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"The Frontier in the Story of
American Religion."

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Church History II & III

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The Frontier in the Story of American Religion :-

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Perhaps the most distinctive element in the development of American civilization was the frontier. Hence we have something, that coming at the time that it did in the history of man's technological advancement was a unique experience, peculiar to America. The frontier, coupled with the cosmopolitan nature of America's population, has been responsible for most of the distinctive elements of American culture. It was of course perfectly natural that religion would not remain long uninfluenced by the frontier. Much that is distinctive about the American religious scene can be traced to the influence of this phenomenon.

First and foremost the frontier is a set of physical conditions, it is life on the geographical outskirts of society. Life is difficult. Houses must be built, land cleared for farming, and one's life defended from bands of Indians. All this with the least possible assistance of modern convenience. Transportation and communication are both difficult, the settler is terribly lonely and terribly hard worked. Life is dangerous. However the settler is his own boss. The American method of land-holding, as distinct from French Canadian settlement, insured him of this. If he quarrelled with his neighbor, or with the ruling class of his community he could always move out -- go further inland.

Brought about by these conditions is a state of mind -- the frontier mentality. This is the frontier that so influenced American history. This mentality had its own social psychology -- some of its physical conditions.

The first characteristic of the frontier social psychology was equality. Hence we must not give the impression that the frontier was a place where there were no distinctions :- a place where there was a scale watering down of all men to the common level. It meant rather that the traditional and historic criteria for distinguishing men in society had no meaning here. Standards were essentially different. A man was judged by his ability to carve for himself a living out of his rather stubborn environment. The hard worker, the prudent manager, the good fighter, these were the men who possessed desirable attributes. Distinctions of birth, of formal and cultural education, and to some extent even between the sexes were meaningless. Thus we have a

mentality which says "I am as good as the next man." It is equality of a kind.

In this Frontier society we have also a large percentage of what came to be the debtor class. Money was borrowed to finance the trip to the frontier, and to buy the land. The Backwoods communities were nearly always in debt. Thus they were against privilege of any kind. They became upholders of "shoney" money programmes.

Another characteristic of the Frontier mentality was its sociality. As has been suggested life in the bush was harsh. Difficult work had to be done almost entirely without the help of machine methods. There was constant danger from Indians as well as wild animals, in case of sickness or disease there were no conveniences. The result was that people had to work together. In case of disaster, they helped each other. We remember the surprise of the first settlers at the congeniality of the vigorous separatists at Plymouth. The more difficult tasks of Barn-building, homesteading and the like were done as co-operative efforts. The common dangers and exigencies of frontier life were great factors in developing an attitude of mutualism.

In the Frontier mentality we have a unique mixture of this mutualism with a strong individuality. Hence we have what is perhaps a peculiar characteristic of this society. If the individual settler didn't feel like conforming to the ways of the majority he didn't have to. Society was not organized as in older lands, it was in the making. Often the settler succeeded in law into the back-woods. Each man was a law unto himself. If he was strong, if he could get away with it, he could be lawless if he chose. If society around him became too strong and too well organized for him to express his individuality he could always pick up and move farther inland. Thus for many generations the Frontier mentality did not have to conform. The ability to conform was not necessary. It was not conditioned into its social psychology. This, coupled with the abstinence, on the frontier of all showed recognized distinctions, resulted in the strongly individualistic character of the Frontier state of mind.

It must be remembered that in connection with American History the frontier had a long and continuous influence. It began in the colonial period. From the beginning the Backwoods settlements.

exercised a pressure on the social psychology of the whole colony. From them came an insistence on equality, individuality and mutualism. As the land became settled and the frontier moved west to the mountains, frontier conditions remained and their influence remained. Following the Revolution came the opening of the old west. Then the middle west and finally, in the civil war times the far west. During all these years we have in America the pressure of frontier conditions and the frontier mentality exerting its pressure on the psychology of the growing civilization.

In tracing the influence of any element on the social psychology of a nation it must be remembered that no one element is determinative. The Frontier doubtless had great influence, but we would be wrong to attribute, solely to it the rise of American democracy, or every liberal movement that came out of American history. Here we have a conditioning factor, not a determining factor. It is true that many of the peculiarities of American democracy are due to the influence of the frontier, but it is not true that American democracy arose because of it.

As we trace the influence of the frontier on American Religion, it is hazardous not to see all manner of results that are illegitimately referred back to the causes of frontier conditions. Because the frontier had a liberal influence is no reason for attributing every liberal movement within the church to it.

It is doubtless true however that the frontier, as a state of mind had a great deal to do with the opposition in colonial times to Episcopacy. The individualism of the frontiersman was going to see no one take his religion from him or tell him what his religion was to be. It is of course true that the opposition movement was begun by the Presbyterians who were themselves not products of the frontier, but that the movement became so wide spread and so unifying throughout all the colonies, is a result of frontier conditions. There was going to be no arbitrary setting of a bishop over them. Hence we must not make the mistake of assuming that the frontier was opposed to the principle of episcopacy.

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Such an assumption would be a simplification of human nature. Years later when the Methodist church split over the same question, the impetus for the anti-episcopal movement against Ashbury did not come from the West. Here, because Ashbury had shown himself an able pioneer, his ecclesiastical jurisdiction was accepted, what the frontier objected to was the granting of privilege on the basis of criteria it didn't understand. Arbitrary jurisdiction, imposed from without and unearned according to its standards were anathema to the frontier.

Another movement in religion which was not uninfluenced by the frontier was that which worked for the separation of church and state. At the end of the Colonial period, there were established churches in eight of the states. A movement began almost immediately to work for disestablishment. It was ultimately successful. The frontier was doubtless in some degree responsible for this movement. Although it was largely due to the Baptist church the movement found a friendly soil in the frontier mentality. Here frontier individualism played its part. It must be remembered that the frontier was not opposed to established churches as such. It was not a matter of supremacy. Rather the ruling group who supported the establishment were, to these frontiersmen, the personification of their oppressors. As has been suggested, the frontier community was a debtor community and usually its creditors were the influential people of the eastern community. The established church was fine for these people whose power was increased because of it. To the frontiersmen, because of his situation, it represented oppression. This was the basis of his opposition as much as anything.

Before we go on to the more general influences of the frontier mentality which have remained part of the religious scene in America until this day let us look at one of the most important historical influences it has had in matters of religion. We speak of the rise of Methodism as a denomination. With the close of the revolutionary war, many of the English church clergy were forced to leave - especially in frontier communities. The Methodist movement had grown to a considerable size in America of this time and the evacuation of these men left all its adherents without official religious service. At this time the Methodists were still depending on the English church for its official

religious affiliation. John Wesley met the situation well determined here were a large group of people, members of his movement, difficult of access and served by no religious body. He suggested a national organization of the body; ordained his own bishops, set up the circuit system of ministry to suit the conditions. Most of these elements were part of the Methodist movement, but in America, because of the frontier, they came for the first time to be embodied in a national church. In a certain respect it can be said that American Methodism as a denomination was a product of the frontier. Because of its geographical elements, its difficulties of transportation and scattered settlement, the frontier influenced the birth of Methodism. American Methodism was borne to meet its demands.

During the great western movement between 1800 and 1830 the denominations that were most suited to frontier conditions, gained most support. Frontier conditions coloured the whole religious scene at this time and its influence can be seen yet. In the first place arminian doctrine or at least a mild calvinism were most acceptable to the frontier mentality. Grace was free - if you worked for it as was every thing else. - The frontiersman was enough of an individualist to reject the idea of irresistibly grace. He could be saved or he couldn't according to what he wanted. Any such superimposed arbitrariness as the doctrine of determinism seemed to suggest was disagreeable to him. The only arbitrariness was one of achievement by dint of one's own hard work. Thus the Methodists fared well from the beginning. The Baptists with their mild calvinism were aided by their democratic form of government and the fact that their minister was always a fellow settler. The frontier had a great influence however in determining the general doctrine held concerning man's ability to save himself.

The frontier also gave American religion its evangelistic quality. Even churches which have been noted for their lack of evangelism were forced to use its methods. Although it did not carry the thought of the whole church, and although it did cause a schism, there was a definitely evangelistic movement within the Presbyterian church. Included the second great awakening in America began under Methodism a scotch-clerk Presbyterian.

However evangelism was needed to meet the situation. The emphasis on a personal religious experience was what was needed. Society was not well organized. As yet there were no fixed patterns of group behavior. The methodical method of Christian nurture, conditioning each individual to a most contributive life in the community was impossible. Community education of any kind was physically impossible. It was a fast country, it was growing at a mad pace. It needed a vigorous religion. Life was booming, it demanded a dynamic religion. Thus a nice respectably faith handed down from father to son was not for its life. Each individual man made the choice for himself. All through the history of religion in America we find recurring emphasis on the need of each individual to make his own personal decision. That religion demanded a personal experience. On the frontier it certainly did.

As well as a vigorous evangelistic element, religion to fit the frontier, needed a vigorous if obvious moral code. Frontier lawlessness is a byword among us. It was natural that such conditions should make for some kind of anti social release and that such conditions should attract social outcasts. If there was any moral code in frontier religion it had to be vigorous. Drunkenness, excessive gambling, fornication and murder had to be met with a vigorous opposition. Thus we get a great emphasis on abstaining from these sins as was needed. The Methodist class meeting and the Baptist congregational meeting met this need of the frontier as did their vigorous if rather negative ethics.

Thus we can see the legitimate need American evangelism fulfilled in the life of the frontier and we can see that American religion has carried that emphasis because of its influence.

Frontier conditions gave rise to another almost peculiar American religious phenomenon. Namely the camp-meeting. As has been said it needed a vigorous evangelism to capture the minds of the frontier. It resulted in vigorous and in many cases unreasonably emotional outworkings. Life on a frontier settlement was without emotional release. It was hard, demanding, lonely and dangerous. No conveniences and the luxury of calm ordered

entertainment was unheard of. Thus religion as well as any other emotional experience had to be taken in large gulps. These people were more susceptible to mass emotions. Thus during the great revival evangelistic meetings often resulted in all kinds of emotional manifestations. These sublimated passions burst forth and often seized whole meeting houses full of people with something not unlike a sex orgie. People fell to the ground, they jerked, they jerked their necks in the famous Cain Ridge meeting in August, 1801, 1000 were "brought to the ground alone". People came for miles to these meetings, probably the only social intercourse they would have for months and stayed for several days. Thus was borne the camp-meeting. Great mass meetings, lasting for days in which mob psychology swayed the people into all manner of mental states.

It is difficult to estimate the result of this sort of thing. Containing the revival as a whole resulted in better living. Yet such orgies could have been seen of having no permanent effect whatever. Likely the revival would have done its work without it but in doing it the peculiar conditions of the frontier contributed to its development. It was a child of the frontier and as the frontier dies, so will such vigorous religious outworkings.

As for as this study goes the frontier had two further influences, and these seemingly contradictory. These are one, the spirit of mutual aid and two, the spirit of individualism. Both tendencies as we have seen were manifest on the frontier and both appeared in the influence the frontier had on Religion.

In the early opposition to the establishment of an espionage in America, the frontier spirit united most of the country. Its opposition to the British control - to some degree a product of the frontier, united the churches. From the need of the frontier there came many unifying tendencies among the American churches. At first they looked to their national set up - a unifying movement in itself brought about by the fact that America, as a whole a frontier community, was cut off from its motherland. The Indian and home mission needs gave rise to many interdenominational organizations to meet them.

In some cases as in the "Plan of Union" among the Presbyterians and congregationalists, the interdenominational co-operation was official. In the great Revival in Kentucky and Tennessee, these denominations united these efforts. In several cases movements for the union of all churches sprang out of the frontier. Thus we have a feeling of mutuality springing out of frontier conditions. When the churches and individuals are faced with common problems so vast they seem no solution except through co-operation, then that co-operation comes. Mutual aid, seems to be the product of problems whose difficulty is so great that even the simple mind can see united action is necessary.

However just as strong was the schismatic influence of the frontier. Individualism, an inevitable product of the frontier, had its influence on religion. As soon as the difficulties of common problems lessened, strong denominational feeling took its rise. Thus even before the great slavery disputes we have schisms developing in the churches. We have a schism among the Methodists, although it is to be noted that the radicals in this case were not the frontiersmen. We have the Cumberland schism and the New Light schism in the Presbyterian church. We have a schism in the German church. All direct results of frontier influence. The need for more radical methods, more radical government and more radical doctrines. All these were the basis of the schisms. Except in the Episcopal church - which could in no wise be called a product of the frontier, - the schisms resulted in the formation of new denominations, each strongly denominationally conscious.

Frontier individualism and the conditions of the frontier working towards individualism had another result - much along the same line as above. That is the multiplication of sects, another distinctive element in American religion. The sects did not all rise thus but in the uneducated populace of the frontier and the lack of any influence leading to conformity on the frontier, gave fruitful soil for these sects to grow and multiply. Thus we have the Mormons, the Disciples, the Christians, the Shakers, several kinds of millenarians and adventists. - each a product of some few men who are afraid some one element in Christianity has not received enough emphasis.

and because of frontier conditions has been able to gain a substantial following.

Thus we have in America a motley Religious scene. The result largely of the influence of the frontier. It is a vigorous affair and still retains its evangelistic emphasis. Religion is still basically an individual thing. The average religious man still recognizes the tension of good and evil within his own life. There is still recognized, that no matter how thorough has been the conditioning process, a need for individual resolution. The idea of crisis as well as the idea of mentors is recognized as an important element in the religious life; and the need for that crisis to be resolved for each man by himself. All this connected with a moral emphasis. An evangelistic religion, which because of the frontier is the dominant element in the American scene, we have a religion of Dynamic hope with ethical overtones. This is an essential part of American religion.

Thus also remains a vigorous denominational loyalty coupled with the ability to unite on a programme of mutual aid for common difficult tasks. Included this confusing mixture of exclusivity and neutrality constitutes the major problem of American culture. Could this problem be resolved American religion as well as the whole American civilization would make a contribution to the world like nothing else in the world.