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The History of the Decline of Christianity in New England

In New England, Christianity had undergone some major changes over time. Specifically, this paper will focus on the time period from colonial America to the antebellum time period to the reconstruction after the Civil War. Oftentimes in history, Christianity has been watered down or made slightly less intense to be more palatable and to appeal to a wider audience in order to maintain control over many people in a certain community. The first example of this occurrence would be the Halfway Covenant. The Halfway Covenant, also known as extended baptism, is essentially the first major adaptation of Christianity with the purpose of maintaining membership and control. This instance is important because it sort of sets a precedent for churches to change in order to fit the needs of their target audiences. Next, there was the first Great Awakening, which was more of a movement than an implemented policy like the Halfway Covenant. The first Great Awakening succeeded in pushing forward conversion in a way it had not been portrayed before. Conversion was now seen as respectable and even inspiring, which again shows the adaptability of religion when loss of power is on the line. The next impactful historical event was the massive influx of Irish immigrants into the United States. With most Irish immigrants being Roman Catholic and some being Presbytarian, they brought very different perspectives of religion as well as ways of life. The Irish Presbytarians also had strategies of expanding membership through conversion, which was often targeted at their Irish Catholilc counterparts. The fourth important factor in the transformation of Christianity in New England is

the second Great Awakening. Abolitionism and the issue of slavery was incredibly central to the second Great Awakening. Presbytarian Evangelicals during the second Great Awakening were very outspoken about their objection to slavery. Some Evangelicals may have even helped enslaved people escape to freedom as they spread their ideas for reform across the country. Finally, the period of reconstruction also changed religion. Throughout American history, Christianity has often changed and adapted in order to stay in control of the people of the country.

COLONIAL CHRISTIANITY

Puritans and The Halfway Covenant of 1662

The Puritans came to the colonies in order to establish Christianity in the way that they believed it should be followed. They did not agree with the newer rules and the reform of the Church of England, and they also left because they faced some religious persecution. The hardship that they had faced did not make them tolerant, but more stubborn in their conviction for their kind of Christianity. This made for very strict rules and traditions, as well as an incredibly blurry line between Church and town, as communities at the time were completely encompassed and controlled by the Church (Gerbner 282). For example, membership to the Puritan Church was a strict and complicated ordeal. Only those who could prove to those around them that they were among God's elect, so-called "visible saints", were allowed membership (281). Another strict tradition within the Church was baptism. Puritans subscribed to the Calvanist definition of baptism as a "covenant seal", meaning that they believed once a baby was baptised they were tied to the church forever (284). It was not only a personal commitment to faith it was a solemn vow taken from birth dedicating oneself to God, the Church, and therefore everyone in the community.

However, the enforcement of such strict rules caused some decline in Church membership. Many immigrants and children of those who were not full members were unable to join the Church and in many cases were completely uninterested in the harsh traditions. Seeing as a large part of Puritan culture was an interconnected community led and controlled by the Church, this was a large problem which eventually caused the creation of the Halfway Covenant (Gerbner 282). Although they did not want to alter their traditions, it was apparent that they would have to if they wanted to maintain control over the people. At first called "extended baptism", the Halfway Covenant allowed for the baptism of children whose parents were not full members of the Church, something which was previously unheard of in Puritanism. The implementation of extended baptism caused a lot of anger within the Puritan faction because some viewed the decision as an unacceptable softening of the religious fervor of the community (287).

The enactment of the Halfway Covenant within the Puritan Church represented the first real shift of Christianity in America, specifically New England. Although it did increase Church membership, especially among women and children, the decision may be looked at as the beginning of religious decline in the region (Gerbner 289). Allowing infant baptism, and therefore bringing some impure souls into the Church, was a contradiction of the original Puritan morals. While many Puritans were offended by the decision, others argued that baptism and religion must be brought to as many people as possible, by any means necessary (290). The Halfway Covenant of 1662 shows how the Church was willing to change, soften, and become more palatable to a wider audience in order to maintain control over the people of their community.

The First Great Awakening

From 1740 to 1742 a large religious upheaval called the First Great Awakening took place in present day New England. At this time in the colonies, there were many social and economic issues going on that played into the Awakening. The shortage of specie, trade growth and the fight for colonial representation in British government are all relevant examples of such issues (Gaustad 567). Some have claimed that the Awakening only had to do with certain social classes or geographical areas, but this is not the case. Evidence shows that the religious shift of the Awakening was felt by rich and poor in both rural and more urban areas. This was another movement with the expansion of Christianity in New England in mind, so the targets were anyone and everyone, not just members of a certain socioeconomic class. Once again colonial New England was going through a religious revival and expansion.

During the first Great Awakening, there was a large emphasis placed on conversion. After the Halfway Covenant was established, converted members of the Church were finally able to be seen as true members and were respected within the larger community. Intense conversion stories about experiencing "divine glory" and being overtaken by the "righteousness of Christ" swept through the Puritan community as a whole in New England (Brauer 231). Conversion served not only as a tool to gain more members for the Church, but also as a method to maintain power and control, similarly to baptism (236). Over the previous years the Puritan community had not changed in size, neither shrinking nor growing even though the larger population of the colonies was expanding quickly. The implementation of conversion served as a solution for the problem of stagnant growth of the Puritan church within a rapidly growing wider population. Congregational clergyman Soloman Stoddard made this clear with his announcement of his preference for a growing congregation rather than a pure one (237).

But the first Great Awakening was about much more than just conversions. There was controversy, division of the Church, and anger. As with any form of religious revival, the Protestant Old Lights of New England were completely opposed to the first Great Awakening (Gaustad 573). They often discouraged the massive waves of conversion, and yearned for what they believed to be true Calvanist religious purity. Many churches faced division based on disagreements between New and Old Lights, and some who remained neutral (576). While the effects may have been somewhat nonuniform based on the positions of the leading clergymen of each church, it is certain that the first Great Awakening had a profound impact on Christianity in modern day New England. Yet again, religion was made more palatable for the general audience in order to maintain the power of the Church over the people.

ANTEBELLUM CHRISTIANITY

Irish Immigration

The massive waves of Irish immigration to the United States beginning in the early 1800s also had a large impact on the state of religion in New England. Many Irish immigrated to the United States due to the harsh conditions in Ireland as well as mistreatment and abuse from the British. In a British report of the *Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, the Irish poor are described quite unpleasantly. The report claimed that the Irish were guilty of "debasing the moral character" of people of other nationalities, such as Scots and English (University of Southampton *Condition* 3). The Irish were also willing to work for much lower rates, often cementing them into "coarse" professions such as brick-laying, which were hardly respected in the community (4). The report also observed that many Irish immigrants were searching for opportunity as there was not as much to be found in Ireland. This optimistic ambition along with their unpleasant

treatment in England as uncivilised and undesirable, led to the large-scale advancement of Irish immigration into the United States.

Most Irish were Roman Catholics, famously clashing with the Protestants for many reasons over the course of history. In the report of the *Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, many values of the Irish seem to clash with those specifically upheld by other sects, particularly the Puritans of New England. For example, some poorer Irish parents were reported to teach their children to steal, and many lower class women would engage in prostitution (University of Southampton *Condition* 23). While these decisions are clearly a product of the specific circumstances of these people, it still highlights and interesting differences between the cultures based on doing what needs to be done to survive. Although it is true that this information comes from a biased source, seeing as the British were not big fans of the Irish, it still shows how the Protestant British had no tolerance for any kind of "sinful" behavior, even if the situation was dire. This is also made apparent by the fact that Irish Catholics were often the second largest religious group represented in British prisons, despite being a religious minority(University of Southampton *Abstract* 2). Along with the other minority religious groups in the prison, such as Jewish or Presbytarian prisoners, there was often no religious consult or priest made available to them (University of Southampton *Abstract* 5).

However, not all Irish were Catholics, there was also a significant number of the combined Scots-Irish demographic that belonged to Presbyterianism, a sect of Protestantism. In fact, interestingly enough, Irish Presbyterians often were anti-Catholic, believing that they had to free Catholics from the "spiritual slavery" of their church (Holmes 381). Presbyterianism is often closely linked with Evangelicalism, meaning that they too place a large emphasis on missionary work and conversion. They believed in "conversion of the world", so that Christ could reign

(382). While perhaps a bit more zealously worded than Soloman Stoddard's growth over purity mindset, the message remained the same: religious expansion is the end goal. American as well as Scots-Irish Presbytarians began to place a lot of weight on Irish Catholic conversion towards the middle of the 1800s, claiming that it was in the best interest of the Christian community as a whole to wipe out the Church (284). Once again, religion was shifting in the interest of expanded reach and dominance as Presbytarians changed their focus to providing famine aid, wanting to use this opportunity to lightly suggest to the Irish that perhaps their current plight was a direct result of their unfortunate choice to follow Catholicism.

The Second Great Awakening and the Issue of Abolition

Although their opinion of the Irish Catholics was less than tolerant, many Presbytarians actually held some more progressive views for the time period. For example, many of them were morally and spiritually opposed to the institution of slavery. However, the entire institution was not on the same page and the issue of slavery caused much tension within the Presbytarian community. In 1846, slaveholders were banned from obtaining membership to the Evangelical Alliance, and this decision created a dramatic split of the organization which almost caused its destruction (Holmes 386). Most ministers tended to share the same opinion on slavery, with the Irish General Assembly in 1843 passing a resolution that stated that slavery was, "ruinous temporal and eternal interests of multitudes of the human race" (386). The Assembly resolved to use their influence over American Presbytarians to take steps towards ending slavery beacuse it was clear that there was not enough religious direction in the United States towards that end.

Moreover, the second Great Awakening was like a nation-wide demonstration of American Evangelicalism at work. Leaders of the Awakening pushed the idea that Jesus had died for the sins of all mankind, including Indigenous Americans and Enslaved Black people

(Pendleton 89). This kind of moral abolition was somewhat unusual, even in the North, seeing as the majority of people held incredibly racist beliefs, even if they were against slavery. In some instances, the Evangelicals even followed through on all their talk about abolition. For example, as the shockwaves of the second Great Awakening traveled through the Western United States, there was also a noticeable increase in the number of manumissions, or instances of people escaping from slavery (90). Also, as promised, there was major influence from the British Evangelicals onto the Americans on the topic of slavery. Many of the American abolitionist ideals came from notable British Evangelical reformers.

The connection between religion and abolition, especially in the North and West, is made clear in religious writings and speeches of the time. In a religious literature and anti-slavery pamphlet called *The Western Casket*, as well as in the speeches by many Evangelicals, there is often reference to "the human race" rather than a specific type of people (Hodgman 260). This term is often used with the connotation of referring to not only white people but people of color as well. It seems that the more inclusive language is designed to serve the goal of mass conversion as most things often are when it comes to Christianity. Some people may say that perhaps it was religious enlightenment that led these people to their abolitionist ways, but unfortunately that is most likely not the case. Of course, what someone truly has in their head or their heart can never be known, but it seems that given their history, the Evangelicals probably did not have tolerance in mind. We see this with the Presbyterian Evangelicals and their treatment of the Irish Catholics. Under the guise of caring and love, they provided for the Catholics in their time of need, sending aid and preaching to them. But in reality, what they wanted was conformity to their own standards, and they wanted total control.

POST CIVIL WAR CHRISTIANITY

Reconstruction

After the Civil War ended, Presbytarians were prepared to reunite their previously torn church. As the United States had been recently purged of slavery, many believed they could reconcile and build "Christ's kingdom" anew (Holmes 390). With a renewal and strengthening of the Presbytarian Evangelical Churches of both America and Britain, people's sights were once again set on reform and conversion. Many Presbyterians had mounting concerns about the Roman Catholic Church, due to post-famine Catholic immigration as well as the strengthening symbolic power of the Pope (Holmes 393). Despite these concerns, Protestantism in the United States was still very much dominant. In fact, American Catholicism had conformed to fit into Protestantism in many cases, and it was also very prevalent in public education and in the culture in general, similarly to today (394).

Also, some White Northern Presbyterians helped to create churches and schools for liberated black people, including Samantha J. Neil (Noll 8). Neil, and several White Southerners who joined her cause, represented a commitment to the belief of all people as equal. Also, it should be mentioned that in the process of educating and assisting these formerly enslaved people, Neil also chose to introduce and convert them to her religion. Again taking people at a vulnerable moment and choosing to use that to the benefit of the power of their church. After slavery was abolished in the United States, the bible recieved a lot of criticism for having a clear enough message (Noll 9). Many Presbytarians responded that taking "higher criticism" was more important than searching for specific answers in scripture.

The issue of taking higher criticism rather than searching in scripture within religion may be applied to the current day as well. Specifically on the issue of homophobia within the Christian community. Many people search for justification for their hatred and bigotry within the

bible, similarly to how people would try to justify slavery with the bible. However in both instances, one does not need to be a theologist or even religious to see that as we are all members of the "human race", as our Presbytarian friends would say, we should be treated as such. The issue of homophobia also connects to the issue of pushing one's religion onto others. In many circumstances, queer people can be put into dangerous situtaions because someone has beliefs that do not make room for their identity. On the other hand, there are many Christian churches, especially in more liberal places such as Portland, that are supportive of queer people. Perhaps this is an example of the continued evolution and adaptation of churches to expand their audiences and maintain control and pull within their communities.

All in all, in order to maintain their power and control over the general community, Christianity in America, and specifically New England, has changed and shifted to appeal to a wider group of people. From the time of the Puritans to the time of reconstruction, Christianity has changed dramatically. Yet, even if we look at the modern day we can still see Christianity everywhere, but it is incredibly different from how it started out. Now it is commercialised and even somewhat progressive, both of which would probably make a Puritan die of shock. But this ability to shamelessly shift shape is what has kept Christianity so prevalent in our culture for so long. There are so many people who would never call themselves Christian or even religious, but they still celebrate all of these at least vaguely Christian holidays. It is so interesting how this religion has been able to survive for so long by constantly reinventing itself. The topic of American Chrisitanity is very broad and complicated. In the future, if researching this topic further, it would be beneficial to focus on a specific sect or group of a religion, because looking at Christianity as a whole was very broad, and it might be better to have some more specific tailored research. Also, the second Great Awakening could have had a bit more development in

this paper. It would have been better to find more of a general overview type of source to achieve

solid understanding. Finally there were some major gaps in the timeframe of the research as it

was more focused on a few major events. However, it would have been good to include some

context of what was happening in the country as a whole in between these events. Perhaps this

would have made the transitions less abrupt and a bit easier to follow for the reader.

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