

RATIONALISM IN AMERICAN RELIGION

Liberal reason-based religious thought from the founding of the United States through the nineteenth century

COURSE #:

22F-RAR

FORMAT:

Seminar

MODERATOR:

Linda Honan

DATE & TIME:

Tues - 9:30 - 11:30 AM

10 Weeks

Starting 9/27/2022

LOCATION:

Zoom

MAX NO. OF PARTICIPANTS:

15

AUDITORS

ACCEPTED:

Yes

MAX NO. OF AUDITORS:

1

PURPOSE:

This seminar will investigate the history of reason in American religion. By the eighteenth century many influential Americans, despite their Puritan beginnings, embraced liberal religious thought, rejecting divine revelation and accepting only what science and nature revealed.

DESCRIPTION:

The seminar will follow the history of rational religious thought in the United States from the Revolution through the nineteenth century. Influenced by Enlightenment thinking, many of the founding fathers rejected religious dogma in favor of a rationalist outlook. While most still believed in God, their belief was based solely on science or nature, without reliance on scripture or religious authority.

In 1785 the congregation of King's Chapel in Boston converted to Unitarianism under the influence of their minister, James Freeman, the first Unitarian preacher in the United States. He exemplified the mindset of independent thought and individual responsibility that had been demonstrated by the American Revolution.

Many Massachusetts churches followed King's Chapel, and by the early nineteenth century the Harvard president and professor of divinity were both Unitarians. Their humanist mindset thrived as Unitarianism became dominant in Massachusetts, developing into several other rationalist groups including Deists, Universalists, Humanists, and Transcendentalists, whose members included Amos Bronson Alcott, Emerson, and Thoreau.

ROLE OF PARTICIPANTS:

Participants will choose a topic from among a list that will be created by the moderator. The topics will include important people and publications relating to our subject matter. At each session, each presenter will speak for 20-30 minutes, and then we will all join in discussion for the rest of the hour.

ABOUT THE MODERATOR:

Linda Honan is a retired museum educator and UMass administrator who lives happily in the Pioneer Valley.