfil God's intentions and purposes for them.

American beginnings were saturated with biblical imagery which conveyed that freedom for the new nation was God's gift and that he had a holy calling for the country. The former concept frequently became twisted both in the failure to acknowledge God as the source of liberty and in the temptation to insert human ingenuity in God's place.

The latter concept often deteriorated into the belief that America's cause was always God's cause, resulting in misplaced priorities. Some other guidelines to remember and heed in the continuing struggle for religious liberty and freedom are cited:

--Realize the battle to maintain the separation of church and state and religious freedom will be a permanent feature of American life and, therefore, deserves constant support of all who favor it; fulfil the demands and opportunities of religious liberty; acknowledge that disagreement over doctrinal issues always has been and continues to be a legitimate feature of Baptist life; recognize that Baptists are non-creedal; realize that the individuality, background and prejudices of each Baptist are different; remember that every person is created in God's image but God does not expect that all be alike. This means, among other things, that God expects man to be creative. And a crucial kind of creativity is theological reflection. All persons are compelled to explore the vital dimensions of our faith.

The examination of one's origin, reason for being, the basis for his doctrinal stances, and the future are just a few of the timeless considerations of mankind. Baptists would be remiss in discouraging their peers from engaging in the freedom of creative spiritual thought, even if the results of such reflection vary.

A proper appreciation of the worth of fellow Baptists and the value of their ideas is an integral feature of the priesthood of all believers.

--Work graciously but firmly against the efforts of dominant personalities who try to force their interpretations on others. A passive acceptance of the doctrinal pronouncements of a person(s) who appear(s) overly aggressive and far too definitive is a disservice on two counts.

One does disservice to self by being so dependent on the thinking of another that he or she never engages individual intellectual and spiritual capacities in the area of Baptist beliefs.

Second, the person who pretends to have the ultimate answer to every question does disservice to himself or herself in assuming a characteristic reserved for God alone.

One can learn much from fellow Baptists in Sunday School and Training Union classes, in worship services and in other church meetings. But each Baptist must learn the fine art of thinking for self, in depth, seeking the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit for guidance.

A multitude of new insights are available for a responsible encounter with the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the Baptist heritage. The freedom--to think and interpret--must be guarded by every Baptist. (BP)

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The Christian Hope &
The American Dream

By Charles W. Deweese and A. Ronald Tonks
For Baptist Press

Conditions in the United States over the past several years have brought about questions that demand Americans take a hard look at their dream and concept of success.

Questions that must be asked include; Is America willing to acknowledge its problems and sins? Is the nation willing to retrieve its past to see whether it has acted responsibly? Is it willing to face the fact that its success story often involves "a compulsive concentration on the means of attaining success with little concern about the broader terms in which it is to be measured," to quote Robert N. Bellah.

An evaluation of the American dream first involves an effort to delineate the meaning of authentic Christian hope. Then a redefinition of success in light of this hope follows. The basic guide for arriving at the Christian hope is the Bible.

Christian hope is inclusive. History, man and creation are all wrapped in the Christian understanding of hope. In the context of God's purposes, hope is not segregated but integrated. The cosmos will cohere in unity in God's presence when hope attains future consummation.

Consider the scriptures. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...' And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good"(Gen. 1:1, 26a, 31a, RSV). These make clear that God is the author of history, of creation and man. The Christian hope originates and culminates with God.

The inclusiveness of the Christian hope has clear evidence in biblical passages that describe God's redemptive purposes for all creation. Individuals are included in the redemptive concern.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17a, RSV).

The redemptive and inclusive elements of the Christian hope find full expression in Matthew 26 in which Jesus referred to the coming of the Son of Man who would separate all the nations of the earth--as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The hope of the righteous resided in the way they related comprehensively to the needs of hurting humanity and in the quality of therapy applied to these needs:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you clothed me...sick and you visited me...in prison and you came to me"(Matt. 25:35-36, RSV).

The Christian hope, therefore, urges that America evaluate her dream for the specific purpose of determining whether her national priorities are designed primarily to meet the needs of her citizens.

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Justice is another characteristic of the Christian hope-- no discrimination, no manipulation or depersonalization. With forcefulness of expression, the prophet Amos admonished Israel to "hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:15a, RSV). The Christian hope is that justice will prevail in America.

Further, the ultimate hope is God himself and therefore is a present and future hope. Jeremiah referred to God as the "hope of Israel, its Savior in time of trouble" (Jer. 14:8a, RSV) and, the Apostle Paul referred to Christ as the "hope of glory" (Col. 1:27b, RSV).

The uninformed could be deceived into thinking that all America genuinely believes this after reading about Congressional prayer breakfasts, worship services in the White House, placing of hands on Bibles in courtroom settings, engraving of religious phrases on coins, and the inserting of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. Many of these references to God and things of religion are superficial and defy a national dream on behalf of civil religion.

In view of this description of Christian hope, say Robert Benne and Philip Hefner, a redefining of success is in order. Traditionally, success as a vital part of the American dream has involved three elements: 1--a shaking free of limits imposed by the past; 2--engagement in a struggling ascent characterized by personal initiative and sacrifice, a keen sense of competition and a strong exertion of self; and 3--an optimistic thrust into a gracious future filled with unlimited opportunity and few, if any, restrictions.

Unfortunately, this concept of success in America has all too often resulted in a denial of historical and covenantal relationships with God, man and nature.

The Christian hope demands some modifications in the American dream and the view of success that is wrapped up in it. First, history and the covenantal relationships that have developed in it must be treated with more dignity.

The construction and preservation of covenantal relationships are vital to the health of American life. Early immigrants to America developed covenants in civic, as well as ecclesiastical life. As early as 1620, the Pilgrims on the ship Mayflower entered an agreement known as the Mayflower Compact. The signers of this mutual pledge bound themselves to contribute to the general good of the Plymouth community and to give obedience to the laws of the colony.

Also, the early inhabitants of Providence Plantations in Rhode Island in the late 1630's were required to assent to a covenant similar to the Mayflower Compact. The values of such covenants were that they increased the respect of colonists for one another, of colonists for government and of government for colonists.

Second, a major alteration of the American view of success must come at the point in insisting that Americans not be so individualistic and competitive in their climb up the ladder of life that they bypass responsibilities to those unable and unwilling to compete. The Christian hope includes justice and love for all.

Third, the success element in the American dream must be conditioned by a healthy respect for authority. Self cannot be elevated so there is no dependence on fellow citizens or on God. He is the hope of America. To deny the need for God and fellow citizens is spiritual and civic suicide.

Fourth, the optimistic element in the American approach to success should not be blind. It should be a realistic optimism. There are numerous limits on the future of America, and she must realize this. Land can run out, natural resources can run out, inflation can become overbearing; the list can go on indefinitely. Faith in God, not a blind and optimistic attachment to self attainment is the kind of hope America needs. (BP)

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