

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL (Ph.D.) DISSERTATION

**THE IMPACT OF THE PURITANISM
ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
– WITH A SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON
NEW ENGLAND COLONY**

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Debrecen, 2016.

I. Objectives and Theme of the Dissertation

“The hypothesis which proposes that the given society, culture are unknowable without studying the religion, system of belief, view of world contributing in the sustain of the said structures is especially true in case of the United States... the colourful history of the States embraces the history of religious belief systems, churches and communities. Moreover it can be stated confidently that the early history of the United States coincided with the history of the spread and maintenance of the Christianity in that large continent which was unknown before.”

The quoted lines written by László Medgyessy describes and reflects well the issues studied in the present dissertation. The Ph. D. thesis deals with the said *“history of religious belief systems, churches and communities”* and focuses on New England. The main issue of my research is the view of world, ideology, mind and idealism of the Puritans who arrived to the New World. Did these factors have impact on the American Revolution and if so, which way? Thus the dissertation deals with the Puritans’ view of history especially how the descendants of the Puritans regarded the historical role of the Revolution and the emergence of the United States as well. Three crucial theological circle of ideas were studied during the research. According to my hypothesis these ideologies had influenced mostly the Puritans who left the old country and affected the whole said process as well as the participants of the American Revolutionary War. These are the Covenant theology, doctrine of the special mission of the Puritans – chosen people, New Israel – and the Millennialism. A considerable part of the dissertation focuses on the definition of the Puritanism, the origins, and its history from the emergence to the foundation of the first Puritan British colonies in North America.

Geographically and politically England and the New World are the main objects of the dissertation, while regarding the time frame the Ph. D. thesis focuses on the 17-18th centuries, religious trends of the Reformation and theological doctrines of the former centuries are presented as well.

Concerning the actuality of the dissertation stress was put on the debates of the historians with reference to the role of the Puritanism in the American Revolutionary War and the founding of the new nation. Three aspects of these debates are reviewed in the dissertation: the Christian approach, the secular and the “golden mean” views. All of these aspects are crucial because reviewing historical roots of the United States of America and the Revolutionary War are a crucial challenge for those who research on the history of the United States of America.

For the average Americans there was a common language and country and strong Protestant Christian belief based on the noble ideal of the independence and the devotees of that ideas assembled against the English who sought to limit the freedom of the Americans in every possible way. According to their narrative they had the common principle and goal. That was nearly not true. The interests, aims, ideas of the thirteen American colonies were not the same and from many aspects they were closer to England than to each other, moreover the economic interests of the colonies connected to the old country. In that period several dozen religions existed in the American colonies and in case of many issues and regarding practice of Christian religion there were huge differences and disagreement between them.

To the abovementioned group called Christians belong the believers convinced about the Protestant religious heritage was unquestionably the most influential ideological background of the American Revolution. Regarding their belief and conviction God had defined plan with the emerging United States thus from their aspect the road to the Revolution had been paved since the foundation of the colonies.

Supporters of the other significant approach question the paramount role of the Protestant religions as the most crucial ideological root and background of the American Revolution. Furthermore they don't believe in that a straight line could be drawn from the foundation of the colonies to the Revolution.

As the representatives of the so called "golden mean" group the work of three great figures of the republican synthesis were studied during the research. Bernard Bailyn, Gordon S. Wood, J. G. A. Pocock argued that at least five great ideological trends influenced the Revolution. These are namely, the republican authors of the era of the English Civil War and the British theorist of the 18th century (true Whigs), writers of the classical antiquity, the Protestant roots and traditions, great philosophers of the 18th century Enlightenment as well as the devotees of the English legal traditions of the common law. I attempt to prove in the dissertation that although the listed historians and scholars acknowledge the role of the Protestantism, they don't treat it as a dominant factor.

The settling of the inhabitants of New England and the New World moreover their social model are studied in the dissertation as well. During the research the decrease of the religious enthusiasm generation to generation and the process by which the "wilderness", the large and abundant continent seduced the settlers were examined as well.

I found incredibly important to study the First Great Awakening which according to my hypothesis can be treated as the "antechamber" of the Revolution. Although the impact of the religion on the Revolution, its origins and the outbreak are debated among the American

historians, but it seems to be accepted that the First Great Awakening can be regarded as a significant event preceded the Revolution and affected all the colonies. The awakening movement was close to the European reformation movements of the late 17th century. Furthermore it can be considered as one of the most crucial spiritual root of the evolving national identity of the British North American colonies. A specific part of the dissertation deals with the European roots of the said movement and the reason of the need for spiritual reformation in New England, the milestones of that period and the consequences of the movement in New England and the other colonies. According to my hypothesis the abovementioned First Great Awakening from many aspects although indirectly but affected the mind and argumentation of the patriots who participated in the Revolutionary War. Particularly interesting the way how the language of the First Great Awakening connected to the language of patriots during the period preceded the outbreak of the war.

The theological views of the pastors participated in politics the so called “black army” changed necessarily during the Revolution and decades before the outbreak. In line with the well-known historian of our age, Gregg L. Frazer, “*the Whig and republican ideas took religious shape ... the radical Whig ideology can be treated as political Protestantism.*” The encounter and fusion of these two ideologies resulted the theistic rationalism, which in my opinion mostly characterized the American philosophers of that era. That way of thinking cannot be treated merely Biblical, because the Whig authors and republican writers drew upon thoughts from works of ancient Greek and Roman authors. The notions of political freedom, honour or fighting against tyranny can be traced back to the antiquity. The theistic rationalism was a very special belief system represented predominantly by the American intellectuals and as far as I know in that form the said ideology did not appear in Europe. The belief system of the theistic rationalism combined three crucial way of thinking characterized the American philosophers of that era: natural religions, nationalism of the Enlightenment and the Christian philosophy.

II. Methodology of the Dissertation

Regarding the historiography several symptomatic trends and approaches are highlighted in the dissertation. Generally it is true that the American historians tended to seek and find answer in the historical past for the issues and challenges of their times. Furthermore they attempted to redefine and rephrase the history. Necessarily the social affiliation, conditions of the historical research and the historians altered during the last centuries. For example in the era of the Puritan authors the history was regarded as the scene of God's activity. They approached the contemporary events and history from Christian aspect and studied everything in that context. For them New England was the New Canaan where the God's chosen ones lived like the people of Israel did in the times of Old Testament in the Promised Land. According to their views New England was not merely one colony among the others, it was the scene of God's work, "City upon a Hill". The aim of the early historians was to construct and shape the emerging national identity. In order to achieve that purpose they were concerned mostly with writing the history of the certain colonies, which should be a sufficient ground for prepare a work dealing with the history of the whole nation.

For the time of the next generation the historical and scholarly environment altered. Although the influence of the Christianity was still crucial, but it had been changed since the era of the Puritans. Not the Christian faith and moral, rather economic and political issues stood at the centre of the public mind. That based on the human development, relations of causality and material explanations. Furthermore it was influenced by the European Enlightenment, in which not God stood at the centre of the trends of the history, but Newton's laws of nature had impact on them as well.

The most of those historians who took part in the American Revolutionary War created the myth of the birth of America. According to that myth the United States of America has mission in the world, thus the emergence of the United States can be treated as fatalistic. It includes the idea arguing that the outbreak of the Revolution was generated by not the British measures rather it was the inevitable result of a process lasted for several decades. That was one of the most characteristic crossing points of the said historical approaches which had an important role in shaping the common American identity. For the said historians one of the most significant elements of the ideological background of the road to the Revolution was the Protestantism. According to their standpoint the Protestantism had central role in the Revolution as well. They present an idealistic picture about the events, the central figures, on the other hand

these historians assumed that there was necessarily a common ideology shared by the patriots of the Revolution which can be traced back to the Protestant religious roots.

To the romantic-nationalist trend belong the generation started to work in the 1830s. In many respects they agreed with the former standpoints since they aimed to form and strengthen the identity of the United States. Following this these historians made efforts to present the most positive side of the history of the emergence of the United States. Three main issues can be noted in their works: ideal of the liberty and progress, and the concept proposes that America's mission is to set an example for the whole mankind, the model, the way to establish and achieve the most perfect state and the most complete life. Essentially all of the said three ideals meant the revival of the thoughts of the Puritan writers. The representatives of the romantic-nationalist approach thought that in their times they were heading to realize the said principles and implement them in the everyday life.

From the 1870s a transformation took place in the writing of the United States' history. In comparison with the former periods the most significant difference was that the professional historians took the leading role. They studied at American or European universities. Although the importance of the divine providence decreased, the millennialist approach of the history especially in case of New England became part of the historians' views of history. Another trend of that period, the so called "imperial approach" emerged in the 1880s-1890s. Historians belonged to that group argued that the interpretation which was the steadfast pillar of the history of America proposing that colonies according to some kind of godly plan since their foundation rushed towards to the Revolution and the independence was wrong. On the other hand they stated that the colonies found their account within the imperial framework.

In the 1920s the anti-Puritan approach emerged, which criticized the Puritans. According to that view the Puritans were not democratic, nor progressive or tolerant of religions and in general they were characterized by hypocrisy. In line with that approach the puritans and the puritan ideas and the religion didn't play a prominent role in establishing the American democracy.

As a response for that trend, in the 1930s a workgroup of historians of the Harvard University started to examine the Puritanism and its impact on the American Revolution and the origins of the uprising of the thirteen colonies. They were convinced that the Puritanism must be examined in its own historical context in order to get the most proper answer for the issues regarding that ideology. The representatives of that trend found impossible to understand the Puritanism from the 20th century aspect, but the context in which the Puritans lived and worked must be known. Following this they emphasized those issues which were neglected by

the anti-Puritan historians, namely the study of the historical background and examining the Puritan culture and way of thinking through primary sources.

The third generation of the professional historians who in some cases are called neoconservatives or the representatives of the so called consent trend emerged after the World War II. The neoconservatives thought that the society was stable and homogeneous. In line with their approach there were always principles which constantly existed and had impact on the American history. Among them the right for property and the protection of property which are due to everyone, or the principle of the limited governmental power can be found.

From the second half of the 20th century three crucial historical approaches of the American Revolution can be identified. On the one hand rivalry still existed between the two standpoints regarding the impact of the religion on the American Revolution and its origins. While a group of historians attempted to refute the role of the Puritanism in the Revolution, others endeavoured to prove the importance of the religion. On the other hand a “golden mean” approach emerged related to the so called republican thesis and the republican debate. Although the bulk of the works including the theory which resulted the dispute were written in the 1960s and the 1970s, but the controversy had origins.

The historians began to study the influence of the Protestant religious legacy on the American Revolution through new aspects in the 1960s and the 1970s. For example apart from the former theories and theses the effect of the First Great Awakening on the Revolution and American identity became highlighted. New figures who were convinced in decisive influence of the religion joined the debate. Some of them attempted to harmonize the two approaches, namely the republican thesis with the views of the Protestant religious history.

Most of the disputes were concerned with the issue of which ideology had the most crucial impact on the events and which idea had dominant role in the given period of the Revolution. Did the views affected jointly or extinguish each other? Did they exist simultaneously and shape the public opinion collectively? Was it impossible? Whether one of the ideas must be determinative? These are the issues still nowadays debated by the historians.

The research, study and categorizing of the large amount of sources available for the dissertation meant a great challenge. Regarding the historiographical part of the research the social processes must be kept in view as well. Thus the American Civil War needed to be studied as a theological crisis. Several types of sources were involved: works of former and contemporary writers, sources of the contemporary press and public opinion, pamphlets, preaches, theological commentaries and Early Christian writings. I attempted to study contemporary materials as many as possible. The results of my former research carried out in

the United States and England are implied in the dissertation. The available online database and websites concerned with the Puritanism benefitted the research.

III. Results

It was a long way to the emergence of the Puritanism and it took long for the fellows of the “Bible movement” set to found New Jerusalem and build the kingdom of God. During the research I became familiar with a movement that was concerned with the huge issues of the future which affect the people of any age. While they suffered much for their religious beliefs, in many cases they were intolerant of religions as much as those who they fought against in that age. The Puritans were least tolerant with those who did not share their religious views or did not agree with the way how they practice religion. Moreover they prosecuted those who criticized the tight relation between the state and the church. The Puritans sought to build the Kingdom of Christ separated from others, but in case of the second and third generations a significant decrease can be noted regarding the religiosity. Although they rejected the forced conversion, but in many cases they cruelly reckoned with the non-Christian Indians. The Puritans aimed to convert the Indians, but in consequence of that they exported the religious confusion and fought against the Catholic natives and the Jesuits who had been there and evangelized before the arrival of the Protestants.

Was America founded on Christian ground? When I started to write the dissertation according to the hypothesis the answer for that question was yes, it was. I thought that the most important ideological base of the new nation was the Puritanism. According to the dissertation and the results of the research I think the abovementioned question cannot be answered with yes or no. The ideal of the “Christian state” brought by the first settlers failed soon. The Puritan ideology represented by the founders of New England did die with them. An ambivalence can be noted: while they conquered the New World, it conquered their souls. The world view shaping for decades and the so called political Christianity became a very special American belief system. Furthermore during that period the theistic rationalism emerged in the British North American colonies as well. That based on the European Enlightenment and the Puritanism which persisted as the legacy of the First Great Awakening, but it had changed in its form and content since the arrival from the “old continent”. Regarding the United States of America in our days the influence of the Evangelical Christianity which rooted in the First Great Awakening can be clearly proved.

To the first great generation of the American historians belonged the writers, politicians, pastors who treated the history as the scene of God’s activity and they viewed and presented the American Revolution from that aspect. For them that fight was the clash of the good and

evil, with other words behind the scene of the history took place the combat between God and the devilish forces of the Antichrist. For them New England was more than a geographical territory. By their faith God's plan included that they conquer that territory and establish the theocratic state which could be a model for every nation. They believed that their fight had importance regarding the salvation history. Since they approached the historical events as Christians, that was the base of the aspect through they viewed the forming national identity. Those who took part in the American Revolution attempted to prove in their works born between 1780 and 1820 that the Revolution was caused not by the British measures. These writers considered that the colonies turned against the crown by the mission and destiny of America. According to the results of the research I don't agree with the historians who are convinced that a direct road led from the foundation of the colonies to the Revolution just because the Puritan ideology entailed that narrative. In my opinion the desire for the dissolution from the crown was rather a process which from many aspects against their interests. The roots of the Revolution cannot be traced back to the Puritanism or religious, theological factors.

On the other hand I don't find the standpoint of the anti-Puritan historians acceptable, who argue that the religion never had positive role in the history of the United States, moreover it was the obstacle of development and had no impact on the Revolution. In line with my results it can be concluded that the legacy of the First Great Awakening evidently had a crucial effect on the participants of the Revolutionary War. I aimed to prove and present that phenomenon in the dissertation.

I agree with the representatives of the "golden mean" trend, who approached the whole issue from the aspects of the republican thesis and the republican debate. Historians who shared that view defined five main sources of the revolutionary ideal: antique authors, writers of the European Enlightenment, authors of the English common law, Protestant religiousness and its influence, impact of the British oppositionist works from the late 18th century on the settlers.

As the result of the dissertation one can conclude that the political Christianity was important root of the ideological background of those who took part in the American Revolutionary War. It was crucial but not the only one factor.

V. List of conference lectures related to the dissertation

A puritánok és az Újvilág kihívásai. *Nemzetközi Egészségügyi Konferencia*. Pécs, 2011. augusztus

Falak és választóvonalak a történelemben. *Nyíregyházi Főiskola Történelemtudományi és Filozófiai Intézete Konferenciája*. Nyíregyháza, 2012. november 29-30.

"Múlt nélkül nincs jövő" – Egyén és közösség történelmi távlatban. *Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Konferenciája*. Debrecen, 2012. 11. 15. (Szervezője is voltam a Konferenciának)

RÉGIÓ ÉS REGIONALITÁS WORKSHOP. *Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi és Néprajzi Doktori Iskola, Történelmi Intézet, Néprajzi Tanszék Konferenciája*. Debrecen, 2013. június 27-28.



Registry number: DEENK/119/2016.PL
Subject: Ph.D. List of Publications

Candidate: János Szabó
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Doctoral School: Doctoral School of History and Ethnology

List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapter(s) (1)

1. **Szabó J.:** A puritanizmus ideológiájának illetve eszmeiségének hatása az amerikai forradalomra.
In: Principium: Pályánk kezdetén. Szerk.: Lukács Anna, Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi és Néprajzi Doktori Iskola, Debrecen, 105-114, 2012. ISBN: 9789634735786

Hungarian scientific article(s) in Hungarian journal(s) (3)

2. **Szabó J.:** Napjaink vitája a "keresztény Amerikáról".
Adventista Szle. Közlésre elfogadva, 1-15, 2016. ISSN: 2415-9468.
3. **Szabó J.:** Az Amerikai forradalom előszobája: A Nagy Ébredési Mozgalom háttere Új-Angliában.
Adventista Szle. 10 (2), 20-36, 2014. ISSN: 2415-9468.
4. **Szabó J.:** Az Amerikai forradalom előszobája : A Nagy Ébredési Mozgalom háttere Új-Angliában.
Hallg. Műtanulm. 2, 294-300, 2013. ISSN: 2063-6024.

Hungarian conference proceeding(s) (1)

5. **Szabó J.:** Vallási közösségek kialakulása a forradalom időszakában Új-Angliában.
In: Falak és választóvonalak a történelemben : A Nyíregyházi Főiskola Történettudományi és Filozófia Intézete által 2012 november 29-30-án rendezett társadalomtudományi konferencia előadásai [elektronikus dokumentum]. Szerk.: Buhály Attila, Reszler Gábor, Szoboszlay György, Nyíregyházi Főiskola, Nyíregyháza, 405-416, 2014. ISBN: 9786155097829



List of other publications

Hungarian conference proceeding(s) (1)

6. **Szabó J.:** Puritánként az Újvilágban.

In: Falak és választóvonalak a történelemben: Társadalomtudományi konferencia 2012.
november 29-30. Szerk.: Óbis Hajnalka, Bessenyei Könyvkiadó, Nyíregyháza, 36, 2012.
ISBN: 9786155097522

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of Web of Science, Scopus and Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) databases.

09 June, 2016

