

The Consequences of Ideas

Lesson 14: Britain's Loss of Virtue

1984, Ronald Reagan stated: "America needs God more than God needs America. If we ever forget that we are One Nation Under God, then we will be a Nation gone under."

I. Virtue: The Role of Religion in Government

- a. In 1796 George Washington wrote "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity," "Religion and morality are indispensable supports."
- b. In a letter, John Adams tells Thomas Jefferson that "Without Religion this World would be Something not fit to be mentioned in polite Company, I mean Hell."
- c. In Colonial days Biblical Christianity championed the idea of individual liberty, it promoted community, but it also provided the foundation for and enforcement of morality. Morality was seen as an essential virtue of society.
- d. The 18th century - called the age of reason - was obsessed with the question of virtue:
 1. The virtue of ancient Greece and Rome and what happened to it;
 2. The virtue of enlightened, rational, republic-loving men - and how best to institutionalize it;
 3. The virtue of the Christian religion - and how to be faithful to it.
- e. In the conventional usage of the day, virtue meant the voluntary observance of the recognized standards of right conduct, (industriousness, frugality, morality, the rule of law and religion).
- f. It was generally recognized by Christians, Deists and Rationalists alike that this "virtue" was obtained when people outwardly submitted to living their lives according to Biblical principles.
- g. Theologically, this "virtue" is related to the concept of common grace in which people who live such lives are blessed and benefitted without regard to their personal relationship to Christ. *Mat 5:45 He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*
- h. The colonists were preoccupied in the 18th century with the intimate connections between virtue and government, virtue and social cohesion, virtue and the economic order, virtue and the ebb and flow of history.
- i. In America, there was a tendency in the 18th century to see England as a nation rapidly losing its virtue, and to see, conversely, the New World as the rising hope; where virtue would triumph.

II. The American Ideal

- a. In the face of Britain's growing vice as well as her efforts to stem the tide of American independence, a revolution, it was thought, would serve the purpose of moral regeneration for Americans.
- b. The idea was that the resulting republic would rule not by fear or force, but by the conscientious scruple and voluntary obedience of all the people.
- c. A popular government, it was reasoned, is a government of the people and cannot exist without virtue, without that self-restraint, that self-sacrifice, that internal principle of obedience among its citizens.
- d. It was thought that the ruler of a republic is to be obeyed "more by the virtue of the people, than by the terror of his power."
- e. Many believed that though a revolution might bring deprivation and hardship, it would also bring a new wholesomeness and vitality to American life.
- f. Calamity, John Adams wrote, "will have this good effect, at least: it will inspire us with many virtues, which we have not, and correct many errors, follies, and vices, which threaten to disturb, dishonor, and destroy us."
- g. "Religion and republicanism," would work hand in hand to create frugality, honesty, self-denial and benevolence among the people" to create, in short, what Samuel Adams called "a Christian Sparta."

III. Conditions in Britain

- a. John Adams expressed the opinion that England had lost her virtue, and with that her right to rule, while America in contrast could seize the moment to repent, reform and revolt - creating a new and enduring Republic.
- b. Adams opined that luxury, effeminacy, and venality are so pervasive in England, that both electors and elected are become one mass of corruption.
- c. He observed that when the nation is oppressed to death with debts and taxes, owing to their own extravagance and want of wisdom, that such a condition would render the people in absolute subjection to parliament.
- d. Corruption was so deeply imbedded in England as to be incurable. England needed revenue from America, not because of legitimate expenses incurred in the war with France, but because of waste and political depravity.
- e. Adams said that "corruption, like a cancer...eats faster and faster every hour. The revenue creates pensioners, and the pensioners urge for more revenue".
- f. He said, "The people grow less steady, spirited, and virtuous, the seekers more numerous and more corrupt, and every day increases the circles of their dependents and expectants, until virtue, integrity, public spirit, simplicity, and frugality become the objects of ridicule and scorn, and vanity, luxury, foppery, selfishness, meanness, and downright venality swallowing up the whole society".

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IV. The British View

- a. Within Great Britain many saw their own land as falling into vice and in danger of collapse. Great Britain was falling away from **God**, away from virtue.
- b. Many Christians believed that God, therefore, would punish - not so much through a special visitation of wrath, but through the **natural** operation of divine law.
- c. English philosophers saw human nature as delicately posed between virtue and vice and envisioned the **role** of government so constructed, so ordered, as to guard against man's vice and encourage his virtue.
- d. The two great temptations in human society are power and luxury. For the first, one must set up constitutional safeguards, which would keep any one man or any group of men from exercising unregulated, **unlimited power**.
- e. The radical Whigs, wrote in **1721**: *Considering what sort of a Creature Man is, it is scarce possible to put him under too many restraints, when he is possessed of great Power: He may possibly use it well; but they act most prudently, who, supposing that he would use it ill, inclose him within certain Bounds, and make it terrible to him to exceed them. Men that are above all Fear, soon grow above all Shame...Power, without Control, appertains to God alone; and no Man ought to be trusted with what no Man is equal to.*
- f. With respect to the **corrupting** force of luxury, the example of Rome's tragic fall should be lesson enough to all of Great Britain. In a written article, after describing the glory that was Rome, the authors ask: *But what did all this Profusion and Magnificence produce? Pleasure succeeded in the room of Temperance, Idleness took the place of the love of Business, and private Regards extinguished that Love of Liberty, that Zeal and Warmth, which their Ancestors had shown for the Interest of the Publick; Luxury and Pride became fashionable; all Ranks and orders of Men tried to outvie one another in Expencc and Pomp;...and, having before sold everything else, at last sold their Country...Thus ended the greatest, the noblest State that ever adorned the worldly Theatre, that ever the Sun saw...and every other Nation must run the same Fortune, expect the same fatal Catastrophe, who suffer themselves to be debauched with the same Vices, and are actuated by the same Principles and Passions.*¹⁸
- g. Such men sought to warn England of woes to come, sought to reform the sins of the fathers so that their children need not suffer, so that the Empire need not **wane**.
- h. Their ideas called for a balance of powers, a rule of law, the consent of the governed, freedom of thought and of religion, they warned against the vices that **first** destroy men, then civilization.

V. Berkeley

- a. Another writer, George **Berkeley** philosopher and churchman, was calling for England's reform even as he was envisioning America's rise.
- b. He returned from a four-year tour of the European continent to find an England plunged into **debt**, torn by stock swindles and dishonesty in high places, and most of all oblivious to its own decline in religion and morals.
- c. He believed that if Britain **turned** from "selfishness, luxury seeking, money grubbing, and dishonest manipulation, to attain integrity once more, "and put religion and virtue in countenance, restore a sense of public spirit, and convince men it is a dangerous folly to pursue private aims in opposition to the good of their country":
- d. It is a degenerate age, he wrote, and so steeped in sin were most Englishmen that Berkeley concluded that **catastrophe** was certain. "Vice and villany have by degrees grown reputable among us; our infidels have passed for fine gentlemen, and our venal traitors for men of sense, who knew the world."
- e. The old English modesty is quite worn off, and instead of blushing for our crimes we are ashamed only of **piety** and virtue. He feared the final period of Britain was near.
- f. The point is that Britons as early as the 1720's already despaired of their own nation's capacity to **escape ruin** or to recover virtue. Hope lay across the seas where luxury and vice had not yet worked their evil ways.
- g. This anxiety about **religion** and virtue helped prepare Englishmen no less than Americans for that revolution which, as Adams wrote Jefferson, occurred first in the minds of the people.
- h. For it was in that revolution of heart and mind, years **before** shots were fired in Lexington or Concord or Bunker Hill, that religion and the pursuit of virtue played their powerful, multifaceted roles.

VI. Application

- a. While individual ideas of what "virtue of a people" signified during the 18th Century, it was unanimously held that virtue could only be manifest by a people who were obedient to the principles of the Bible.
- b. Most, whether Deists or Christians acknowledged that departing from God and His principles would bring about catastrophe to any nation. What parallels do you see between 18th Century Britain and the United States today?
- c. Various writers and commentators have identified causal factors which led to the decline of Rome, Britain, and now the United States. Do you personally agree or disagree with their assessment?
- d. What do you think ought to be the role of the Christian in averting a catastrophic decline in the United States today?
- e. What are you personally doing in response to the evidence that the United States is heading for a catastrophic decline?