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Dr. Westblade - 18th Century Theology

The Decade Project: 1710-1719

The period of 1710-1719 served as a transitional period for New England. They were forced to grapple with how to maintain their English heritage whilst also building a newfound colonial identity. This caused much contention as colonists fought to uphold the ideals that they found most noble. Since religious life was the focal point of the colonial community, this transitional period fundamentally impacted how faith was viewed and practiced. In a period of religious conflict both within the Protestant church itself, between Catholics and Protestants, and between Christianity and the secular world, various events forced Protestant Americans to discover their own unique religious identity while holding onto the foundations of the Christian faith.

Anglican and Presbyterian feuds culminated in 1710 in London with the Sacheverell Riots. London had been a center for polarized religious disagreement since the 1680s with various religious mobs taking to the streets in disagreement over the Anglican Church's effect on English government. Sacheverell, a High Church Anglican minister, had dared to preach, defend, and publish a sermon that the House of Commons deemed "seditious." He exposed, in a ninety-minute sermon, that there were many members high in the Church of England and government that were aiming to destroy the Church and country from the inside. This threat was from Separatists that Sacheverell believed could ultimately tear the Church apart. Since the Church was the foundation of the state, it would also lead to the downfall of England at home. Such

sentiments were not taken well by the English government, who sought to promote peace and unity at home while remaining tolerant of other Protestant sects. They perceived Sacheverell's rhetoric against Protestants more dangerous to national unity than the actions of Presbyterians that sought to localize church authority outside the Church of England. Sacheverell may have gone too far with insinuating these Presbyterians were enemies of England, but his premise was certainly based in the truth that numerous buildings for congregational worship were being erected in London itself. The numbers of both people and centers of worship were growing in support of more localized religious practice as a result of the government tolerating greater religious diversity.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, London's conservative residents came out into the streets in droves on March 1, 1710, two days after Sacheverell's conviction. The message from the Sacheverell rioters was generally consistent: National Church unity is the way of God and England. Some rioters went so far as to destroy the furniture of congregational churches and threaten to burn the builder of a church. John Dyer, a writer of a best-selling Tory newsletter at the time, wrote that this mob sought to kill him because "he drew people from the public worship of God in the National Church."<sup>2</sup> Religious disunity, for these rioters, was an affront to God, threatening the salvations of

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Holmes, "The Sacheverell Riots: The Crowd and the Church in Early Eighteenth-Century London," *Past & Present* no. 72 (Aug. 1976): 55-60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650328>.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, 65.

individuals and the moral fabric of society that was bound up in the state religion. The military ultimately had to squelch the mob before extensive damage was done in England.<sup>3</sup>

Protestants in New England were left to hear the stories of their Motherland's capital being burned in outrage against people attempting to reform the Church at home. This emboldened Protestants as they sought to be examples to the rest of the world. It also challenged their reformed Christian understanding of the unity of the Church. These American Protestants had to answer to Paul's command "that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."<sup>4</sup> Division produces conflict. If Congregational churches were independent in practice, how did they truly follow Paul's clear command? Political power centralized in the church, even within a small community, could very well encourage similar riots. These Congregationalist communities, though independent at the church level and unique theologically from the Anglican Church, modelled the religious conservatism of England: tying religion, politics, and social morality together like the Sacheverell rioters contended for in England.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Holmes, 64-65.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 1:10, ESV.

<sup>5</sup>"Religion in Colonial America: Trends, Regulations, and Beliefs," Facing History and Ourselves, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/religion-colonial-america-trends-regulations-and-beliefs#:~:text=Toward%20the%20end%20of%20the,well%2C%20including%20Baptists%20and%20Anglicans.>

Aside from the Sacheverell riots, there were many other instances of religious disputes within the Protestant church itself. One such example pertains to Benjamin Colman, a Presbyterian minister in Boston. He became involved in controversies over his affirmation of nature and the physical world, as well as human use of music and art as expressions of Christian living in themselves. However, he was neither a rationalist nor a naturalist. He believed, along with his fellow New England Protestant pastors, that the Fall had depraved human intellect to ascertain the divine. He did contend, though, for power of rationality. God-given reason is raised above the rest of creation with regeneration, allowing for a “Rational Dominion” over the created order and human society. He went so far in 1716 as to call human good deeds an operation of both the head and the heart. Colman thus claimed that God redeemed both the passions and the intellect. This potentially opened up training one’s own passions through the intellect, removing God as the sole instigator of the heart’s reform. This synthesis of Protestant belief in God’s sovereignty and order with the role of human rationality was not wholly adopted by his peers. Ministers in Massachusetts responded generally negatively to this proposition as a threat to the supremacy of God’s election and sanctification.<sup>6</sup>

Not only was religious disunity prevalent within the different sects of Protestantism itself, it could also be seen between Catholics and Protestants. This

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<sup>6</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 271-273.

conflict dates back to the sixteenth century, but manifested itself in various ways during the 1710s. Notably, the Riot Act of 1715 resulted in many instances of religious tension. “The Riot Act of 1715 prescribed that where 12 or more persons comprising an unlawful, riotous and tumultuous assembly disturbed the public peace and did not disperse within one hour of being commanded to do so, those persons comprising the assembly were each guilty of a felony 'without Benefit of Clergy, and the Offenders therein shall be adjudged Felons, and shall suffer Death as in case of Felony without Benefit of Clergy'.”<sup>7</sup> The necessity of this act stemmed from two things: the pervasiveness of riots during this time and the inadequate nature of local police forces to handle them. It gave the constable or sheriff more power to curb political unrest before resorting to means of violence. Although well intentioned, this act had inadvertent consequences which perpetuated tensions between Catholics and Protestants. For example, Ireland during the early eighteenth century was fraught with religious conflict. “The Protestant political nation realized it was 'an isolated minority, surrounded by a potentially hostile Catholic population'.”<sup>8</sup> On top of the already tense relations, the Riot Act would allow Catholics “to harass Protestant dissenters, as their

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Hinton, “And the Riot Act Was Read!” *Adelaide Law Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2003): 79-88, Accessed January 31, 2021, [https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/adelrev24&id=85&men\\_tab=srchresults](https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/adelrev24&id=85&men_tab=srchresults).

<sup>8</sup> Neal Garnham, “Riot Acts, Popular Protest, and Protestant Mentalities in Eighteenth-Century Ireland,” *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 2 (2006): 403-23, accessed February 1, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091621>.

services might be declared riotous meetings.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, issues arose between the two religious groups regarding what constituted a riotous assembly and what didn’t.

Furthermore, Protestants were forced to examine what causes were worth putting up a fight for, even if it resulted in political or legal repercussions.

On top of religious disunity between various denominations, a tension emerged between religious and political practices. This can partly be seen within the passing of the Riot Act. “The British act has generally been seen as an essentially political measure, passed into law at a period when popular disorder presented a real threat to the existence of the state and more especially to the emergent Whig hegemony.”<sup>10</sup> This act was implemented for political purposes and didn’t give much concern to religious implications. This is just one example of many illustrating the divide between religious and political policies during this decade. One cause for this divide was the anglicization of New England, which was the increase in cultural and political influence of Britain on the colonies. “Anglicization operated as a political force reshaping institutions of law and government to conform to English practice.”<sup>11</sup> This movement towards conformity with England perpetuated the religious-political divide because religious beliefs between the Congregationalists of New England and the Anglicans and Catholics of Britain differed so much. Thus, the conformity was of a political and cultural nature.

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<sup>9</sup> Garnham, 407.

<sup>10</sup> Garnham, 407.

<sup>11</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 131.

The religious-political tension of this decade could further be seen within the policies relating to slavery. There were numerous policies passed for and against the use of slavery at this time. In 1712, Pennsylvania banned the import of new slaves into the colonies.<sup>12</sup> In 1719, the first shipments of African slaves were brought to Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> In 1712, New York was the home to a number of violent slave rebellions in which blacks called for a war against Christians for their passivity and lack of adherence to God's word regarding the treatment of African Americans.<sup>14</sup> These examples are representative of the great deal of contention regarding the issue of slavery during the 1710s. Some people believed that slavery directly countered God's word and thus ought to be abolished from the colonies. Others valued the economic and political benefits of slavery over any moral convictions they may have felt. The strain between secularism and religious beliefs necessitated that people choose what their priorities were which resulted in great social and religious divides.

In conclusion, although the 1710s didn't contain many monumental events that fundamentally changed New England life, it did contain a multitude of riots, controversial religious speakers, and important political policies which all served as catalysts for a change in religious life. The underlying tensions throughout this decade

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<sup>12</sup> Jack H. Schick, "Slavery In Pennsylvania," Friends Journal, Friends Publishing Corporation, 2012, <https://www.friendsjournal.org/slavery-in-pennsylvania/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Slavery In Louisiana," Whitney Plantation, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/history/slavery-in-louisiana/>.

<sup>14</sup> Naomi Blumberg, "New York Slave Rebellion of 1712," Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-York-slave-rebellion-of-1712>.

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occurred within the Protestant church itself, between Catholics and Protestants, and between the secular world and the Christian one. These served to transition New England away from Britain and to eventually lead it to the American Revolution.

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