

Ch. 3: RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE (& IDEOLOGY)

Political ideology: a coherent and consistent set of beliefs about the proper *ends* of government (order vs. liberty; equality vs. liberty)

Political culture: a coherent and consistent set of beliefs about the proper *means* that government should use to attain its ends (limited vs. unlimited power)

- I. The Puritan imprint on colonial thought
 - A. General Protestant Reformation influences
 1. Individual
 - a. Voluntary association with denomination
 - b. Interpretation of Scriptures
 2. Congregational
 - a. Authority over clergy
 - b. Autonomy from higher religious authority
 3. Denominational pluralism
 - B. Specific Puritan (Old Testament) theological influences
 1. Sacred covenant
 2. Original sin
 3. Chosen people

- II. Covenant theology and the right to revolt
 - A. Basic tenants of American political philosophy
 1. Social contract
 - a. Mayflower and Plymouth Compacts
 - b. Declaration of Independence (explicit religious references)
 - c. Constitution (implicit influence of covenant theology)
 2. Limited government
 - a. *A priori* assumptions about human nature and politics:
 - (1) Plato: "untainted" philosopher kings should rule
 - (2) Contemporary Americans: "untainted" non-politicians should rule
 - (3) Madison (and the Puritans)
 - (a) No one is untainted -- all humans are self-interested and short-sighted
 - (b) Therefore, we must use human shortcomings to achieve the common good: "*But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections of human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.*"
 - b. Methods:
 - (1) *Internal controls*: disperse government's powers (and constituencies)
 - (a) Dividing into *levels* of government (that represent different constituencies)
 - (b) Separating into *branches* of government (that represent different constituencies)
 - (c) Overlapping the powers (concurrent or shared) given to *both*
 - (2) *External controls*:
 - (a) Popular sovereignty: free, fair, frequent and competitive elections
 - (b) Social pluralism:
 - i) The proliferation of *cross-cutting group divisions*
 - ii) That produce *overlapping group memberships*
 - iii) That produce *differing political coalitions across different issue divisions*
 - iv) That produce *increased willingness to bargain and compromise*
 - c. Consequences for the process of public policy making
 - (1) Delay/gridlock
 - (2) Bargaining/compromise
 - (3) Difficulty in assigning praise or blame

- III. Puritanism and democracy: a qualification
 - A. Anti-democratic (authoritarian or totalitarian) elements of Puritanism
 - 1. Intolerance of dissent from “official” religion
 - 2. Mandatory church attendance
 - B. Democratic elements
 - 1. Protestant creed: egalitarian vision of religion -- individual & congregational autonomy
 - 2. Institutional interest: religious pluralism -- escape from Anglican dominance
 - 3. Social practices: training in self-government
- IV. “Total depravity” and institutional restraint
 - A. Influence on founding fathers of Puritan assumption of human sinfulness
 - 1. Distrust of both the people and their rulers
 - 2. Decision to fragment (divide powers across branches, separate powers across levels, and overlap many of both types) rather than concentrate political authority
 - 3. Belief that the role of government was not to make people good
 - B. Paradox: human shortcomings used to safeguard against the abuse of government power
 - C. Ratification controversy
 - 1. Not over human shortcomings
 - 2. But “internal & external controls on government”
 - D. Modern cynicism and distrust of government based on Puritan assumptions
- V. “One nation under God:” *civil religion*
 - A. Definition: attempting to understand a nation’s historical experience and national purpose and destiny in religious terms and to approach political issues in moral terms
 - B. Contrasted to *state religion*
 - C. Elements
 - 1. Creed
 - 2. Symbols
 - 3. Rituals
 - D. Functions/themes
 - 1. *Priestly* function: providing a higher purpose to legitimate or sanctify government
 - a. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: urging the nation to be “... dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”
 - b. Reagan’s frequent reference to America as “a shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere”
 - 2. *Prophetic* function: providing a standard or moral code to judge government against and to evaluate political “sins” (e.g., Jefferson & Lincoln’s condemnation of slavery and M.L. King, Jr.’s condemnation of racial discrimination)
- VI. Civil religion as a double-edged sword
 - A. Promotes positive civic *virtues*
 - 1. Defining a higher purpose
 - 2. Pointing out shortcomings
 - B. But also encourages negative political *perversions*
 - 1. Replacing healthy skepticism with either idolatry or total condemnation
 - 2. Rejecting utilitarian compromise for the moral absolutism and dogmatism of both the ultra-liberal left (“blame America first”) or the ultra-conservative right (“my country, right or wrong”)
- VII. One of many influences
 - A. Intellectual forces of the Age of Enlightenment
 - 1. Rationalism
 - 2. Social progress
 - B. Economic forces
 - 1. Economic grievances led to the American Revolution
 - 2. Concerns for protection of contract and property rights led to the Constitutional Convention
 - 3. Economic pressures contributed to first westward expansion and international intervention
 - 4. More recent globalization of the economy has produced immense changes