



PEOPLE OF FAITH

Christianity in America

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Questions for Discussion
By Steve Rabey

PEOPLE OF FAITH

A VISUAL HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA

Episode 1

Faith in the New World: From Monarchs to the Marketplace

Questions for Discussion

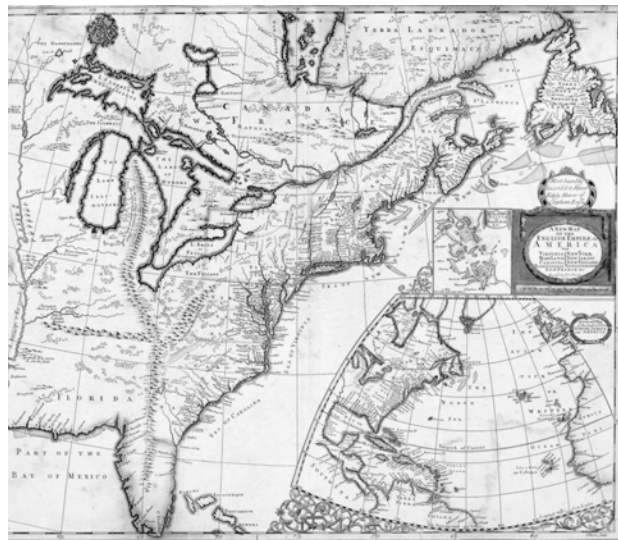
1) People who came to the New World from Europe brought their Christianity with them, but they largely did so free from the control of kings and popes. How did this “unofficial” approach to Christianity impact the way religion would be practiced in the United States until our own time?

2) No other country had ever legalized the kind of religious freedom practiced in the U.S. What are the advantages and disadvantages of religious freedom?

3) True or false? In colonial times, various colonies supported an “official” colonial church or denomination and enforced citizens’ affiliation with that chosen church. Explain.

4) The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution enshrines the freedom of religion? What do you think this document means when it says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

5) What is your impression about the meaning of the term “Separation of Church and State”?



6) What did French thinker and historian Alexis de Tocquevi say about religion in his 1835 book, *Democracy in America*?

7) What do people (like historian Robert Laurence Moore) mean when they refer to America's "freewheeling marketplace of religion"? Are they saying religion is for sale?

8) By the mid-1800s, what group had worked its way from a few dozen to becoming the largest denomination in America?

9) Which 20th-century congregation gave us "seeker sensitive" services?

10) Many American Christians can identify with the line in the song that goes, "Don't know much about history," at least when it comes to the history of religion. What might be different today if people knew more about the nation's religious history?



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Episode 2:

Many Mansions

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What is your impression of Americans' church-going habits and religiosity? Do you think that Americans go to church:
 - a) More than people in other nations?
 - b) Less than people in other nations?
 - c) About the same?
- 2) By the mid-1800s, most major cities had Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist and other churches, often within a few blocks of each other. How was that arrangement different from what had happened in other countries? Do you think this kind of diversity was a good thing? What sort of challenges might it present?
- 3) Match the cities with the people groups that were brought to the U.S. by waves of immigration between 1830 and 1850:

Cities

New York
Cincinnati
St. Louis
Boston

People Groups

Irish and German Catholics
German Lutherans



- 4) Why do you think African Americans felt the need to begin their own religious denominations?

5) Why did members of groups like the Amish and the Hutterites migrate to America?

6) Why was America a fertile ground for the creation of new groups like the Unitarians, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Shakers, the Oneida Community, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Worldwide Church of God?

7) What did the Millerites believe, and what did they do as a result of this belief? Which denomination did the disappointed Millerites found?

8) What are some of the major reform movements that were begun by American Christians?

9) What cultural factors aided the popularity of the Jesus movement and the charismatic movement of the 1960s?

10) What is a "parachurch" organization? Can you name some? What advantages do they present over formal religious denominations? Do they present any potential problems?

11) In this episode, historian Martin Marty says that a "Godless Constitution equals a Godly Country." Marty argues that keeping American government out of religion created a country where religious activity flourished. What do you think? Can you compare the U.S. to other countries you have seen where government has been more involved in religion? What are the differences between that country and the U.S.?



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Episode 3: “Rebels with a Cause”

Questions for Discussion

1) Are the terms “liberal” and “conservative” helpful in discussing the social activism of Christians throughout American history? When do these terms help clarify people’s motivations, and when do they obscure our understanding?

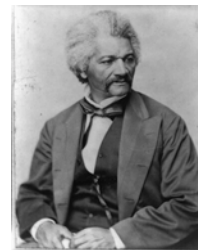
2) Not all Christians in the American colonies were “on the same page” about declaring independence from England. How should Christians respond to popular uprisings and rebellions in our country or other countries? What factors would cause you to support or reject a rebellion or independence movement?

3) True or false: As the founding fathers were arguing over how to create the ideal government, some favored supporting an “official” church in the U.S., just like European countries.

4) Many people believe that one book unleashed widespread public sentiment against slavery and, in many ways, increased the likelihood of a civil war? Which book was it, and why did it cause such a reaction?

5) Some Christians argued in support of slavery, while other Christians argued against it. Which biblical passages and Christian teachings did each group use as its rationale?

6) Frederick Douglass said that America’s acceptance of slavery branded its Christianity “a lie.” What do you think about Douglass’s critique of American belief and practice? And today, what sorts of controversial issues might cause some critics to make similar critiques of American religiosity and behavior?

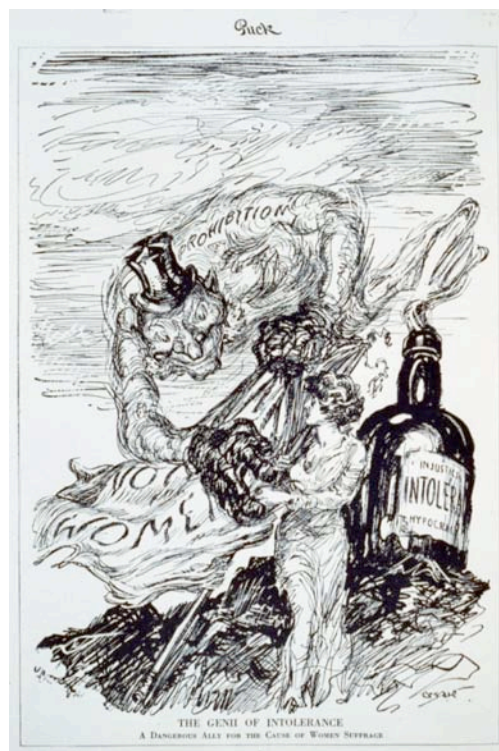


7) Who were some of the activists and what were some of the programs of reform they began to fight problems caused by industrialization and urbanization?

8) What question did Congregationalist minister Charles Sheldon ask in his famous book, *In His Steps*?

9) Christians led the battle against alcohol, but the victory of Prohibition was a mixed bag. Why?

10) Fill in the blank: Some white Christians told King to “wait” in his efforts for integration and equality. But King said “wait” always meant _____. What was King’s point?



Political cartoon describing the alliance between the prohibition and women suffrage movements.

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Episode 4

The Challenges of Change

Questions for Discussion

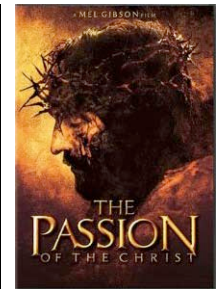
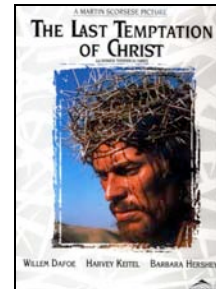
1) Christians in America have been constantly challenged to apply the fundamentals of their faith to an ever-changing roster of social issues, technologies and cultural trends. Which issues were at stake in the Scopes Trial? Who were some of the players in the trial, and what roles did they play?

2) You may not expect conservative Christians to be “early adopters” of the latest trends. But they were the first to latch on to the powerful, new communications technology of radio. What motivated them to be early proponents of broadcast technology?

3) Motion pictures have long been controversial for some American Christians—does this surprise you? Why do you think this would be true? What sorts of issues and values are at stake? What do you think about recent attempts to make “Christian” movies?



4) *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of the Christ* were two religious treatments of the life of Christ. One was a critical success and a box office dud. The other was largely panned by critics but went on to earn nearly one billion dollars at the box office. Why did these two films generate such very different reactions? Why were these particular films loved by some and disliked by others?



5) Are you familiar with the “Contemporary Christian Music” industry? Can you name some of these artists, albums, and songs? What impact has CCM and “praise and worship music” had on church worship styles?

6) What is meant by the term “cafeteria Christianity”? And what do the folks at the Gallup organization mean when they describe poll results as showing that Christianity in America “is a mile wide but an inch deep”?

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Episode 5:

Homegrown Saints

Questions for Discussion

This episode covered the lives and work of 10 Christian men and women who changed the course of religious and cultural life in America.

Briefly describe one or more of the following “saints,” explaining:

- a) Who they were;
- b) What they believed;
- c) How their faith moved them and changed us.



Jonathan Edwards

- 1) Jonathan Edwards
(1703-1758)



- 2) Charles Finney
(1792-1875)



- 3) Harriet Beecher Stowe
(1811-1896)



- 4) Archbishop John Joseph
Hughes (1797-1864)



- 5) Charles Sheldon
(1857-1946)



- 6) Dorothy Day
(1897-1980)



7) Norman Vincent Peale (1889-1993)



8) Reinhold Niebuhr
(1892-1971)



9) Martin Luther King, Jr.
(1929-1968)



10) Billy Graham (1918-)

11) Are there other people who should be on a list of American “saints”? Who do you feel should be included on the list? Think of a few more American saints and explain why you think they qualify.

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Episode 6:

The Future of Faith

Questions for Discussion

Earlier episodes of “People of Faith” explored key people, events and themes in America’s deep and permanent relationship with Christianity. This concluding episode turns the historian’s microscope on the present and the future by asking a series of probing questions about the role of Christianity in 21st-century American life and culture.

How would you answer the following eight questions?

Question 1: What Role Should Faith Play in American Life

Question 2: How Can Christians Balance Change with Tradition?

Question 3: What Color is the Church?

Question 4: How Will Churches Handle Human Sexuality?

Question 5: How Can We Be Good Stewards of God’s Creation?

Question 6: How Can People of Faith Promote a Culture of Life?

Question 7: How Should Christians Relate to Other Faiths?

Question 8: What Role Will America Play in the Global Community?



Final questions for discussion:

9) Having taken a look back at the rich history of Christianity in America, choose a few historical personalities that resonate with your own faith and religious practice. Which “People of Faith” might serve as guides or fellow travelers on your spiritual journey?

10) Can you also choose a couple historic events or developments that continue to be important to you, your denomination or faith tradition, or the nation at this point in American history?

11) Americans continue to embrace Christianity in various ways as we move further into the 21st century. What other faces and trends illustrate new ways that Americans continue to live as people of Christian faith?



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