Christianity in U.S. History

Antebellum America, Looking East

Although my people have lived on this land for less than thirty years, we have already come to feel that it is our home, and ours alone.[1] My parents were among those who made the long journey, in 1836, from our ancestral lands in the East to the Indian Territory. We Muscogees—or "Creeks," as the whites call us—have always been proud of our ability to adapt to new situations and circumstances, and so our feelings for our new Muscogee nation should not seem so unusual to outsiders. It is like what I recently heard a medicine man say at the ceremonials at Locker Poker: "The mountains and hills, that you see, are your backbone, and the gullies and the creeks, which are between the hills and mountains, are your heart veins." This is our home.

I was born in 1839, shortly after my parents settled near the town of Coweta. Like Coweta, many of our towns are named after towns in our ancestral lands. Some, like Tuckabatchee, are even made up of the same families which lived in their namesakes. Tuckabatchee is unique in another way, for it is the only town laid out like our old ceremonial towns, with a chokofa (our central meeting place) and ceremonial buildings surrounded by private houses. The town is the primary political unit of our nation, and each town is considered to be either Upper or Lower Creek. In the East the Upper Creek towns were the northern ones, while here they are generally the

southern ones. My parents are both from the Kasihta tribe, one of the original Lower Creek tribes of the Muscogee (Creek) confederacy.

Men from the U.S. government visited our nation earlier this year (1859) to assist in our census, and they claim that we now have 14,888 citizens. My grandparents say that is quite a bit less than when they were young, but our nation is still healthy. Just last month our General Council, made up of principal and second chiefs from the various towns, adopted our first written constitution. Many of our laws and punishments are similar to those of the states nearby—Arkansas, Missouri, Texas—but the chiefs still have not resolved the question of whether our mixed-blood people can also be citizens of the United States. Of course, it is only three years ago that we stopped allowing whites to become naturalized citizens of our nation.

Although most Muscogees, myself included, still follow the traditional ways of our people, my parents and grandparents tell me that the beliefs and practices are not as strong as they were before. Many of our elders distrust the whites because of the hardships we have been subjected to, and until 1848 it was illegal for white missionaries to hold their religious ceremonies here, though we have always allowed them to operate boarding schools in some of our towns. (I myself attended the Koweta Mission in Coweta, which was founded in 1842 by a Presbyterian minister named Loughridge.) But during the past decade there has been a lot of interest in the whites' religion, and now even some of the most respected leaders are pastors of Methodist and Baptist churches. Christianity seems to be replacing traditional ceremonies in many of

our towns—but perhaps replacing is the wrong word; in many ways the whites' religion is much like our own. In any event, our tradition of toleration should allow for both ways to exist among us in harmony. Still, I wish that some of the mixed bloods, who are so anxious to imitate the whites' ways, would be more cautious. We hear rumors that the whites have become divided over the correct interpretation of their religion, and may even fight a war to settle it. If Christianity will not help us survive as a people, it may not be the best thing for us.

Antebellum America, Looking West

Although the climate and topography of the Indian Territory were noticeably different from the Muscogees' lands in present-day Alabama, they adapted very quickly to their new environment. In the twenty-four-year period from 1836 to the eve of the Civil War, the Muscogees rose from desperation (3,500 died from exposure and fevers in 1837[2]) to a level of affluence which rivaled their pre-removal existence. In 1860, some 267 Muscogees owned over 1,600 slaves.[3]

Apart from their town names, the Muscogees found other things to remind them of their earlier homeland. Their neighbors in Indian Territory—the Cherokees, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, and eventually the Seminoles—had also surrounded them in the Southeast, and it was in Indian Territory that these nations came to be known as the Five Civilized Tribes.[4] Christianity was not the only other religious tradition the Muscogees encountered, therefore, as each of their neighbors had distinct traditions with which the Muscogees were

already familiar. They also came into contact with several tribes not previously encountered, including the Osages, the Kiowas, and the Pawnees. The Muscogees were skilled at organization and leadership, and from 1842 until the Civil War they convened a number of international councils promoting cooperation among the various tribes.

The establishment of Indian Territory in 1834 followed on the heels of a protracted period of intense expansion of the American missionary enterprise. In the thirty-five years following the drafting of the Constitution, Protestants established at least eleven denominational and interchurch bodies to undertake missionary work.[5] These organizations reflected the growing awareness that only innovative, aggressive forms of Christianity would succeed in a land where no single denomination or sect enjoyed the state's exclusive support. A number of missionary organizations established work among the southeastern tribes prior to removal. Despite their infrequent successes, many of these bodies followed the tribes to their new homes in Indian Territory.

Missionaries in the antebellum period were influenced by their churches' newfound confidence and assertiveness as they approached their native charges. While all assumed a common cultural standard by which to guide their work, there were extensive debates over the proper content and method of evangelistic efforts among the Indians. For instance, the New York Missionary Society instructed its missionaries "to stress only the great doctrines of divine revelation," while the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions "desired its agents to preach the law of God in all its holy

strictness as well as the fullness of the Saviour's mercy and love."[6] Above all, missionaries sought to inculcate a conception of sin which could form the basis for a distinctively Christian experience of conversion, including an emotional sense of guilt and conviction. "Thus as a result of missionary enterprise, the Indian Christians gained a different outlook on life, new social institutions, new male and female roles, and novel techniques for altering the lives of their fellow tribesmen . . . While the missionaries may not have instituted the New Jerusalem in the forests for which they hoped, they did destroy the Gehenna, in their eyes, of integrated traditional tribal life."[7]

Indian Christians came into contact with the national and international dimensions of Christianity through their involvement with the organizational apparatus of the denominations. Representatives of the denominational hierarchies made periodic trips to their far-flung home mission outposts, bringing with them news from the East. Exemplary native converts also traveled, though less frequently, to the eastern churches, where they served as case studies of successful missionary work.

As the churches were reestablished in the United States following the American religious settlement (the ratification of the First Amendment in 1791), Americans envisioned a fresh realization of Christian society based on unity through plurality. But the naiveté of the Enlightenment mindset was succeeded by a profound awareness that plurality was giving way to diversity, dissent, and division. The Jacksonian shift from national to emerging regional concerns and the heightened influence of Romanticism in the United States

amplified this awareness. And on the steadily receding western frontier, the persistent presence of the Indians, with their own distinctive religious and cultural traditions, only further clouded the Americans' visions of unity. American civil religion emerged during this period, serving an important purpose in a nation where no single religion could claim state support, but was unable to fully compensate for the increasingly deep disharmony in American society.[8]

As the nation pushed westward, the churches sought to respond to their context in several ways. Public schools came to be seen as the meeting point for the civil and religious spheres of life.[9] The fervent revivalism and sectarianism of frontier Christianity can also be interpreted as responses to the changing social climate.[10] Though each new movement or group sought to establish itself as the authoritative expression of the faith, their proliferation only confirmed the thesis that the American religious consensus (of unity through plurality) was breaking down. By 1850 there was widespread recognition that religious freedom was producing extreme diversity, not harmony, and was affecting more than just "religious" matters. Slavery emerged as the key social and religious issue of the day, and the Social Question had come clearly into view.

As the young nation moved toward Civil War, the theory of religious freedom came into conflict with the doctrine of laissez faire economics. Northern proponents of religious and economic free enterprise found themselves at odds with their ideological peers in the South, who were more

liberally enterprising than Northerners could accept. Thus the Civil War was much more than a political conflict; it was also a holy war with massive economic implications.

Yet both before and since the Civil War, American Christians have tended to measure the success and status of their churches by counting bodies and buildings. Even so great a church historian as Kenneth Scott Latourette betrayed this bias by describing the nineteenth century as "the great century" in the history of Christianity, basing this determination on the churches' nearly single-minded devotion to worldwide expansion through religious imperialism.[11] Perhaps, like Abraham Lincoln, we would do well to consider the requirements of justice when establishing criteria for judging the success or failure of the Christian mission. If Lincoln and others were correct in interpreting the Civil War as satisfaction of the blood guilt of the nation, we may need to recognize that in order for American Christendom to flourish, freedom—religious, economic, cultural, and otherwise—must coexist with justice.

Modern America, Looking Post

The trauma of World War I marked the end of one historical period and the beginning of another; it was a brief but significant time of transition that changed both the face of American religion and the nature of American society. Though few realized it at the time, the war and its aftermath ushered in what we now self-consciously refer to as the modern era.

The massive mobilization effort that brought American forces into the war in 1917, reversing an initial stance of neutrality, was thwarted by the war's quick resolution the following year. While 1919 began with a spirit of optimism, it ended in despair and disillusionment as Americans soon realized that their crusade "to make the world safe for democracy" had failed. More than just reaction to the war was involved in this turnabout, though, as the year was one of incredible upheaval: the Eighteenth Amendment (Prohibition) was implemented, resulting in soaring crime rates and violence; an influenza epidemic killed five hundred thousand Americans, twenty million worldwide; the Ku Klux Klan reemerged in the South as an accepted social and political authority; and the Attorney General spearheaded a war on both labor and political activists, smashing the United Mine Workers strike and suppressing Socialists and the IWW.[12]

The year 1919 was also a critical one for Native Americans and their nations. Half a century earlier, in 1871, Congress had legislated that "hereafter no Indian nation or tribe within the territory of the United States shall be acknowledged or recognized as an independent nation."[13] Having derecognized the sovereign status of Indian tribes, Congress in 1919 offered citizenship to those Indians who had served in the "Military or Naval Establishments" during the war. Though this act granted citizenship on a voluntary basis only, it foreshadowed the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, which had no such provision and applied to all Indians: "Be it enacted . . . That all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States be,

and they are hereby, declared to be citizens of the United States: Provided, That the granting of such citizenship shall not in any manner impair or otherwise affect the right of any Indian to tribal or other property."[14] If 1919 marked America's coming of age, it prefigured the coming of a new age for Native Americans, who found themselves involuntarily thrust into the melting pot of American society.

Two great tensions have influenced the development of American religious and cultural identity in the twentieth century. First, the Christendom mentality has been challenged and in large part overcome by the processes of secularization. Significant segments of American society are now devoid of any religious content or influence, and where religion does still function, Christianity is no longer considered to be normative.[15] Second, the ideology of the melting pot has been discredited by the reality of religious and cultural pluralism. While the dominant white immigrant society has sought to create and project a common American identity, it has been forced to recognize the legitimacy of minority faiths and cultures. Both of these tensions—Christendom vs. secularization, melting pot vs. pluralism—have influenced the contemporary understanding and practice of religious freedom. The question of religious freedom runs as an important thread through the past seventy years of American Christian thought.

A heated debate between Modernists and Fundamentalists developed during the twenties. At issue was the role that modern science should play in understanding Christian faith, particularly with reference to biblical criticism.

At the same time, the few remaining Social Gospel progressives struggled to revise, in light of the war, their overly optimistic conceptions of the kingdom of God. The Christian Realism of Reinhold Neibuhr and others developed during this period as a response to the deepening dimensions of the Social Question.[16] Like their Social Gospel predecessors, they attempted to determine what the relationship should be between Christianity and society in a world characterized by political ambiguity, cultural diversity, and religious pluralism.

Despite (or perhaps because of) a prolonged period of worldwide economic depression and a second world war, the thirties and forties were a time of theological renaissance. Protestants looked to Reformation sources for answers to modern questions (neo-orthodoxy), while Roman Catholics returned to the Medieval world for fresh insights (neo-scholasticism);[17] both sought a sense of freedom deriving from the security of tradition. On the American scene, the fifties revival of public religion gave substance to the Supreme Court's earlier claim that Americans are "a Christian people."[18] The 1956 adoption of the phrase “In God We Trust” as the national motto serves as an apt commentary on general attitudes toward religion during this period.[19]

Social unrest in the sixties affected every aspect of American life, and the Christian (particularly Protestant) religious hegemony was dealt a serious blow. The "death of God" theologians pressed religious freedom to the limit, rejecting traditional theological categories and looking for meaning in secular culture. The political resurgence of conservative Christianity during the seventies came in response to these dramatic societal changes, particularly the

diminished influence of religion in the public sphere. But despite the longing of some Christians for the security and prosperity of the fifties, the nature of religious freedom has been permanently changed. "Today religion is not even defined as belief in God, but more in terms of the function of sincerely held beliefs."[20]

Of course, religious freedom in American society has always been an important, if imperfectly realized, ideal. What has been referred to as civil religion "centers in the sense that the Federal Constitution guarantees sacred values and ideals of liberty, equality, and justice."[21] Foremost among these guarantees are the freedoms spelled out by the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Unfortunately, for many minority faiths—Native Americans, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and even Catholics—religious freedom has often been an elusive luxury.

Native Americans have often cited the First Amendment in arguing for the protection of their religious traditions. For example, the Native American Church was incorporated in 1944 after years of conflict with missionaries and bureaucrats; their preamble begins:

> Whereas, The "human rights" of all citizens of our country are guaranteed and protected by amendment 1 of the Constitution of our Country, and

> Whereas, The Indians of the United States, we contend, are likewise protected by, and come within the meaning of the protection of the Constitution, and
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> Whereas, These members of the Indian Tribes of the United States belonging to the Native American Church, do by these presents declare and publish to the world that they too, in the exercise of their native religion, call upon all liberty loving people of our country for tolerance, and that they likewise too, declare their inherent right to protection in the free exercise of their religious beliefs and in the unmolested practice of the rituals thereof, under amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States.[22]

But while the constitution may in theory protect all religions equally, a long history of governmental and judicial interference makes it clear that Native Americans have in fact not enjoyed religious freedom. The problem lies in the very definition of religion that is assumed. "The nature of Indian tribal religions brings to contemporary America a new type of legal problem. Religious freedom has existed as a matter of allowing differing beliefs to exist in people's minds. It has not, thus far, involved consecration and setting aside of lands for religious purposes . . . A great deal remains to be done to guarantee to Indian people the right to practice their own religion." Sacred lands "must be returned to the concerned Indian tribes for their ceremonial purposes."[23]

Shortly before the takeover of the B.I.A. headquarters in November 1972, Native American activists presented a platform of "Twenty Points" to the

President. Point Eighteen was a demand for the protection of Indians' religious and cultural freedom, which the White House responded to by asserting that "Indians, like all citizens, are protected in their religious rights by the First Amendment."[24] Yet six years later Congress enacted the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), tacitly recognizing that Indians weren't being protected adequately; it stated that "henceforth it shall be the policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and Native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonies and traditional rites."[25] As a result of inconsistent and overly stringent judicial interpretation, AIRFA has yet to result in any improvement in the status of Native American religious freedom.

As American society moves beyond Reaganism and into the next decade, the question of religious freedom continues to loom large on the horizon. The present conservative movement of the Supreme Court, final arbiter of Constitutional freedoms, might indicate even darker times for minority faiths. But we can find reason for hope in the seemingly irreversible changes that have affected the Christendom mentality. Perhaps the nineties will be, like the sixties and the thirties were, a time for dynamic social reconstruction after the present period of unfulfilling economic prosperity.

If the Social Question considers the nexus between religion and society from the religious perspective, perhaps we can hypothesize "the Religious

Question" and look at the same issue from the opposite perspective: Has the United States moved into a post-Christian era? The irony of our present situation is evident in the way in which we attempt to handle the simultaneous development of secularization and religious pluralism in the context of the First Amendment. While most Americans oppose the establishment of any particular Christian faith in the public sphere, they often fail to support the protections necessary to insure the free exercise of non-Christian faiths. And as we have seen, this problem arises from the definition of religion assumed by the drafters of the Constitution. Recognizing the rapid spread of secularization accompanied by the incomplete realization of religious pluralism, perhaps our best reply to the Religious Question is this: The United States has moved into a post-Christian, but not a post-Judeo-Christian, era.

> If Christians are to embrace the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, and if they are to accept the coming age of American religious pluralism, they must relinquish their pretense of Christendom.
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> . . . As Christians must discover their integrity alongside and in mutual respect for the integrity of other religions, so must America discover its national integrity alongside and in mutual respect for other nations.[26]

(1989)