

The Lutheran Church In the American Revolution

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Apr. 14, 1981

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness..." These words of the Declaration of Independence centered in on the one fundamental issue of the American Revolution. Up until 1763, the colonists didn't really make any serious opposition to the extension of English law in the colonies. But soon thereafter, the colonists began to display a love of religious and political liberty and independence. What was happening was, they were fast becoming impatient of too strict an exercise of royal prerogative and the claims of Parliament. Actually, the colonies did belong to the king, but the colonists were determined to uphold their rights. It's not too difficult to see that war was inevitable. By this time, the Lutheran Church was established in America, thanks to the efforts of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg^{and others}. There were Lutheran Churches throughout many of the colonies. What effect did the American Revolution have on the Lutheran Church, and what part did Lutherans play in the war? To these questions I devote this paper.

As I pointed out in the beginning, one of the primary thoughts of the colonists was freedom. The first religious opposition was caused when the Mother country wanted to have an Anglican bishop established in America. Colonists were already intolerant of British domination and many felt that by appointing an Anglican bishop, would involve British supremacy in ecclesiastical affairs. Contrary to popular belief

the American Revolution was not only a political, but also a religious revolution. Churches were active in both, arousing and forming public opinion, and stirring the people to united action. The Lutheran Churches were, at first somewhat reluctant to join the cause, nevertheless, they almost unanimously supported the cause of the Colonists. There were, of course, a number of reasons why, at first, support was slow in forming. A large number had come from a war-torn Europe. They came for the express purpose of peace, so it naturally follows that their first thoughts were for a peaceful settlement. There was the idea of moving to the frontier, with the thought of, "let alone and be left alone." Lutherans were law-abiding people and weren't subject to revolt or revolution. They were willing to obey the powers that be. Even to this day there is mixed opinion among Lutherans, about the relationship of the Revolutionary war, and Romans 13. However, as colonies declared themselves independent, Lutherans became some of the most determined supporters of the cause of liberty.

Without a doubt, the most prominent Lutheran minister who became involved was Peter Muhlenberg, the son of Henry Muhlenberg. Rev. Peter Muhlenberg was said to be a close friend of George Washington and Patrick Henry, to name a few. Later we will see that he served along side of General Henry Lee. In December of 1775, Muhlenberg was appointed colonel of the Eight Virginia Regiment. He preached his farewell sermon in January of the next year. In that sermon he stated, "In the language of Holy Writ, there is a time for all things.

There is a time to preach and a time to fight; and now is the time to fight." After the benediction, he was said to have thrown off his preaching robe, and underneath he wore the uniform of a continental officer. He took about 300 of his parishioners with him. Colonel Muhlenberg trained his troops in southeast Virginia. It wasn't long, when he got his first orders, those being to assist General Lee at Charleston. General Muhlenberg was more than adequate when it came to the responsibilities of leadership. General Lee remarked, "Muhlenberg's regiment was not only the most complete in numbers, but the best armed, clothed and equipped for immediate service. His soldiers were alert, zealous, and spirited." After Lee and Muhlenberg's joint victory at Charleston, Muhlenberg was ordered to take his troops to Georgia and Florida. It was here that they received news of the Declaration of Independence. Later they were again ordered up to Virginia. On Feb. 21, 1777, Colonel Muhlenberg was elevated to the rank of Brigadier General. After the war he was called into service of his native state. He never again returned to the active ministry, but was a member of Zion Lutheran congregation of Philadelphia. A statue of General Muhlenberg stands outside City Hall, in Philadelphia. Muhlenberg was consider by many as, "A minister of fiery determination in upholding the truth, a warrior of unvarying courage and prompt decision, and a statesman of sterling integrity."²

Peter's brother, Frederick Muhlenberg, also left the pulpit and took an active part in the affairs of the state

and union. Although his wasn't so much out of choice, rather he was forced to leave when the British took New York. Yet he went about his new duties with the same intensity that his brother showed.

Another prominent Lutheran leader was John Hanson, a representative of the Swedish Lutherans in colonial America. Military and leadership prowess was something that wasn't foreign to this family. John's grandfather was a distinguished military leader under Gustavus Adolphus during the 30 years war. His Father served for several terms as a member of the General Assembly of Maryland. Because the family was rather wealthy, John was an influential person, especially in politics. He gained fame as a statesman and came out strongly in opposition to British dominion. He came out against the Stamp Act. Later he denounced slave trade, he urged the people not to use British goods, and he refused to trade with any colony that refused to join his association. Minute men were organized to enforce this particular resolution. He came into the Revolutionary war scene when, after the events at Lexington-Concord, he organized two companies of riflemen and marched to Cambridge, Mass. to join Washington's army on Aug. 9, 1775. Like Peter Muhlenberg, John Hanson wielded a large influence on his family. His brother, Samuel, gave Washington eight hundred pounds sterling with which to buy shoes for his soldiers at Valley Forge. His oldest son, Alexander, served for some time as private secretary to George Washington in the field. Another son, Samuel, served

as a field surgeon. A third son, Peter, was made first lieutenant by the Continental Congress, he died later as a British prisoner of war.

There were many others who were remembered for their deeds in the revolution. Abram Markoe, a prominent member of the Lutheran Church of Denmark, whose family moved to Philadelphia, organized the Philadelphia Troop of Light Horse, the First City Troop, in anticipation of the conflict. This happens to be the oldest military organization in America. John Treutlen, a layman from the Salzburgers of Georgia, is known for his victory at the Fort of Frederica. There he successfully thwarted the British plan to subjugate Georgia and South Carolina, and make these areas the base of operations against the other colonies. Doctor Bodo Otto, a staunch Lutheran, served as senior surgeon in charge of hospitals in the Continental army.

Concerning Lutheran involvement and influence during the war, the late President Hibben of Princeton University stated,

"The Lutheran Church has stood for both religious and civil freedom at the great crises of the world's history, and our American institutions have drawn much of their vitality and strength from the spirit which has animated its followers." ³

There were, of course, opponents of the Revolution among Lutheran ministers and laymen. Christopher Triebner, a clergyman, fled from Georgia to England with the retreating British soldiers, in 1782. Nicholas Collin, also a Lutheran minister was arrested as a British sympathizer in New Jersey, however

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members of his congregation pleaded in his behalf and he was later released. Pastor John Voight refused to replace the traditional prayer for the king, with a prayer for the American Congress. The parish of Peter Sommers in Mohawk Valley, New York supported the crown, right up to the point where all hope of victory was lost. John Schwerdfeger moved his congregation to Ontario from New York.⁴ Thus it was evident that there were some who didn't go along with the flow of the revolution, however the majority did indeed favor the cause of the colonists.

Its quite obvious to state that the long and exhaustive conflict of the Revolutionary war left many marks upon the new-born country. Considering the sphere of religion, this is also quite evident. Out of the 19 Church edifices in New York, only 9 could be used after the war was over. During the seige of Boston, all but two of the Pastors had to flee from the city. There were many places where whole congregations were dispersed and sometimes absolutely extinguished. Two Lutheran Churches in New York disappeared altogether. At Ebenezer in Georgia, their beautiful house of God was turned into a stable for British soldier's horses. That same Church, often served as a Lazaretto for the sick and wounded.⁵ Because of this the congregation was virtually broken up and without a pastor. The community was a picture of distress. In many communities, the ministrations of the Gospel ceased just when it was needed most. At times, it seemed as though the revolution in government was attended by a revolution in the Church.

The war of independence lasted about eight years. During this time, the neglect of ordinances and the virtual suspension of spiritual activity in many communities would sufficiently account for a state of profound spiritual apathy, worldliness and disorder. This is true, especially since there was unhappy division of sentiment regarding war, which sometimes separated families and broke up many prosperous Churches. It would be very pleasing if you could say, that in the midst of adversity the Church grew stonger. Sad to say this wasn't the case in regard to the Revolutionary war. Contrasted with the activities and progress of the Church before the war, this would have to be considered a period of decline. There was indeed life yet in the Church, however many of the ablest preachers were heard no more. I earlier spoke of Peter and Frederick Muhlenberg, it seems in this light, what was gain for the state was loss for the Church. One often has to think of what might have been acheived, had they returned to the Church which now desperately needed their services. One also has to consider the general tendency of the age, the interests of the Church being sacraficed for the urgent and all-engrossing political and material issues. But God never suffered his fields to be wholly desolate. At times like these one can see the hand of God at work protecting and sustaining his Church on earth.

One of the elements to especially note is that Lutherans aren't foreigners in America. They were among the early settlers; they took a worthy part in the subjugation of the great American continent; and they took a worthy part in the rearing of the Temple of liberty in America.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Qualben, Lars, The Lutheran Church in Colonial America, p.252.
- 2 Finck, William, Lutheran Landmarks and Pioneers in America,
P. 178.
- 3 Qualben, op. cit., p. 259
- 4 Nelson, Clifford, The Lutherans in North America, p.77.
- 5 Wolf, Edmund, The Lutherans in America, p. 273.

1. Bellah, Robert. Religion and the American Revolution,
Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1976.
2. Finck, Abdel. Lutheran Landmarks and Pioneers in America,
The United Lutheran Publishing House, Philadelphia, 1913.
3. Nelson, Clifford. The Lutherans in North America, Fortress
Press, Philadelphia, 1975.
4. Qualben, Lars. The Lutheran Church in Colonial America,
Thomas Nelson and Sons, New York, 1940.
5. Wentz, Abdel. The Lutheran Church in American History,
The United Lutheran Publishing House, Philadelphia, 1923.
6. Wolf, Edmund. The Lutherans in America, J.A. Hill and
Co., New York, 1890.