

THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN SECTARIANISM

I. The Religious and Social Setting of American Sectarianism

A. Major Shifts in Western Europe and North America

The nineteenth century left an enduring evangelical legacy that has lasted to the present day. The period also witnessed the rise of various sectarian movements. These arose partly because religious tolerance was gaining strength at the time.

B. Religion Burned Over in Western New York

The phrase “burned-over district” describes the religious character of Western New York State during the first half of the nineteenth century. Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), the father of American revivalism, explained in the 1870s that the region had seen so many revivals in the previous decades that it no longer had any more “fuel” (the unconverted) to “burn” (convert). The region was not only where Finney preached, but was also where William Miller began his predictions. The “burned-over district” was the birthplace of Spiritualism, the Shakers, the Oneida Community (c.1848), and Mormonism.

II. Joseph Smith and the Mormons

A. Origins of the Movement

At the age of ten Joseph Smith (1805-44) was brought by his parents from New England to the vicinity of Palmyra, NY. Smith began a personal spiritual search which resulted in a visionary experience in 1822. In 1830 Smith organized a church which four years later adopted the title—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The group embraced doctrines of celestial marriage, multiple marriage, and progress to Godlikeness. The authoritative standards of Mormonism are based on the Bible, the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the *Pearl of Great Price*. Smith was murdered in 1844 in Nauvoo, Illinois and the largest faction of his movement followed a new prophet, Brigham Young (1801-77), who led the group to the Utah Territory, where it flourished. The top-five largest U.S. churches are as follows:

1. The Catholic Church 68,202,492
2. Southern Baptist Convention 16,136,044
3. The United Methodist Church 7,679,850
4. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 6,157,238
5. The Church of God in Christ 5,499,875

CH506: American Church History Lecture 7

B. Basic Doctrine

- God has a physical body; he was once a man.
- Humans can become gods.
- The divinity of Christ is not unique.
- The atonement means that Christ earned for people the right to be raised from the dead.
- Salvation is through faith and works.

C. Emerging Mormon Doctrine

Some evangelical leaders are dialoging with Mormon leaders and are shying away from labeling Mormonism as a “cult.” For example, read Dr. Richard Mouw’s recent interview with CNN. Access it by following the link below:

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/09/my-take-this-evangelical-says-mormonism-isnt-a-cult/comment-page-9/>

III. Charles Taze Russell and Jehovah’s Witnesses

A. A Sketch of Russell’s Life

One of the most interesting and zealous of the nineteenth-century millennial movements was the Jehovah’s Witnesses. It was founded by Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) who made a number of failed apocalyptic predictions.

B. Teaching and Growth

Russell believed in the immediate return of Christ to redeem his people from this evil world. While awaiting Christ’s return, Christians should separate themselves from government and society. The Christology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is Arian. According to their theology, Jesus is the first and highest created being. Salvation is through faith, baptism, witnessing, and leading a moral life.

CH506: American Church History Lecture 7

IV. Reading in Noll and Further Comments

Please read chapter 8 (“Outsiders”) in Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. In this chapter, Noll discusses the Millerites, Adventists, and Mormons. He also has sections on African-American churches, Catholicism, and immigration.

American evangelicalism grew substantially in the period before the Civil War. Please refer to the following chart below.

Actual attendance on an average Sunday in 1850: 34% of the total population

Methodists	1,247,000
Baptists	961,000
Presbyterians	347,000
Congregationalists	211,000
Lutheran	200,000
Episcopal	89,000
Catholic	1,606,000

Roman Catholicism also grew in the nineteenth century, particularly in the latter portion due to immigration. The Americanization of the Catholic Church would help to change the way the Vatican viewed the modern world.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH AND THE IMPACT OF THE CIVIL WAR

I. The Impact of Abolition and the Civil War upon the Churches

A. Introductory Comments (Abolition in England)

Slavery was ultimately defeated in England through the efforts of William Wilberforce (1759-1833). The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was passed just days before his death. Other nations would soon follow England's lead.

B. Slavery and the Drive for Abolition in America

1. Origins to 1830

In the United States, the initial strength for Abolitionism was in the South. Quakers played a major role in opposing slavery. The Second Great Awakening also sparked an interest in social concerns, although there were limits to the kinds of reform that evangelicals undertook.

2. The North: 1830-1840

Evangelicals were at the forefront of the Anti-slavery movement. William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) edited the *Liberator* magazine and demanded an end to slavery. Arthur (1786-1865) and Lewis (1788-1873) Tappan, who were friends of Garrison and supporters of the ministry of Charles G. Finney, dedicated their tremendous resources to the cause of Abolition. One of the societies formed by the Tappan brothers was the American Anti-Slavery Society, which produced anti-slavery tracts and pamphlets. The Tappan brothers convinced Lyman Beecher to serve as president of Lane Seminary, which became a stronghold of abolitionism. Lyman Beecher was the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Another stronghold of abolitionism was Oberlin College, which became the home of Charles Finney and Asa Mahan, Oberlin's first two presidents.

CH506: American Church History Lecture 7

C. Slavery or Abolitionism: Source of Schism in the American Church

The American Church was certainly not united on the subject of slavery and abolition. Some were unsure whether or not abolition was a good thing. Others spoke out against slavery but were not actively involved in abolitionist efforts. Still others were fully committed to the cause. The Tappan brothers, for example, repeatedly had their homes and stores vandalized. Leading abolitionists such as Theodore Weld (1803-1895) were attacked. The Presbyterian pastor Elijah Lovejoy (1802-1837) was shot to death. The issue of slavery caused splits among Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. The Roman Catholic Church remained unified for it was not an American church after all.

D. Preparing the Way for Political Disunion

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter. Over 600,000 people died in the American Civil War.

II. Emancipation and the Black Church

A. The Introduction of Christianity to the Slaves

1. Religion among the African Slaves

Christianity in Africa began in Egypt during the middle of the first century or the beginning of the second century. By the end of the second century, it had spread to Carthage. In fact, in the third century the most influential Christian leaders emerged from North Africa.¹ It was Tertullian (c.160-c.220), for example, who coined the term “Trinity.” The great defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy at the Council of Nicea was the African Athanasius who argued against Arius (d.336), another African. One of the most dominant theologians of the early church was Saint Augustine (354-430), who became bishop of Hippo in North Africa (395).

Today, about 48 percent of the African population is Christian, 41 percent is Moslem, and 11 percent adheres to some other belief (or no belief). Among the slaves arriving in America, a small but significant proportion was Muslim. Some were Christian. However, most of the slaves who arrived in America on the slave ships adhered to native African religions.

¹ See Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (IVP, 2008).

CH506: American Church History Lecture 7

2. Missionary Work

There was some early ministry among the slaves in America; however, slaves were largely presented with a degraded form of Christianity interpreted through the lens of oppression and white supremacy.

3. The First and Second Great Awakenings

During the First and Second Great Awakenings, large numbers of African Americans converted to Protestant Christianity. By the time of the Civil War, a conservative estimate is that between 12.5 and 17 percent of the slave population of roughly 4 million were affiliated with one denomination or another.

B. The Black Church: Its Separation and Growth

The Civil War produced racially segregated churches and entirely new denominations. Today a majority of black church membership is concentrated in eight Protestant denominations:

1. The Church of God in Christ 5,499,875
2. National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. 5,197,512
3. National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. 3,500,000
4. African Methodist Episcopal Church 2,500,000
5. Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Inc. 1,800,000
6. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church 1,400,000
7. Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. 1,010,000
8. Christian Methodist Episcopal Church ~1,000,000

Total membership in the above churches: 21,907,387
Total U.S. African-American population: 43,000,000

C. The Legacy of Christianity among African Americans

We will have a short guest lecture on Wednesday.

D. Appendix: "Africanisms"

These are phenomena found in the life and culture of slaves that found their way into the Christian condition (music, dance, narratives, etc.)

CH506: American Church History Lecture 7

MAJOR NINETEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHICAL, SCIENTIFIC, AND THEOLOGICAL, DEVELOPMENTS OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

I. Kant, Hegel, and Marx

Kant and Hegel gave us philosophical idealism. Marx held that the socioeconomic structures of a given society condition its basic values, laws, customs, and beliefs.

II. Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Darwin is best known for his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* first published in 1859. In 1871 he published another major work on *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Social Darwinism influenced all kinds of areas from literature to economics.

III. The Theological Situation in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The period under consideration was also the time of a number of important German theologians. Two notable examples are Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855).

IV. The Tension between Rationality and Renewal

Science, philosophy, and theology were all playing a part in challenging long-held assumptions and beliefs. Biblical interpretation was increasingly up for grabs. There was also an increasing stress on morality and ethics. Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) helped to pave the way for the Social Gospel. Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) demonstrated that an evolutionary hypothesis could also be applied to the development of the Bible.

Over against the intellectual challenges were various renewal and revival movements. The nineteenth century saw the resurgence of Pietism and the rise of holiness movements (e.g., Phoebe Palmer, 1807-74 and the “Keswick Movement”). The early twentieth century would see the emergence of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism.