

The United States and The United Kingdom: A Special Relationship?

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ABSTRACT: -The purpose of this paper is to explore the origins and development of common religious and cultural relationships between the United States and the United Kingdom during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which have continued to link the two nations until the present day. It examines how the opposition to the monarchy during the English Civil War, which culminated in the regicide of Charles 1 in 1649, had a bearing on the opposition to the monarchy during the American War of Independence, which led to the metaphorical regicide of George III in 1776. The difference was that, in Britain, the king was removed by his execution, whereas in America, the king was removed by revolution. The seminal influence of the Pilgrim Fathers on American identity and the impact of groups such as the Levellers and the Quakers on political and religious attitudes in both countries will be considered.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to explore my personal reflections on the impact of conflicting ideas, emerging from the prevailing political and religious culture in Britain during the English Civil Wars, upon the foundational values of the United States of America. My argument is that powerful ideas that appeared during the religious reformation of the sixteenth century and culminated in the momentous events of the English Civil Wars in the seventeenth century influenced the American Revolution and continue to resonate in the politics of both countries to the present day. It might even be said that the conflict between the Roundheads and the Cavaliers produced an enduring political division that has continued down the centuries, and can be discerned in the Labour-Conservative and Democratic-Republican political dichotomy in the respective countries today.

Whilst it is acknowledged that political, cultural and economic repercussions of the English Civil Wars are complex, the concern of this paper is to reflect in particular on the significance of religious ideas on the political developments leading up to the American Revolution. It is my contention, moreover, that the enduring significance of the English Civil Wars on the political and social landscape of not only the United Kingdom but throughout the English-speaking world has to date not been given the attention it deserves.

History is not so much a series of events as an ebb and flow of ideas. As J F Kennedy asserted: 'A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.' It is the transmission and dissemination of ideas that has had the greatest effect on historical events. It can be argued, for example, that the ideas of Marx, Freud and Einstein had an incalculable impact on the history of the twentieth century. Pointedly, Hill (1991: 17), in his ground-breaking study on the English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century, advises that

'Historians are interested in ideas not only because they influence societies, but because they reveal the societies which give rise to them.'

Consequently, it is argued here that the essential currency of radical religious ideas that evolved during the tumultuous upheaval of the English Civil War continued to resonate with subsequent generations of immigrants to America and impacted on the views of the Founding Fathers and the events of the American Revolution more than a hundred and fifty years later. Moreover, it is suggested that it was the same melting pot of religious ideas that fuelled the social and political upheaval both of the English Civil War and the American War of Independence.

Admittedly, the connection between the nature of the relationship of the ideas that were current during the English Civil War and those that informed the American Declaration of Independence are multifaceted and difficult to ascertain with perfect clarity, but my proposition is that the conflicting ideologies that appeared before and during the English Civil Wars shaped the context in which reformers and dissenters constructed the

then unconventional ideas that ultimately informed modern interpretations of freedom and democracy in the American and, ultimately, the global context.

Whilst there has been a considerable examination of a network of different perspectives and ideological paradigms (see, for example Hawkes, D.; 2003), it would not be possible to rehearse them all in detail here. Nevertheless, it would be sufficient to say that, within this analysis, an ideology can be regarded as a coherent pattern of ideas that interpret reality within a broad perception of the nature of politics and religion.

It would be possible, though, as a specific point of illustration, to extrapolate parallels and connections between the views expressed by, for example, John Milton(1) – a leading protagonist of Cromwell’s government – in his polemical tract, *Areopagitica*, and those expressed in the First Amendment of the American Constitution. Published in 1644, *Areopagitica*, eloquently provided a philosophical defence of freedom of speech and the freedom of the press. Significantly, *Areopagitica* has been cited by America’s Supreme Court to underline the principles of the First Amendment of the American Constitution, which secures the freedom of expression, freedom of speech and the freedom of the press in the USA.

Similarly, it would also be possible to relate the theories proposed by religious dissenters during the Civil War to the principles of individual freedom and the rights of the citizen that can be found in the Constitution of the United States. By exploring the political and religious debates that took place in England during the first half of the seventeenth century, I intend to illustrate further that aspects of the relationship between republican and democratic ideas that were current then were revisited and revised during the course of the American Revolution. In order to pursue this argument, I shall first consider the seminal role of the Pilgrim Fathers in establishing core values that were to permeate the political climate of the incipient American republic.

II. THE PILGRIM FATHERS

The Pilgrim Fathers set sail from Plymouth, England, on the Mayflower on 6th September 1620 and, against all the odds, its crew of disaffected religious dissenters survived the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, arriving at Cape Cod on 9th November 1620. Subsequently, the inspirational story of the Mayflower pilgrims came to inform the culture of the founding of the American colonies. Significantly, the story (or the myth) of these original Puritan settlers, pilgrims fleeing religious persecution in England during the reign of James I, continued to reflect and inform the American self-image and is remembered today in the USA, each November, in the annual Thanksgiving celebrations.

When the Mayflower set sail from Plymouth, there was a group of 102 Puritan passengers on board, all of whom had decided to leave their home country to start a new life free from religious intolerance. For the first pilgrims, America was the New World, which offered the opportunity to create a religious and political utopia. Having settled in this New World, and then survived the first year, in the autumn of 1621, the Pilgrims in the company of some local Native American tribes came together in prayer for the first Thanksgiving to celebrate the colony’s successful first harvest with three days of feasting. To this day, that first Thanksgiving is commemorated in the USA on the fourth Thursday of November every year as a national holiday. Thanksgiving recalls the Plymouth Pilgrims’ religious observance of their survival in the face of adversity and the success of that first harvest in 1621.

‘In his first Thanksgiving address after the Revolutionary Wars, in 1789, George Washington asserted: Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.’

(<https://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/thanksgiving-proclamation-1789-2>)

The religious overtones cannot be missed. Nowadays, in remembering Thanksgiving, Americans recall that their country was founded by the Plymouth pilgrims, who had considered that they were on a journey to heaven. Thus, clearly, there was a religious dimension from the outset. They may not have expected to survive, but as radical Protestants their intention was to establish a divine kingdom on earth.

The Plymouth plantation was based on the religious idealism of fundamental Protestantism. The Pilgrims believed that everyone should have equal access to their faith. As Puritans, they rejected both the secular authority of the king and the hierarchy of the established Church of England and looked to establish a society that was based on equality within the communion of Christ. As soon as they arrived in America, they

discussed how they would govern themselves and agreed to sign a contract to establish a modest form of democracy, in which each member of the colony would contribute to the welfare of the whole community. The principles of the contract were derived from gospel values.

During the following decades of the seventeenth century, Christian dissenters in England continued to be subject to marginalization and discrimination. In detaching themselves from the established Church of England, many puritans, such as John Bunyan (2), for example, were persecuted and imprisoned; others joined an exodus of immigrants to America, taking with them their revolutionary views. Indeed, Robertson (2007: xii) informs us that in the 1630s ... some 30,000 [Congregationalists] crossed the Atlantic ...

In the following decades thousands of English dissidents followed the path of these pioneers. They took with them the radical ideas and religious beliefs that were to define the revolutionary wars of the 1780s. These ideas, I believe, sowed the seeds of and informed the movement towards the struggle for American independence in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, as I point out to American friends, the Founding Fathers of America, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Hamilton, all of whom signed the Declaration of Independence, were British subjects, descendants of families who had left Britain for America, largely for political, economic or religious reasons. They had been born and brought up in a British culture using a common language and within a common heritage. Critically, they had inherited the values of the English Civil War, which had thrown Puritans against the Monarchy.

It is argued here that the American Revolution can be traced back to the discontent of these generations of aggrieved Puritans who, following the Mayflower Pilgrims of 1612, during the subsequent period of more than a century and a half, had left the shores of Britain to colonise America and to cultivate their own distinctive political and religious views.

Churchill said that the United States and the United Kingdom were two countries divided by the same language. No matter how we might interpret this, the roots of the two nations are complementary, drawing from the radical ideas and beliefs of the Puritans of the early seventeenth century. They are two nations connected by a common religious and cultural context. It would be possible to go as far as to say, therefore, that, *mutatis mutandis*, the revolt against the monarchy – which resulted in the regicide of Charles I in 1649 – was re-enacted with the corresponding metaphorical regicide of George III by the American colonists in 1776. The difference was that, in Britain, the king was removed by his execution, whereas in America, the king was removed by revolution.

In order to trace the roots of dissension that led to the American Revolution, then, I shall look in more detail at some of the strands of the political and religious ideas that emerged during the English Civil Wars. I shall begin by considering the ideas discussed during the Putney Debates of 1647.

III. THE PUTNEY DEBATES

After his comprehensive defeat at the Battle of Naseby in June 1645, and following subsequent setbacks in his cause to defeat the parliamentarians, Charles I was eventually taken into custody and held under guard at Hampton Court Palace. (Robertson; 2007) He was taken there in August 1647. Whilst confined to Hampton Court Palace, he enjoyed a degree of liberty and was treated with respect. Though not everyone agreed, Cromwell felt that some accommodation with the king could still be achieved and set out to consult with colleagues and leading politicians. In turn, Charles I considered himself indispensable to whatever political force it should prevail that he should come to terms with.

Possibly for political reasons, Cromwell, himself a deeply religious man, established his base between Hampton Court Palace and the Palace of Westminster at Putney, at the Church of St Mary the Virgin, where, from 28th October until 11th November, 1647, he chaired a number of meetings to discuss what arrangements should be adopted to form a new government. These meetings became known as the Putney Debates.

The Putney Debates, which took place under the auspices of the New Model Army, which was led by Oliver Cromwell and his son-in-law, Henry Ireton, consisted of a series of discussions about the formation of a new British constitution. Some of the participants in the debates distinguished themselves as Levellers.⁽³⁾ The Levellers, whose leaders included John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn, held the belief that the King had violated the ‘natural rights’ of the people. The Levellers and their supporters advocated popular sovereignty, the extension of the franchise, equality before the law, and religious tolerance. Some Levellers, such as Lilburne, drew on the principles of the Magna Carta as the foundation of English rights and liberties.

I believe that these ideals continued to exercise the thoughts of those who left Britain to populate the emerging American colonies. In terms of the ‘special relationship’, it is relevant, too, by the way that, in 1965, the British memorial to President John Kennedy was established at Runnymede, the site of the signing of the Magna Carta.

IV. THE IMPACT OF THE LEVELLERS

The Levellers interpreted the conflicts in their own time as comparable to those between the kings and prophets in the Old Testament. Their political views were influenced by their conviction that God informed the conscience of individual men and that their reason should prevail. They drew the conclusion, therefore, that Christ, as a humble carpenter from Nazareth, promoted the message of equality. In John 13: 16, for example, Jesus says, 'Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.'

Correspondingly, the Levellers considered that they had a direct one-to-one relationship with God, which precluded not only the intercession of priests but also a monarch's claim to a divine right to rule.

The Putney Debates, therefore, reflecting upon questions of government, democracy and liberty, inspired the notion, drawn from the Levellers' reading of the gospels, that all citizens are 'created equal'; it was a principle that was to be articulated in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and in the American Constitution. In the Putney Debates, the radicals demanded a constitution based upon male suffrage ('one man, one vote'), biennial Parliaments and a reorganisation of parliamentary constituencies. They argued that authority should be invested in the House of Commons rather than in the Monarch and the House of Lords. They stated that there were 'native rights' for all Englishmen, including freedom of conscience, freedom of speech and equality before the law. I believe that with the discussion and development of these ideas, the Putney debates of 1647 were influential in the context of the demands of the American revolutionaries a hundred and thirty years later.

For those engaged in the Putney Debates, though, these views were not generally supported. Ireton, for example, vigorously opposed the radical views of the Levellers, saying that he would rather retain the constitution of King, Lords and Commons than advocate such radical proposals. Indeed, Hill (1991: 118) speaks of '...Ireton's determination in the Putney Debates to convict the Leveller spokesmen of communism...'. Nevertheless, the constitutional ideas that were discussed during the Putney Debates continued to resonate and impact upon political thinking. Lindley (1998), for example, says the debates demonstrated the remarkable extent to which the General Council was won over to Leveller ideas...

It should also be borne in mind that the debates took place in a climate of conflict, during one of the bloodiest wars in Britain's history. Robertson (2007: xvi), for example, maintains that '... the army...sustained in the civil war a comparatively higher loss of life than was suffered in the trenches of the First World War.' It might be considered extraordinary therefore that this rational discussion should take place within the chaos of war.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising in this context that the contemporary philosopher and commentator, Thomas Hobbes,(4) should describe life as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.

However, all debate was brought to an abrupt conclusion when it was learnt that King Charles had escaped from Hampton Court Palace and had gained refuge at Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight. From there, he resolved to renew his efforts to re-establish his authority. He began by communicating with Scottish and Irish sympathisers and fomenting discontent in England. In 1648, a 'royalist counter revolution' in London was put down (Lindsey; 1998: 30).

V. THE INFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE

The egalitarian and radical principles of the American Revolution reflected the egalitarian and radical nature of the Christian dissenters of the seventeenth century, which in turn derived from their interpretation of the now widely published Bible in English. Whether Quakers or Presbyterians, Baptists or Calvinists, each member of these communities assumed the authority to interpret and express their own views of biblical texts, irrespective of class or background. All drew their inspiration for their radical views from the Bible and, in particular, the Christian principles promoted by Jesus in the gospels. Hill (1991: 162), for example, perceptively points out that:

'As ordinary people formed their own congregations in the sixteen-forties, free from traditional clerical control, they discussed all aspects of theology and politics in the light of the Bible.'

The influence of the Bible on political discussion was significant. It was considered that the notion that all people are created equal came directly from the radically inclusive teachings of Jesus. Indeed, the arguments presented in the Putney Debates drew heavily from the Bible. As Hill (1991: 168) asserts, 'free from traditional clerical control, they could discuss all aspects of theology and politics in the light of the Bible.'

The Geneva Bible was one of the most historically significant translations of the Bible into English. It was published in 1560, fifty-one years before the King James translation. It was the Geneva Bible, drawing on earlier translations by William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale, which was used by many English dissenters. Indeed, whilst the King James Version of the bible was completed in 1611, it was the Geneva Bible that was taken to America on the Mayflower.

In 1439, in the German city of Mainz, a blacksmith in his late thirties introduced the first printing press to Europe. Johannes Guttenberg, through his invention of movable-type printing, provided the vehicle through

which the Bible could be mass produced and disseminated to ordinary people in their own language. In doing so, it set off a train of events that would reverberate like a tsunami across Europe and subsequently across the world, contributing to a revolution of ideas that had a significant influence on thinking.

In 1522 Martin Luther published his German translation of the New Testament and by 1534 the Old Testament was also translated into German. It was argued that people should be able to interpret the word of God in their own language. Inspired by Luther, William Tyndale began a translation of the Bible, and the New Testament was published in English in 1526. Having been translated into a vernacular language, the Bible could be printed and disseminated widely. It was now available to everyone who was literate, and they could interpret it as they wished. For the first time in history, readers were able to access and interpret the Bible in their own language, as individuals, without the intervention of clerics, and to make up their own minds about its message. As Hill (1991: 93) says

‘Men coming to the Bible with no historical sense but with the highest expectations found in it a message of direct contemporary relevance.’

The translation of the Bible into English and its wide distribution provided the opportunity for individuals to interpret the gospel in their own way. In turn, allegiance to various political groups was influenced by individual interpretations of Christian values as presented in the Bible. The corollary was that

‘...they believed, on good protestant authority, that anyone could understand God’s word if he studied it carefully enough...’

(Hill; 1991: 93)

Dissension in the non-conformist tradition manifested itself in the variety of protestant and puritan groups that emerged in the first part of the seventeenth century. Religious ideas were openly discussed, debated and commented on. Non-conformists questioned, for example, conventional and Catholic theological doctrines surrounding the Trinity, original sin and the priesthood.

The English Civil Wars were not only a manifestation of physical conflict but were also a crucible for a conflict of political and religious ideas. People were empowered by the words of the Bible that had been translated into English. With the advent of the printing press the Bible was available to a wide constituency. Ordinary people gained direct communication with God and this offered to individuals rights they did not previously realise they had. During the Putney Debates, for example, Colonel Thomas Rainsborough, one of the Levellers in attendance, maintained that natural rights came from the law of God that had been expressed in the Bible. (Robertson: 2007). Rains borough argued:

‘For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest hee; and therefore truly, Sir, I think it clear, that every Man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own Consent to put himself under that Government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that Government that he hath not had a voice to put Himself under.’

It is proposed that these ideas contributed to the composition of the well-known statement in the American Declaration of Independence, which was provided by Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers at the time of the American Revolution:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’

In 1863, during the American Civil War, President Lincoln, alluded to this sentiment in his Gettysburg Address and drew on it as the basis of his political argument in abolishing slavery.

It is interesting to note, too, that religious – and particularly, Christian – principles continue to permeate political life in the United States; the phrase, ‘God bless America’, for example, which was first used by President Richard Nixon and later popularised by President Ronald Regan, has, like a mantra, entered the political lexicon of American political language.

Thus, in summary, it can be seen that, during the English Civil Wars, radical ideas were proposed by distinctive groups in the New Model Army, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, and included a number of dissenting protestant sects and denominations, such as the Baptists and Quakers. Distinguishing political and religious strands, Hill ((1991: 14) maintains,

‘Groups like Levellers, Diggers and Fifth Monarchists offered new political solutions ... The various sects – Baptists, Quakers, Muggletonians – offered new religious solutions.’

It has been shown, too, that, in many ways, the political and religious perspectives of these groups overlapped. In order to illustrate, in further detail, the relationship between ideas emerging before, during and after the English Civil War and those current during the American Revolution, I shall now take one of these groups and I shall explore connections between the English Civil Wars and the American Revolutionary Wars with specific reference to the role and influence of the Quakers.

VI. THE QUAKERS

The Quakers were but one of a range of Christian radical groups that had emerged in the tumult of the English Civil War, promoting the view that 'all persons are equal under God', a principle upon which the United States was to be established. They were a loosely knit group of non-conformists that grew out of a Christian movement founded by George Fox. His journal attributed the name 'Quaker' to a judge in 1650 who called them Quakers 'because I bid them tremble before the Lord'. Their thoughts and ideas became an inspiration for later opposition to traditional authority in advocating a path towards greater democracy.

The influence of the Quakers can be illustrated with reference to the case of William Penn, the Quaker who founded Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania. As a leading Quaker during the reign of Charles II, Penn had been persecuted and imprisoned for his beliefs. The king took the view that the Quakers were a problem in England, so, on his release from prison, Penn was given vast tracts of land in America west of New Jersey, over which he was given authority to govern. The Quakers were encouraged to emigrate there to alleviate the perceived problems they caused in Britain. Thus was established the state of Pennsylvania.

Penn was appointed as the governor of Pennsylvania, where he was free to implement Quaker ideas in a practical way. Consequently, he established a government that would be responsible to the people and would respect minority rights. Accordingly, the emerging American colonies became a catalyst for new political ideas that could be tried out in practice. Benjamin Franklin, studying Penn's work, was greatly influenced by Penn's ideas and values.

A leading pamphleteer for the American Revolution, Thomas Paine, who himself grew up as the son of a Quaker father, arrived in Pennsylvania in 1774, and became the editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. In his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, Paine, a belligerent anti-monarchist, attacked the authority of George III, whom, significantly, he saw as the embodiment of Charles I:

'For the fate of Charles the First hath only made kings more subtle – not more just.'

(Paine; 20018: 10)

Hence, it is possible to link Paine's disdain for the monarchy and his advocacy for the rule of the people through democratic government to ideas promoted during the English Civil War. Paine promoted independence as a vehicle to achieve freedom for the American colonists. Equally, in the English Civil War, dissenting Protestant groups encouraged people to fight for egalitarian government. As Hill (1994: 97) points out:

'...Quakers, like Fifth Monarchists, helped to fill the vacuum left by the execution of Charles I.'

In Britain, the internecine conflict of the Civil Wars was eventually resolved in the settlement of 1688, which was secured by the passing of the Toleration Act. It determined to heal the political divisions that had raged during the previous sixty years. The 1688 'Glorious Revolution' sought a compromise, allowing for a political agreement that provided for a restored monarchy that maintained authority over the established Church and at the same time acknowledged the democratic traditions of the Puritans. Parliament was established as the ruling power of the country. It was to directly influence the 1689 English Declaration of Rights, which formally ended the reign of King James II.

VII. SUMMARY

Whilst acknowledging that 'such influence is difficult to prove', Hill (1992: 381) concedes that

'It is unlikely that the ideas of the seventeenth-century radicals had no influence on ... the American Revolution ...'

A purpose of this paper has been to explore some strands of evidence for considering the extent to which political and religious ideas that were prominent during the English Civil Wars potentially had an influence on the climate of opinion that surrounded the American Revolution. The Puritan leaders executed Charles I in 1649 and put an end to the monarchy, only to see it recalled in 1660 with the restoration of Charles II. I believe an enduring opposition and animosity towards the monarchy was carried across the Atlantic and inherited by later generations of Americans to come to a head again in 1776.

It would not be possible to exhaust this subject in one paper but, in examining the ideas that were discussed during the Putney debates and considering links with religious groups like the Quakers, I would hope to stimulate some discussion on the degree of significance of these ideas upon the American Revolution and would welcome a conversation. I believe that these are connections that are worth pursuing, particular in the context of future relations between the two nations.

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¹Whilst renowned as one of Britain's greatest poets, John Milton published pamphlets and propaganda promoting the cause of the Parliamentarians. After the execution of Charles I, he supported Cromwell's Commonwealth government and was appointed as a minister.

²John Bunyan (1628-1688) was an English writer who joined the Parliamentary army during the English Civil War. After the restoration of Charles II, the freedom of dissidents was curtailed. Bunyan was arrested for his non-conformist preaching and he was sent to prison for twelve years, where he began working on the book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for which he is best remembered.

³The term 'leveller' was originally a pejorative description applied to a political movement that espoused universal suffrage, popular government, religious tolerance and equality before the law.

⁴Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is considered to be one of the founders of modern political philosophy. In 1651, he produced his best-known book, *Leviathan*, in which he explored ideas related to a social contract in which he advocated that the rights of the individual be respected; equality before the law; and 'representative' government based on the consent of the people.

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