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THE ELECTION SERMON: SITUATING RELIGION AND THE CONSTITUTION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

*Mark A. Noll**

INTRODUCTION

The sermon, which has long played a negligible part in national electoral politics, threatened in 2008 to return to the prominence it had once enjoyed in the far distant American past. When early that year video clips of Sunday sermons by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, appeared on YouTube, the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama seemed imperiled.¹ Reverend Wright's inflammatory denunciations of the United States as a hopelessly racist society would not have been noticed if candidate Obama and his family were not members of Reverend Wright's congregation.² But because they were, this sermonic material injected the kind of widely noticed pulpit commentary into politics that was once standard fare.

Since the 1870s, however, the importance of sermons as vehicles of political commentary has declined. While religion has remained a potent force in American politics,³ that force has been exercised much less by formal sermons than by public speeches with religious themes (for example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech),⁴ by voluntary movements mobilized for reform (for example, the prohibition, civil rights, anti-Vietnam, and antiabortion movements), by cooperation between politicians and religious figures who were recruited for their influence, and through the powerful media that have

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1. Jodi Kantor & Jeff Zeleny, *On Defensive, Obama Plans Talk on Race*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 18, 2008, at A1.

2. Jodi Kantor, *Obama Denounces Statements of His Pastor As "Inflammatory"*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 15, 2008, at A13.

3. See RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS: FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE PRESENT (Mark A. Noll & Luke E. Harlow eds., 2d ed. 2007).

4. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., I Have a Dream, Address at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C. (Aug. 28, 1963), in A CALL TO CONSCIENCE: THE LANDMARK SPEECHES OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. 81-88 (Clayborne Carson & Kris Shepard eds., 2001).

taken over the central place in American life once occupied by the Sunday sermon (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, and now the internet).

Barack Obama's quick defusing of the potentially explosive impact of Reverend Wright's remarks is indicative of the relatively minor political role of sermons today. In a memorable speech on race delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, then-presidential candidate Obama communicated his deep commitment to the religious life he had found in Reverend Wright's church, but also contextualized and repudiated his former pastor's inflammatory remarks.⁵ He reminded a listening America of "the old truism" that "the most segregated hour in American life" still takes place "on Sunday morning."⁶ And he spoke forthrightly about the "racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years."⁷ With these deft remarks, national electoral politics returned to where it had long resided: with religion remaining an important theme, but with that importance not conveyed primarily through the formal sermons of recognized religious professionals.⁸

In contrast, throughout much of early American history, sermons occupied a much more conspicuous position on the bridge between church and state.⁹ This Article focuses on the period from the 1740s to the early nineteenth century during which the political sermon changed, flourished, declined, and finally re-emerged as a significant public force. The first goal of this Article is to illustrate the significance of sermons in social settings where formal church discourse was still central to public communication of all kinds.¹⁰ The second goal is to suggest that the shifting dynamics of religious-political interactions in the eighteenth century now pose a delicate problem for those who seek guidance from the Constitutional era when negotiating religious-political connections in the present.¹¹ After examining this history, we should recover a clearer picture of the American past and (hopefully) a little stability for the future.¹²

5. Jeff Zeleny, *Obama Urges U.S. to Grapple with Race Issue*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 19, 2008, at A1, A14.

6. Barack Obama's Speech on Race (Mar. 18, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html> (last visited Jan. 26, 2010).

7. *Id.* at 5.

8. See discussion *infra* Parts II–VI.

9. See discussion *infra* Part II.

10. See discussion *infra* Part II.

11. See discussion *infra* Parts III–VI.

12. See discussion *infra* Part VII.

II. HISTORY OF THE POLITICAL SERMON

Sermons constituted one of the main modes of public communication for American society well into the late nineteenth century. Indicative of the weight of sermonic discourse, the average American before the Civil War probably heard more sermons each year than received individual pieces of mail, including newspapers and magazines.¹³ Sermons also constituted a very large portion of published materials as a whole. Although the percentage of religious titles produced by American presses fluctuated considerably during the second half of the eighteenth century, those percentages were always much higher than has been the case over the last century.¹⁴ Among these religious titles, printed sermons long held pride of place. In both oral sermons and printed sermons, political discussion was commonplace.

Although sermons with political content came from all American regions throughout this early history, the colonies of New England specialized in producing addresses that were officially designated "election sermons." The first of these special sermons was delivered to the Massachusetts General Court on May 14, 1634.¹⁵ The preacher was the revered Puritan patriarch, John Cotton. His sermon urged the newly seated legislators to reelect the outgoing governor, John Winthrop, to another year in office. Although it was a spirited effort, the General Court disregarded Reverend Cotton's advice and chose to replace Winthrop. Thereafter, for almost every one of the next 250 years, Massachusetts legislators designated a minister to deliver a sermon when they convened to organize for the new political year. Beginning in 1661, these sermons were regularly published. Connecticut, Vermont, and New Hampshire imitated Massachusetts with annual election sermons of their own, although these states brought an end to the practice some years before Massachusetts stopped its sermons in 1884.

A study of these election sermons is a useful enterprise in itself, but election sermons were far from the only pulpit occasions when congregations received a political word from the Lord.¹⁶ In New En-

13. See MARK A. NOLL, *AMERICA'S GOD: FROM JONATHAN EDWARDS TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN* 201 (2002).

14. *Id.* at 163.

15. Material in this paragraph is from Lindsay Swift, *The Massachusetts Election Sermons*, in 1 *THE PUBLICATIONS OF THE COLONIAL SOCIETY OF MASSACHUSETTS* 5-7 (Cambridge, John Wilson & Son 1897).

16. The literature is extensive, but perhaps not as vast as might be expected. See Harry P. Kerr, *The Election Sermon: Primer for Revolutionaries*, 29 *SPEECH MONOGRAPHS* 13, 16 (1962) (discussing the wide availability of printed sermons). See generally John G. Buchanan, *Drumfire*

gland—as well as elsewhere during the colonial period and later in the newly formed United States—colonies, towns, states, and other governmental units frequently called for days of fasting with special sermons that implored divine relief from an array of misfortunes.¹⁷ With almost equal frequency, these same government units designated special days for thanksgiving and again commissioned ministers to provide sermons that thanked God for deliverance from one trial or another. In addition, ministers regularly preached about current political events without waiting for governments to commission special occasions for that purpose. The result was a mass of sermonic political discussion surrounding almost all of the significant events in colonial and early national American history.¹⁸

Before examining the shifting terrain of the political sermon, however, an additional preliminary word is in order. During this stage of American history, it is important to remember that organized religion was dominated by Protestants of British origin.¹⁹ Into the 1790s, Protestant churches made up at least ninety-eight percent of all houses of worship, with only a handful of Jewish synagogues and only slightly more Catholic churches sprinkling the landscape.²⁰ More than eighty percent of the Protestant churches were of British origin.²¹ The churches of British origin were even more dominant in public visibility than statistics indicate because the general influence of the new nation's Lutherans, German Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Mennonites,

from the Pulpit: Natural Law in the Colonial Election Sermons of Massachusetts, 12 AM. J. LEGAL HIST. 232 (1968) (describing early American sermons that touched on a multitude of government activity and legal issues); Alan J. Silva, *Rituals of Empowerment: Politics and Rhetoric in the Puritan Election Sermon* (1993) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Davis, on file with Pitts Theology Library, Emory University) (examining Puritan election sermons in seventeenth century Massachusetts).

17. For outstanding general work on fasting and thanksgiving sermons, as well as on week-in, week-out sermons with political bearing, see generally HARRY S. STOUT, *THE NEW ENGLAND SOUL: PREACHING AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND* (1986).

18. For superb coverage of both regular and special-event sermons, see generally STOUT, *supra* note 17. This Article discusses a few election sermons, which are properly defined as such, but most of the sermons discussed herein are in the broad category of general political sermons. However defined, sermons were a staple of early American public life. See Mark A. Noll, *Religion and the American Founding*, in *THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS* 43, 61–63 (Corwin E. Smidt et al. eds., 2009); Mark A. Noll, *American Empire (1802–1898): Political Order*, in *RELIGION IN AMERICAN HISTORY*, 173–189 (Amanda Porterfield & John Corrigan eds., 2010).

19. Readily accessible information about denominational size in the colonial and revolutionary periods is found in EDWIN SCOTT GAUSTAD, *HISTORICAL ATLAS OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY* (rev. ed. 1976); EDWIN SCOTT GAUSTAD & PHILIP L. BARLOW, *NEW HISTORICAL ATLAS OF RELIGION IN AMERICA* 12–54 (2001).

20. There were fifty Catholic churches in 1770 and sixty-five in 1790. NOLL, *supra* note 10, at 166.

21. *Id.*

and Moravians was restricted by their use of non-English languages. Forces that anticipated the flourishing religious pluralism of later American history were indeed active in this era, but that pluralism did not fully emerge until the surge of immigration that began in the 1830s.

III. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE POLITICAL SERMON, 1740–1763

The key development that transformed the political sermon in the 1740s and 1750s was the combination of fervent revivalism and imperial warfare. From that combination arose the particularly American amalgamation of religion and politics that carried the colonies toward independence and into their existence as the new United States of America.

The ideological interchange that led directly to the revolutionary era's politicalization of religion began during the colonial wars of the 1740s.²² Before that time, Protestant thought in the colonies featured an almost exclusive concentration on God's direct providential control over events and opinions. Orthodox Protestants and Catholics were also inclined to view dissenting or radical politics as a dangerous substitute for reliance on divine providence. Dissenting or radical political thought was known by several names: "commonwealth," a reference to the Parliamentary struggle against Charles I; "Real Whig," a reference to the overthrow of the Catholic James II; "republican," a reference to a long tradition stretching back to sixteenth century Italian city-states; and "country," a reference to those who opposed the court corruption of the Hanoverian monarchs. The complaint of traditional Protestants against these forms of political dissent was that they offered human political exertion as a substitute for reliance on divine providence. From this standpoint, political ideologies made human self-reliance, rather than divine grace, the key to human flourishing, and they put an Enlightenment confidence in human perception and human action in the place historically reserved for rightful reliance on God's all-seeing and all-knowing power.²³ The great change in the colonies during the 1740s was the alignment of historical

22. The material in this paragraph summarizes NOLL, *supra* note 13, at 42–50, 73–92.

23. For a full discussion of the theological implications of republican politics, see J.C.D. CLARK, *THE LANGUAGE OF LIBERTY 1660–1832: POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN WORLD* 38–40 (1994); J.C.D. CLARK, *ENGLISH SOCIETY 1660–1832: RELIGION, IDEOLOGY, AND POLITICS DURING THE ANCIEN REGIME* 277–94 (rev. ed. 2000).

Protestant doctrines of providence with heretofore suspect principles of republicanism.

Well into the 1740s, religious commentary on public events maintained the traditional Protestant emphases. Yet with King George's War between Britain and France from 1744 to 1748, the content of later American religious politics made its colonial debut.²⁴ For the colonists, King George's War featured New England's miraculously successful assault on the French fortress at Louisbourg, Cape Breton Island. In making the merger of orthodox Protestant thought and heretofore suspect republican thought possible, the old standby of Protestant anti-Catholicism played a major role.

As imperial struggle with France intensified, a number of colonial ministers from across the theological spectrum began to link the fate of genuine Christianity to the future of British liberty. Battlefield reports from Scotland, where loyal Protestant troops defeated the Catholic Bonny Prince Charles, joined reports from Louisbourg to push ideological temperatures to new heights. The Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent in New Jersey, for instance, used a Real Whig vocabulary to hail the reduction of Louisbourg as the rescue of "our civil and religious Liberties" from an enemy "who unweariedly labours to rob us of our civil and religious Liberties, and bring us into the most wretched Vassalage to arbitrary Power and Church Tyranny."²⁵ The liberal Charles Chauncy of Boston also mixed once-separated categories by referencing the "Salvation" that God secured for the colonies in the defeat of the French.²⁶ Theological moderate Nathaniel Walter of Roxbury, Massachusetts went even further by finding biblical prototypes for the "good Commonwealth's Man" of New England who had fought so valiantly at Louisbourg.²⁷ Even more striking, Walter viewed Jesus as one who had carried "every Virtue to the highest Pitch," including "that Devotedness to the publick Service, and those other Virtues which render Antiquity venerable."²⁸

24. The material in this paragraph summarizes NOLL, *supra* note 13, at 78-80.

25. Gilbert Tennent, *The Necessity of Praising God for Mercies Receiv'd: A Sermon Occasion'd, By the Success of the Late Expedition (Under the Direction and Command of Gen. Pepperel and Com. Warren) in Reducing the City and Fortresses of Louisburgh on Cape-Breton, to the Obedience of His Majesty King George the Second* 7, 37 (July 7, 1745) (Phila., William Bradford 1745).

26. Charles Chauncy, *Marvellous Things Done by the Right Hand and Holy Arm of God in Getting Him the Victory: A Sermon* (July 18, 1745) (Boston, M. Cooper 1745).

27. Nathaniel Walter, *The Character of a True Patriot: A Sermon Preach'd at the Thursday Lecture in Boston* 17-18 (Aug. 1, 1745) (Boston, D. Henschman 1745).

28. *Id.*

The familiar vocabulary of republican ideology, which seemed to spring up everywhere, was driven by an inflamed burst of anti-Catholicism. Charles Chauncy and his Massachusetts colleague Joseph Sewall revived that spirit when they rejoiced over the defeat of the French by referring to the pope as the “Antichrist” and “the Man of Sin.”²⁹ If the American colonists were now innovative in beginning to rely on a republican picture of the world that their Puritan predecessors associated with heresy, then the colonists’ vigorous anti-Catholicism may have softened apprehensions about using the new political vocabulary.

The timing of this religious-political confluence was critical because the other great colonial event of the 1740s, in addition to the war with France, was a revival.³⁰ The affective evangelistic preaching of George Whitefield and his many imitators produced spectacular results: from crowds of unprecedented size gathering to hear itinerant preachers to unusually large additions to church membership rolls and a new sense of shared religious commitment linking partisans of the revival from Savannah, Georgia to Portland, Maine.³¹ One of the most politically significant consequences of the colonial Great Awakening was the collapse of New England’s Puritan churches as the all-encompassing guardians of public ideology. In the wake of the revivals, New England’s church–state establishments were drastically weakened. Substantial ecclesiastical parties—differentiated by degrees of enthusiasm for or opposition to the Awakening—now competed vigorously against one another. Despite holding on for nearly a century more in Massachusetts, and almost that long in Connecticut and New Hampshire, the Puritan establishments would never recover their once nearly complete—and once welcomed—control of public life. Republican discourse, in other words, became a significant influence in colonial religious discourse only after the grand experiment of the Puritans’ godly commonwealths suffered an irrevocable setback. Alasdair MacIntyre was not thinking of colonial American politics when he wrote about radical political thought in the age of Enlightenment, but his words nevertheless apply directly to the American setting both during the war and after the revival: “Republicanism in the

29. See Chauncy, *supra* note 26, at 22; Joseph Sewall, *The Lamb Slain, Worthy to Be Praised, As the Most Powerful, Rich, Wise, and Strong: A Sermon Preach’d at the Thursday Lecture in Boston (July 11, 1745)* (Boston, D. Henchman 1745).

30. An excellent general history of the colonial revival is THOMAS S. KIDD, *THE GREAT AWAKENING: THE ROOTS OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY IN COLONIAL AMERICA* (2007). Briefer treatment is provided in 1 MARK A. NOLL, *THE RISE OF EVANGELICALISM: THE AGE OF EDWARDS, WHITEFIELD AND THE WESLEYS 76–135* (2003).

31. NOLL, *supra* note 30.

eighteenth century is the project of restoring a community of virtue."³²

The ideological transformation of colonial religious language in 1745 and 1746 provides a context for understanding why Jonathan Mayhew's sermon of January 30, 1750, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, was such a sensation when it was first preached, and why it continues to be such a landmark for historians.³³ The sermon celebrated the execution of Charles I by Parliament and its Puritan allies, which had taken place one hundred years earlier, and it offered a potent blend of liberal religion, commonwealth politics, and fervent religious rhetoric. Thus, it solidified the marriage of Protestantism and republicanism and pointed toward what would soon become standard colonial rhetoric.

The renewal of hostilities against France in 1754 pushed other preachers where Mayhew had gone.³⁴ Throughout this new imperial crisis, the Real Whig vocabulary spread everywhere. For example, in 1755, the Presbyterian Samuel Davies of Virginia preached the first of several stirring war sermons that dressed orthodox theology in the garments of Whig liberty. The ostensible purpose of the sermon was to appeal for repentance and the New Birth by exploiting the calamities of war, but Davies's analysis of the war was thoroughly republican: "our religion, our liberty, our property, our lives, and everything sacred or dear to us, are in danger," especially of being "enslaved" by "an arbitrary, absolute monarch" who enforces conformity to "the superstition and idolatries of the church of Rome."³⁵

In New England, Ebenezer Devotion of Windham County, Connecticut was the election preacher for 1753. His sermon's theme was "the civil ruler" as the leader who encouraged "Vertue" and suppressed "Vice," which were the positive and negative poles of the Real Whig globe.³⁶ Devotion infused republican vocabulary with an older Puritan language by referring to the people of Connecticut as God's "Covenant People."³⁷ Thus, Devotion strongly defended his

32. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY* 236 (2d ed., Univ. of Notre Dame Press 1984) (1981).

33. For a full account of this sermon and its effects, see CHARLES W. AKERS, *CALLED UNTO LIBERTY: A LIFE OF JONATHAN MAYHEW 1720-1766*, at 81-97 (1964).

34. This war was also called the Seven Years' War. For a full account of religion and politics during this war, see NATHAN O. HATCH, *THE SACRED CAUSE OF LIBERTY: REPUBLICAN THOUGHT AND THE MILLENNIUM IN REVOLUTIONARY NEW ENGLAND* 36-54 (1977).

35. Samuel Davies, *God the Sovereign of All Kingdoms*, in 3 *SERMONS ON IMPORTANT SUBJECTS* 173 (4th ed., New York, J. & J. Harper 1828).

36. Ebenezer Devotion, *The Civil Ruler: A Dignify'd Servant of the Lord, but a Dying Man* 35, 50 (New London, Timothy Green 1753).

37. *Id.* at 50.

colony's church–state establishment, but he did so with the new language of Real Whig politics.

Three years later, the Connecticut election sermon was offered by someone with stronger credentials—the Reverend George Beckwith of Lyme—who had just returned from serving as a chaplain with British colonial forces in a campaign against French troops and their Native American allies. For Reverend Beckwith, religious and political reasoning combined to lend the colonial cause the highest possible sanction; victory over the French in the previous war had been “a Salvation beyond a rational Probability,” and now during another war and in the face of Connecticut's manifestly evil enemies, Beckwith felt free to ask, “Is not God for us? is not the Cause His? are not our Enemies His Enemies?”³⁸

By the time active fighting against the French came to an end in 1760, an unusually strong bond between republican political ideology and traditional religious convictions had emerged in the American colonies. This bond was expressed particularly in defense of New England's special place in the eye of God. The prime vehicle for that defense was the political sermon.

IV. THE FLOURISHING OF THE POLITICAL SERMON, 1763–1783

“The crisis over the Stamp Act that immediately followed the end of the French and Indian War—and the subsequently spiraling alienation from Britain” expanded American commitment to Christian republican ideology.³⁹ Special events, often interpreted through the sermon, tightened the link between Christian and Real Whig reasoning.⁴⁰ Thus, colonists in the 1760s resisted Anglican efforts to place a bishop in the colonies because they perceived this as a threat to both civil and religious liberty.⁴¹ They regarded the Quebec Act of 1774,⁴² which legalized establishment status for the French Catholics of that colony, as proof of Britain's opposition to true religion and promotion of civil tyranny.⁴³

38. George Beckwith, *That People a Safe and Happy People, Who Have God for, and Among Them Shewed in a Sermon Before the General Assembly of Connecticut* 25, 58 (May 13, 1756) (New London, T. Green 1756).

39. NOLL, *supra* note 13, at 81.

40. *See id.* at 80–82.

41. For treatment of that resistance, see generally FRANK LAMBERT, *THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA* 195–99 (2003).

42. Quebec Act, 1774, 14 Geo. III c. 83 (Eng./Gr. Brit./U.K.).

43. For patriot attitudes towards the Quebec Act, see LAMBERT, *supra* note 41, at 209, 213; Quebec Act, 1774, 14 Geo. III c. 83 (Eng./Gr. Brit./U.K.).

On the eve of warfare with Great Britain, the merger of Protestant convictions about providence, covenant, and religious virtue with secular convictions about liberty, rights, and political virtue was now ubiquitous. The result for patriot leaders was the availability of a vocabulary that could define the political struggle as a clash of deep moral principles. For colonial churches, the conflict with Britain took on apocalyptic meaning.⁴⁴ For later American history, it was of great significance that this mixture of political and religious viewpoints occurred at the dawn of national existence. The political sermon was the crucible in which those ingredients were mixed.

For supporters of the struggle against Britain, traditional Protestant and traditional republican vocabularies became almost interchangeable. The two perspectives merged in describing human nature as potentially noble but in need of constant restraint to avoid the natural drift toward corruption. They used similar language to describe the relationship between individual morality and public well-being, specifically, that the personal exercise of virtue provided the necessary foundation for a free and well-balanced republican society. In turn, liberty—civil *and* religious—was a prerequisite for the cultivation of virtue. Tyranny not only revealed the degeneracy of rulers, but made it impossible for virtue to be cultivated. Without virtue there could be no true liberty, without liberty no health in society.

As tensions with Great Britain escalated towards open war, the drumbeat of political sermons intensified. In 1774, Samuel Sherwood of Weston, Connecticut, preached a sermon on “Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers” in which he described the conflict between Britain and the colonies as between “the true friends to the rights of humanity,—our dear country, and constitutional liberties and privileges, civil and religious: And the base, traitorous and perfidious enemies thereto.”⁴⁵ Two years later in 1776, Ebenezer Cleaveland of Massachusetts used a biblical vocabulary of salvation to describe the measures that must be taken to turn a revenue officer of the Crown into a patriotic Son of Liberty.⁴⁶ That same year, the Massachusetts election sermon was delivered by Samuel West, who raised the stakes

44. For full consideration of how apocalyptic themes informed political rhetoric of the period, see RUTH H. BLOCH, *VISIONARY REPUBLIC: MILLENNIAL THEMES IN AMERICAN THOUGHT, 1756–1800*, at 53–74 (1985); MARK A. NOLL, *CHRISTIANS IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION 53–60* (2006).

45. Samuel Sherwood, *A Sermon, Containing, Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers, and All Free-Born Subjects* ix (Aug. 31, 1774) (New Haven, T. & T. Green 1774).

46. Ebenezer Cleaveland, *The Abounding Grace of God Toward Notorious Sinners, Illustrated in a Sermon upon the Conversion and Call of the Matthew the Publican, to Be a True Christian and a Faithful Apostle of Jesus Christ* (July 31, 1774) (Salem, S. & E. Hall 1776).

almost as high as they could go: in the face of the “wanton exertion of arbitrary power” and a “barbarity unknown to Turks and Mahometan infidels,” he asked the assembled Massachusetts General Court, “Does it not then highly concern us all to stand fast in the liberty wherewith heaven has made us free, and to strive to get the victory over the beast and his image, over every species of tyranny.”⁴⁷ At just about the same time in Danbury, Connecticut, the Reverend Ebenezer Baldwin considered the possibility that the political-moral-religious struggle with the mother country might indicate that America would become “the principal Seat of that glorious Kingdom, which Christ shall erect upon Earth in the latter Days.”⁴⁸

In 1776, John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton and the era’s most politically active cleric, preached a memorable sermon just before he left for Philadelphia to sign the Declaration of Independence.⁴⁹ That sermon, delivered on May 17, 1776, was entitled *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*. It proclaimed God’s ability to bring good out of the unrestrained excesses of British tyranny. When this sermon was published, Witherspoon added a special coda addressed to his fellow Scots that encouraged them to join in support of the patriot cause.⁵⁰

Throughout the war years that followed, American pulpits reverberated with these fervent themes. In 1777, a New England Presbyterian, Abraham Keteltas, used a sermon to contend that “[t]he most precious remains of civil liberty the world can now boast of, are lodged in our hands.”⁵¹ Consequently, Keteltas had no doubt that the conflict under way with Britain was

the cause of truth, against error and falsehood; . . . the cause of pure and undefiled religion, against bigotry, superstition, [and] human inventions In short, it is the cause of heaven against hell—of the kind Parent of the universe against the prince of darkness, and the destroyer of the human race.⁵²

47. Samuel West, *A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Council and the Honorable House of Representatives, of the Colony of the Massachusetts-Bay* 53, 67 (May 29, 1776) (Boston, John Gill 1776).

48. Ebenezer Baldwin, *The Duty of Rejoicing Under Calamities and Afflictions, Considered and Improved in a Sermon* 38 (Nov. 16, 1775) (New York, Hugh Gaine 1776).

49. For the full context explaining sources of Witherspoon’s political views, see JEFFREY H. MORRISON, *JOHN WITHERSPOON AND THE FOUNDING OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC* (2005).

50. See John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men: A Sermon Preached at Princeton* 61–78 (May 17, 1776) (Phila., R. Aitken 1776).

51. Abraham Keteltas, *God Arising and Pleading His People’s Cause; or, the American War in Favor of Liberty, Against the Measures and Arms of Great Britain, Shewn to be the Cause of God: In a Sermon Preached October 5th, 1777 at an Evening Lecture in the Presbyterian Church in Newbury-Port* 27 (Oct. 5, 1777) (Newbury-Port, John Mycall 1777).

52. *Id.* at 30.

The same year, the preacher of the Connecticut election sermon, John Devotion, waxed poetically rhapsodic, but in the same vein:

Lo! the angel Gabriel comes.
From him that sits upon the throne;
All nations hear the great Jehovah's will;
America, henceforth separate,
Sit as Queen among the nations.

.....

Live, Live, Live
Beloved of the Lord, until he comes,
Whose right it is to reign:
Call her Free and Independent STATES of AMERICA!
Hallelujah, Praise the Lord. Amen.⁵³

Four years later, Moses Mather, speaking to the same audience, looked back on the successful military struggle with much the same view. At the beginning of the conflict with Britain, Mather had expressed the opinion that the colonists' "affections are weaned from Great Britain, by similar means and almost as miraculously as the Israelites from Egypt."⁵⁴ Now in 1781, he expressed an even stronger conclusion that "the over-ruling hand of divine providence has been so often so conspicuous in the events of the present war, as to extort a confession, even from infidelity itself, that it is God that fighteth for us."⁵⁵ More succinct was the Presbyterian Robert Smith from Pequea, Pennsylvania, who affirmed in a sermon during the same year that "the cause of America is the cause of Christ."⁵⁶ In 1783, this strand of sermonic interpretation was summarized by Erza Stiles, the president of Yale College, when he concluded a sermon based on a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy⁵⁷ by stating that the blessings promised to Israel were "allusively prophetick of the future prosperity and splendour of the United States."⁵⁸ In sum, the path of extravagantly

53. JOHN DEVOTION, *THE DUTY AND INTEREST OF A PEOPLE TO SANCTIFY THE LORD OF HOSTS 39* (Hartford, Ebenezer Watson 1777).

54. Moses Mather, *Sermon, America's Appeal to the Impartial World, Wherein the Rights of the Americans, As Men, British Subjects, and As Colonists; the Equity of the Demand, and of the Manner in Which It Is Made Upon Them by Great-Britain, Are Stated and Considered, and, the Opposition Made by the Colonies to Acts of Parliament, Their Resorting to Arms in Their Necessary Defence, Against the Military Armaments, Employed to Enforce Them, Vindicated 69* (Hartford, Ebenezer Watson 1775),

55. Moses Mather, *Sermon, Preached in the Audience of the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut, in Hartford, on the Day of Their Anniversary Election 16 (May 10, 1781)* (New London, Timothy Green 1781).

56. Robert Smith, *The Obligations of the Confederate States of North America to Praise God 33* (Dec. 13, 1781) (Baltimore, John Hayes 1783).

57. *Deuteronomy 5:1-33*.

58. Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honour: A Sermon, Preached Before His Excellency Jonathan Trumbull, Esq L.L.D. Governour and Commander in Chief, and*

political pulpit rhetoric that would one day reach Reverend Jeremiah Wright was well marked out.

The effective use of patriotic sermons was almost certainly the reason why more and more pronouncements by leading patriots came to take on a sermonic quality. When Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* in 1776,⁵⁹ he had likely come to the skeptical conclusions that he later published about the legendary character of the Bible.⁶⁰ But this opinion did not prevent him from citing Hebrew scriptures at great length in his influential attack on monarchy or from using a religiously charged vocabulary to subvert accepted British notions of hereditary power.⁶¹

Toward the end of 1777, when the Continental Congress proclaimed a special day of thanksgiving to praise God for the patriots' recent victory at Saratoga, it asked Samuel Adams to draft the proclamation.⁶² The result was a noteworthy effort, not only for its sermonic quality, but also because it intermixed themes of individualist or Lockean liberalism with strong republican motifs that also undergirded the conflict with Britain. Adams began with a Puritan-like reminder that it was "the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to him for benefits received, and to implore such farther blessings as they stand in need of."⁶³ But he went on in republican and Lockean tones to say that similar adoration was due to God for his providential aid "in the prosecution of a just and necessary war, for the defence and establishment of our unalienable rights and liberties."⁶⁴ The proclamation called the people to prayer on the eighteenth of December, so that they might

consecrate themselves to the service of their divine benefactor; and . . . join the penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favour, and their humble and earnest supplica-

the Honourable the General Assembly, of the State of Connecticut, Convened at Hartford, at the Anniversary Election 9 (May 8, 1783) (Worcester, Isaiah Thomas 1785).

59. THOMAS PAINE, *COMMON SENSE AND THE CRISIS* (Dolphin Books 1960) (1776).

60. See THOMAS PAINE, *THE AGE OF REASON: BEING AN INVESTIGATION OF TRUE AND FABULOUS THEOLOGY* (New York, George Forman 7th ed. 1795); THOMAS PAINE, *THE AGE OF REASON: PART THE SECOND, BEING AN INVESTIGATION OF TRUE AND FABULOUS THEOLOGY* (London, Daniel Isaac Eaton 1796).

61. PAINE, *supra* note 59, at 19–27.

62. See 9 *JOURNALS OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS 1774–1789*, at 854–55, 855 n.2 (Worthington Chauncey Ford ed., 1907).

63. *Id.* at 854–55; see also Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution*, 24 *WM. & MARY Q.* 3 (1967) (describing the Puritan echo in Revolutionary rhetoric).

64. *JOURNALS OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS*, *supra* note 62, at 855.

tion that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance.⁶⁵

Congress also asked the people to pray for material prosperity, but ended by stressing the need to cultivate “the principles of true liberty, virtue and piety, under his nurturing hand, and to prosper the means of religion for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consisteth ‘in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.’”⁶⁶ Whatever the degree of religious sincerity among the congressmen who passed this resolution, they successfully captured the mix of theology and ideology that ministers proclaimed from many pulpits when justifying the war of independence.

At least substantially because of the way the clergymen supported the patriot cause, religion played an important role in how the Founders depicted the struggle against Britain and how they described a well-functioning political order.⁶⁷ The Founders differed among themselves on many matters of theology as well as politics, but they agreed on the need for religion to support a republican approach to government. Thus, John Jay and John Witherspoon were evangelicals in something like the modern sense of the term; James Wilson and Alexander Hamilton fluctuated in their attachment to Christian orthodoxy; George Washington and James Madison shared devotion to the republic and an extreme reticence about disclosing their personal religious beliefs; and Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson held views ranging from Unitarian to Deist. Yet all of these major Founders wanted the newly formed United States to promote religious liberty, and none wanted the national government to dictate religious beliefs or practices. They were mostly committed to the radical innovation of separating church and state. In addition, the Founders also agreed that the free exercise of religion was essential to their vision of an American republic.

For the later history of North America, it was especially significant that the message from patriotic pulpits overwhelmed political principles proclaimed from Loyalist pulpits.⁶⁸ Sermons by Anglicans like Jonathan Boucher of Maryland and Charles Inglis of New York City

65. *Id.*

66. *Id.* at 855. For an entire book devoted to the religious interests of the Continental Congress, see generally DEREK H. DAVIS, RELIGION AND THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS, 1774–1789: CONTRIBUTIONS TO ORIGINAL INTENT (2000).

67. The material in this paragraph summarizes material found in JOHN G. WEST, JR., THE POLITICS OF REVELATION AND REASON: RELIGION AND CIVIC LIFE IN THE NEW NATION (1996).

68. For a thorough study of Loyalist viewpoints that includes much material on Jonathan Boucher and Charles Inglis, see NANCY L. RHODEN, REVOLUTIONARY ANGLICANISM: THE COLONIAL CHURCH OF ENGLAND CLERGY DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION (1999).

propounded a picture of social well-being that drew on doctrines of creation—whereby God established rulers in their places—and of nature—whereby the harmonious working of the created order was thought to mirror God’s providential control of the cosmos.⁶⁹ Moderate Loyalists like Inglis also accepted some aspects of Whig political thought, yet the bond between their Whig principles and Loyalist convictions was never as strong as the bond between the revivalistic Protestantism and the republican thought that prevailed in the newly formed United States. This may have been true because, as a religion that stressed creation and nature, Christian Loyalism could not resonate in a situation thought to be imperiled by tyranny as powerfully as revivalistic evangelicalism with its emphasis on redemption and dramatic rescue from sin. The American road not taken, however, would define the political history of Canada, where over thirty thousand United Empire Loyalists found a home after leaving the new United States. Those Loyalists included Charles Inglis, who became the first Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia.⁷⁰

Sermons also attended the patriots’ great moral blind spot, which was their vociferous complaining about Parliament’s enslavement policies while they continued to enslave African-Americans. Tracts and sermons from prominent British figures like John Wesley and his Methodist colleague John Fletcher highlighted this inconsistency in vain.⁷¹ They were joined by only a few American pastors, including the Caucasian Samuel Hopkins (a disciple of Jonathan Edwards) and the African-American Lemuel Haynes (a close student of Edwards); both of these ministers used Christian and republican arguments in their sermons to attack chattel bondage, but they had little to show for their efforts.⁷²

69. See, e.g., Jonathan Boucher, *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution, in THIRTEEN DISCOURSES, PREACHED IN NORTH AMERICA BETWEEN THE YEARS 1763 AND 1765* (Russell & Russell 1967) (1797); Charles Inglis, *The Christian Soldier’s Duty Briefly Delineated: In a Sermon Preached at King’s-Bridge (Sept. 7, 1777)* (New York, H. Gaine 1777).

70. For a history of the course of Inglis’ career in Nova Scotia, see generally PETER M. DOLL, *REVOLUTION, RELIGION, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: IMPERIAL ANGLICANISM IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA 1745–1795*, at 230–52 (2000).

71. JOHN FLETCHER, *THE BIBLE AND THE SWORD* (1776), reprinted in *POLITICAL SERMONS OF THE AMERICAN FOUNDING ERA 1730–1805*, at 567–68, 577 (Ellis Sandoz ed., 1991); JOHN WESLEY, *A CALM ADDRESS TO OUR AMERICAN COLONIES* (1775), reprinted in *POLITICAL SERMONS OF THE AMERICAN FOUNDING ERA 1730–1805*, at 409–20 (Ellis Sandoz ed., 1991).

72. See, e.g., SAMUEL HOPKINS, *A DIALOGUE, CONCERNING THE SLAVERY OF THE AFRICANS* (Norwich, J. P. Spooner 1776); LEMUEL HAYNES, *LIBERTY FURTHER EXTENDED* (1776), reprinted in *BLACK PREACHER TO WHITE AMERICA: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF LEMUEL HAYNES, 1774–1833*, at 17–30 (Richard Newman ed., 1990).

Unlike sermons that defended ties with Britain or attacked the institution of slavery, patriotic sermons became a major force during the Stamp Act crisis and remained important throughout the Revolutionary War.⁷³ Compared to other institutions of moral authority, churches loomed large in late colonial society. And the sermon was probably more effective than other forms of public communication, such as newspapers, handbills, or pamphlets. The prominence of the institution and the effectiveness of the medium made political sermons a vitally important factor in the creation of the United States.

V. THE DECLINE OF THE POLITICAL SERMON, 1783–1800

Given the prominence of political sermons during the Revolutionary period, including many election sermons, it is puzzling that this pulpit genre rapidly declined as a public force once national independence was secured. To be sure, a few sermons lauded the new Constitution of 1789 as a nearly divine creation. For example, Alexander MacWhorter, a respected New Jersey Presbyterian, expressed what was becoming a common view when he preached in 1793, “Perhaps it is not in the reach of beings, of no more extended intelligence than man, to work up any thing nearer absolute perfection, consistent with, and creative of freedom, order and happiness, than the cardinal principles of our glorious *Civil Constitution*.”⁷⁴

Others were not so sure, especially abolitionists who scorned the Constitution for how it supported slavery by stipulating that slaves be counted as three-fifths of a person when determining congressional representation,⁷⁵ by prohibiting even the possibility of terminating the slave trade before 1808,⁷⁶ and in the provision that galled the most, by requiring the return of any “Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof,” if such a person escaped to a free state.⁷⁷ Based on these objections, William Lloyd Garrison would later argue that the Constitution was nothing less than an “agreement with Hell.”⁷⁸

73. See STOUT, *supra* note 17, at 261–68 (describing sermons during the Stamp Act Crisis); *id.* at 283–311 (describing sermons during the War for Independence).

74. ALEXANDER MACWHORTER, A FESTIVAL DISCOURSE, OCCASIONED BY THE CELEBRATION OF THE SEVENTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE, IN THE TOWN OF NEWARK 11–12 (Newark, John Woods 1793).

75. U.S. CONST. art. I, § 2, cl. 3, *amended* by U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 2.

76. U.S. CONST. art. I, § 9, cl. 1, *repealed* by U.S. CONST. amend. XIII, § 1.

77. U.S. CONST. art. IV, § 2, cl. 3, *repealed* by U.S. CONST. amend. XIII, § 1.

78. Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Constitutional Convention: Making a Covenant with Death*, in *BEYOND CONFEDERATION: ORIGINS OF THE CONSTITUTION AND AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY* 188 (Richard Beeman et al. eds., 1987).

In general, however, far fewer political sermons were preached when the Constitution was being written and publicly debated than when Americans were struggling for independence. The reason lies primarily in the altered circumstances that led to the framing of the new nation's charter.

The Articles of Confederation, which were to govern the newly independent United States, went into effect in 1781.⁷⁹ Compounding political problems under the Articles and a weak post-war economy were moral concerns that troubled James Madison and several others who took the lead in calling for a new instrument of government. Along with like-minded observers, Madison was appalled at the factionalism dividing states into a debtor class advocating "easy money," and a creditor class demanding a stable currency.⁸⁰ They were particularly dismayed at the short-lived but troubling debtors' rebellion led by Daniel Shays in western Massachusetts. Madison and others observed that the new states were turning to men of little consequence—even to rabble-rousers and demagogues—instead of electing morally responsible men of substance. Worse, state legislatures often acted with extraordinary disregard for checks and balances on power.

The question that Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and other veterans of the Revolutionary struggle asked themselves was a grave one: Had the war to preserve republicanism against Britain succeeded only to witness the decline of republicanism in an independent America? The call in 1787 for a convention to consider a remedy for such defects seemed to offer one last chance to bring together popular government and individual freedom.

Despite the political crisis created by dissatisfaction with the Articles of Confederation, this crisis lacked much of the drama that had attended the War.⁸¹ The secrecy of the Constitutional Convention further removed the event from public scrutiny. Only when the Philadelphia gathering was completed did the new Constitution become the object of intense public debate. To anti-Federalists, too much power was vested in the central government. But to Federalist supporters, the genius of the Constitution lay in its balance of powers that prevented any one segment of the national government from becoming

79. ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION (1781), *reprinted in* JAMES BAYARD, A BRIEF EXPOSITION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES 171–78 (Phila., Hogan & Thompson 1840). The Articles were ratified by the states in 1781. *Id.* at 18.

80. For Madison's disquiet about events in the mid-1780s, see GORDON S. WOOD, EMPIRE OF LIBERTY: A HISTORY OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 1789–1815, at 15–17 (2009).

81. *See id.* at 31–36.

too powerful, even as it enabled the national government to check the arbitrary exercise of authority in the states.

The debate over ratifying the Constitution was accompanied by a blizzard of publications, but only a few sermons. Instead, newspapers took the lead in publishing pro and con arguments on the merits of the proposed new form of government. The eighty-five *Federalist Papers* authored by Madison, Hamilton, and John Jay became the best known of such writings, but there were many others.⁸²

In contrast to conflicts during the Revolution and in contrast to constitutional arguments leading to the Civil War, arguments between Federalists and anti-Federalists about ratifying the Constitution witnessed a much less overt role for religion.⁸³ To be sure, while the Continental and Confederation congresses had moved to expand freedom of religion in the period between 1774 and 1789, they had also promoted religion more actively than would the later United States Congress.⁸⁴ For example, these bodies called for public days of thanksgiving and prayer; they authorized prayers to open their daily sessions and they retained chaplains to offer them; they attended sermons (including Roman Catholic sermons) and went to church funerals as a body; they sponsored military chaplains; they referenced God in official documents with more frequency than did the Constitution; they incorporated religious symbols into the nation's Great Seal; and they provided federal lands in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 for education in order to promote "religion, morality, and knowledge."⁸⁵ Yet as would be true for the Constitution, most of these actions were pragmatic efforts to achieve immediate results rather than consistently reasoned efforts to establish carefully defined principles. The most common congressional action was to consistently refer religious questions to the states.

In the tidal wave of published commentary generated during debates over the ratification of the Constitution, quotations from Scripture abounded. The Bible, in fact, was quoted much more often than

82. See generally ALEXANDER HAMILTON ET AL., *THE FEDERALIST PAPERS* (Ian Shapiro ed., Yale Univ. Press 2009).

83. See NOLL, *supra* note 13, at 164.

84. For coverage of religion and the Continental and Confederation Congresses, see generally DAVIS, *supra* note 66, at 73–80 (describing congressional motions for prayers to open sessions and retain chaplains); *id.* at 80–83 (describing the creation of the military chaplaincy); *id.* at 83–90 (recounting the Continental Congress's declaration of public days of fast and thanksgiving); *id.* at 137–44 (explaining the origins of the "theistic framework" in Great Seal); *id.* at 168–72 (discussing the religious implications of the Northwest Ordinance); DAVID L. HOLMES, *THE FAITHS OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS* 2–3 (2006) (recounting church attendance of members of Congress, including Roman Catholic Masses).

85. See DAVIS, *supra* note 66, at 169.

any other authority.⁸⁶ But most of these citations were ceremonial and rhetorical; only rarely did religious concerns enter into the deliberations at Philadelphia or the struggle for ratification. As indicated by major document collections for the revolutionary and constitutional periods, sermons or statements by clergy in other forms were much more common in the former era than in the latter.⁸⁷

Practicalities, not principles, dictated that religion be excluded from the constitutional debate. If there was to be a functioning national government, it was imperative that the different forms of state support for religion—including the conflicting religious tests that states prescribed for office holders—be removed from discussion. As Americans debated whether to ratify the new Constitution, five of the nation's fourteen states (Vermont had joined the original thirteen) provided some tax support for ministers; those five states and seven others continued religious tests for public office. Only Virginia and Rhode Island practiced the kind of separation of church and state that has since become the American norm, whereby the government does not provide money for churches and poses no religious conditions for participation in public life.⁸⁸ John F. Wilson's perceptive summary helps explain why sermons were relatively unimportant in this period: "At root, while the founding fathers were not antireligious individually or collectively, their overriding and commonly held objective of achieving an adequate federal government would only be frustrated if the issue of religion's relationship to regime were allowed to introduce a dimension of continuing divisiveness into their work."⁸⁹

86. See Donald Lutz, *The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought*, 78 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 189, 194 tbl.4 (1984).

87. More sermons for the years 1763–1783 than for 1783–1793 are found in the volumes of *POLITICAL SERMONS OF THE AMERICAN FOUNDING ERA*, *supra* note 71. Likewise, where Bernard Bailyn included seven sermons and eight other writings by clergymen in his list of seventy-two revolutionary era pamphlets, his compilation of several hundred documents from the Constitution's writing period included no sermons and less than ten statements of any kind by clergymen. Compare 1 PAMPHLETS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION 1750–1776 (Bernard Bailyn ed., 1965), with 1–2 THE DEBATE ON THE CONSTITUTION (Bernard Bailyn ed., 1993).

88. For a complete survey of church-state arrangements in the fourteen states in the early 1790s, see generally THOMAS J. CURRY, *THE FIRST FREEDOMS: CHURCH AND STATE IN AMERICA TO THE PASSAGE OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT 134–92* (1986).

89. John F. Wilson, *Religion, Government, and Power in the New American Nation*, in *RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS: FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE PRESENT* 84 (Mark A. Noll & Luke E. Harlow eds., 2d ed. 2007). For accounts that support Wilson's interpretation, see JAMES H. HUTSON, *CHURCH AND STATE IN AMERICA: THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES* 143–44 (2008); Martin E. Marty, *The American Revolution and Religion, 1765–1815*, in 7 *THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: ENLIGHTENMENT, REAWAKENING AND REVOLUTION 1660–1815*, at 510–11 (Stewart J. Brown & Timothy Tackett eds., 2006).

Yet throughout the drafting of the Constitution, and then during debates on its merits, several religious matters remained important. Almost all of the Founders presupposed that government under the Constitution would prosper only so long as morality, backed by religion, remained strong among the people at large.⁹⁰ The Massachusetts constitution of 1780 affirmed this message with language that other states later borrowed: “the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend [up]on piety, religion[] and morality.”⁹¹ This motive also lay behind many of the informal religious services that the early state and federal governments rendered to religion. These services included promoting national slogans such as “In God We Trust,” invoking God on state mottos and seals, proclaiming days of thanksgiving and prayer, supporting missionaries who ministered to Native Americans, and exempting church property from taxes.⁹²

The Founders also sought a wide scope for the free practice of religion with the 1786 Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom authored by Thomas Jefferson leading the way.⁹³ Yet in general, the reticence of the Constitution concerning religion and other matters of public philosophy helps explain the relative absence of sermonic commentary that it attracted. The First Amendment of 1791 was clear in its expression: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”⁹⁴ But even these provisions generated only modest public comment at the time, including comment from the pulpit.

The political sermons of the revolutionary era had been fixated on a specific form of abusive power. Power exercised from above—by the monarchy, the distant Parliament, the Roman Catholic pope, or the armies of great European powers—was the power that corrupted public life, and this power could only be combated with the virtue of free citizens. In the constitutional period, by contrast, the abuse of power that seemed most threatening came from below. Runaway legislators, whom the people had elected, and dangerous demagogues, who arose from the common folk, now loomed as the most serious threats to a healthy public order. Sermons served colonial and revolutionary era audiences well by defying abusive power from above. They were less useful against abusive power from the democratic mass.

90. See WEST, *supra* note 67.

91. HUTSON, *supra* note 89, at 109 (quoting MASS. CONST. pt. 1, art. 3 (amended 1833)).

92. *Id.* at 167.

93. VA. CODE ANN. § 57-1 (2007).

94. U.S. CONST. amend. I.

VI. THE REEMERGENCE OF THE POLITICAL SERMON, CIRCA 1800

The early decades of U.S. history under the Constitution witnessed the return of the political sermon, but in a new style. To be sure, it also witnessed at least two expressions of the old-style political sermon in the very last years of the eighteenth century.

First, George Washington's Farewell Address of 1796 functioned as a primer in classical republicanism in that it warned about the dangerous public effects of passion, praised the Constitution as "sacredly maintained," and cautioned against standing armies and political factions.⁹⁵ But it also became an oft-noticed expression of Christian republicanism because it promoted religion as critical for the public good: "Can it be, that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue?" To maintain that virtue, Washington evoked religion: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports."⁹⁶ The unprecedented torrent of memorial sermons after the death of Washington in late 1799 gave voice to the common conviction that Washington's republican dignity had been an antitype that fulfilled biblical typology for a godly ruler.⁹⁷ In effect, these sermons were a reprise of many themes that had poured from pulpits when Washington commanded the army of the Continental Congress.

The second return to an old-style political sermon occurred during the election campaign of 1800. In the long run-up to that election, several prominent ministers preached stem-winding sermons that attacked Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republican party as clones of the French Revolutionaries.⁹⁸ On the Fourth of July 1798, Timothy Dwight, who had succeeded Ezra Stiles as president of Yale College, explicitly linked Jefferson and his party to French atheism:

For what end shall we be connected with men, of whom this is the character and conduct? . . . Is it, that our churches may become temples of reason, . . . and our psalms of praise Marseillois hymns? Is it, that we may change our holy worship into a dance of Jacobin

95. George Washington, U.S. President, Farewell Address (Sept. 19, 1796), in *GEORGE WASHINGTON: WRITINGS* 966–69 (John Rhodehamel ed., 1997).

96. *Id.* at 971.

97. See generally James H. Smylie, *The President As Republican Prophet and King: Clerical Reflections on the Death of Washington*, 18 *J. CHURCH & ST.* 233, 233–52 (1976) (discussing the views that contemporary clergymen held of Washington).

98. For a discussion of the religious–political controversies of the 1800 election, see MARK A. NOLL, *ONE NATION UNDER GOD? CHRISTIAN FAITH AND POLITICAL ACTION IN AMERICA* 75–89 (1988).

phrenzy, and that we may behold a strumpet personating a Goddess on the altars of Jehovah?⁹⁹

As the election of 1800 drew nearer, clerical supporters of the Federalist candidate, John Adams, preached and wrote pamphlets that recalled language used against Britain in the 1770s. Said one, "I dread the election of Mr. Jefferson, because I believe him to be a confirmed infidel."¹⁰⁰

Yet this kind of sermon proved atypical in early national history because it assumed the apocalyptic importance of political events, it treated democratically elected leaders as monarchs able to wield absolute control, and it assumed that dignified pastors could command assent by virtue of their ministerial positions alone.¹⁰¹ The Congregationalists and Presbyterians, who for religious reasons supported the Federalists during the battle against Jefferson in 1800, soon quieted when Jefferson's tenure proved inoffensive to the churches. It also became clear that the relationship between churches and society was changing into something quite different from what it had been in the colonial period. In this different form, political sermons would one day reemerge, but of a new and different type.

During the late eighteenth century, churches in the United States existed in a state of confusing transition. The colonies' predominant religion, New England Puritanism, survived only in fragments and as a lingering belief in God's ability to covenant with nations. The tumultuous upsets of the War for Independence severely disoriented the main religious traditions of the colonial era. To be sure, local religious revivals promoted by evangelical Protestants occurred throughout the 1780s, but these revivals were on the margins. Uncertainty attended the denominations' efforts to compete with each other for adherents and to bring their teachings to the frontiers of the new nation. Churches were also trying to cope with disestablishment, which represented a nearly unprecedented innovation in the long history of Western Christianity.

After leaving behind religious establishments, and in response to the challenge of the nation's wide-open spaces, religious life on the ground underwent a transformation. Leadership during this transfor-

99. Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse* 20 (July 4, 1798) (New Haven, Thomas & Samuel Green 1798).

100. JOHN M. MASON, *THE VOICE OF WARNING TO CHRISTIANS, ON THE ENSUING ELECTION OF A PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES* (1800), reprinted in 4 *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF JOHN M. MASON, D.D.* 537 (Ebenezer Mason ed., New York, Baker & Scribner 1849).

101. For an account of the decline of this particular mindset, see generally Harry S. Stout, *Rhetoric and Reality in the Early Republic: The Case of the Federalist Clergy*, in *RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS* 65-78 (Mark A. Noll & Luke E. Harlow eds., 2d ed. 2007).

mation came from unexpected quarters. Methodists (guided by Bishop Francis Asbury), Baptists (instructed by countless local preachers), and Disciples and “Christians” (inspired by the creative leadership of Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone) preached the salvation of souls, organized congregations, and recruited young men and a few young women to serve as itinerants—all with remarkable effect. With these upstarts in the lead, the more traditional churches of the colonial era (Congregational, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches) gradually adapted themselves to the new religious style.

Politics after the election of 1800 was mostly incidental to churches during this period of concentrated evangelization and voluntary moral mobilization. For some Baptists and most Methodists, at least until Asbury’s death in 1816, politics became nearly invisible. For them, narrow religious concerns were all-consuming. For other Baptists and the followers of Campbell and Stone, the Christian message was joined with the ideological legacy of the revolutionary era. But in general, Protestants retreated from active participation in elections and partisan politics for about a quarter century after the 1800 election.

Yet the American religion that flourished in the early nineteenth century still engaged in politics, albeit on a broader scale. Most importantly, religion continued to be intensely republican because it had internalized the fear of unchecked authority and the commitment to private virtue that drove the ideology of the political founding. It was “Christian republican” because the virtue promoted by energetic itinerants in the United States was not classical masculinity, but humility in Christ. The religion that came to prevail in the new nation did not trust ascribed authority or inherited bureaucracies, but rather earned authority and ad hoc networking. It championed the ability of any white man to assume leadership in any religious assembly, and it spoke of the Scriptures as a supreme authority that trumped or even revoked all other religious authorities.¹⁰²

Above all, the religion that came to prevail in nineteenth-century America, which eventually gave birth to a new style of political sermon, was voluntaristic. Voluntarism was a mind-set keyed to innovative leadership, proactive public advocacy, and entrepreneurial goal-setting. Voluntarism also became an extraordinarily influential practice that, beginning with church organization, soon mushroomed to inspire mobilization on behalf of a myriad of social and political

102. For the premier discussion of the religious changes of this era, see generally NATHAN O. HATCH, *THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY* (1989); NOLL, *supra* note 13, at 161–208.

causes. Neither government, nor an inherited church, nor the dictates of Big Business, but rather voluntarily forged enterprising connections replaced the inherited, more European conceptions of social order of the late colonial period.

With this new mode of organization, a period of tumultuous, energetic, contentious innovation first gathered religious momentum and then began to shape all of American society. By demonstrating how religion could thrive despite the absence of an establishment, this period's dynamic evangelicals established an enduring pattern for the future. Other religious movements that differed greatly in belief and practice would flourish in the United States by adopting, to at least some degree, many of the free form and populist traits that evangelical Protestants pioneered.

In this environment, political sermons eventually began to reappear. But rather than addressing the nature of government itself, as in the revolutionary era, these sermons advocated on behalf of reform—first against delivery of the mail on Sunday, then for temperance, and finally for and against slavery.¹⁰³ These political sermons resembled the more strictly religious sermons that were regularly featured at meetings of voluntary societies like the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.¹⁰⁴ They brought religion back to politics and politics back to the churches. Their force began to resonate in the 1830s, and during the three decades before the Civil War, they would once again become prominent in public life.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the period's most famous foreign observer, dwelled at length on how the new style of voluntary Protestantism influenced the nation's political course.¹⁰⁵ During his visit to the United States in the 1830s, Tocqueville observed what he described as a conundrum: why religion, which because of the Constitution's separation of church and state "never mixes directly in the government of society," could nonetheless exist as "the first of [the nation's] political institutions."¹⁰⁶ His explanation focused on the manner in which Protestant faith aligned itself with republican principles of liberty: "if [religion] does not give them the taste for freedom, it singularly facili-

103. For an excellent treatment of the Sunday mail debate, see RICHARD R. JOHN, *SPREADING THE NEWS: THE AMERICAN POSTAL SYSTEM FROM FRANKLIN TO MORSE* (1995).

104. For a full study of the sermons preached at annual meetings of the American Board, see generally MARK Y. HANLEY, *BEYOND A CHRISTIAN COMMONWEALTH: THE PROTESTANT QUARREL WITH THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1830–1860* (1994).

105. ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 280 (Harvey C. Mansfield & Delba Winthrop trans. & eds., Univ. of Chi. Press 2000) (1835).

106. *Id.*

tates their use of it.”¹⁰⁷ In particular, Tocqueville pondered the “great political consequences” that “flowed from” the flourishing of disestablished Protestant churches.¹⁰⁸ His final judgment was comparative: in Europe, Tocqueville stated, “[I] had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions. [In the United States,] I found them united intimately with one another: they reigned together on the same soil.”¹⁰⁹ Tocqueville was describing the landscape in which the political sermon reemerged.

As in the revolutionary period, so also in antebellum America, political sermons had wide effects. As Daniel Walker Howe’s splendid recent history of the period from 1815 to 1848 shows, when national political parties reinvented themselves as voluntary societies for organizing local campaigns and national conventions in the 1830s, they did so according to the new model of religious voluntary societies and with the rhetoric of the new political sermons.¹¹⁰

VII. CONCLUSION

Once it is understood that antebellum American politics had a different form than colonial and revolutionary politics, and once it is grasped that the most influential religious pattern in the United States’ history was solidified in the first half of the nineteenth century rather than in the founding era of the late eighteenth century, then it is possible to ask better questions about connections between the revolutionary era and the present. The political sermons of the antebellum era set the course for much of the religious approach to politics that prevail today. Echoes from the political sermons of the revolutionary era are still heard when preachers talk about the divine character of the United States, but when they approach issues of specific social reform—including civil rights, economic reform, gender equality, and reproductive rights—they are following the political sermons of a later period.

For adjudicating issues of church and state today, it is of course necessary to closely observe the developments from the revolutionary and constitutional eras. Yet it is also necessary to recognize that the history following the United States’ founding has led to politi-

107. *Id.*

108. *Id.* at 282.

109. *Id.*

110. For specific consideration of how the style of religious voluntary societies influenced political parties, see DANIEL WALKER HOWE, *WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICA, 1815–1848*, at 269 (2007).

cal-religious realities that are very different from those that existed in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

The historical situation can be restated as follows: the main focus of the religious-political principles hammered out in the era of the Revolutionary War and the constitution-writing period was protection of the new nation from the excesses, abuses, corruptions, and intrinsic failures of the European past. But given the realities in place since the 1790s, the focus has shifted; the main business since that time has been to establish religious-political guidelines for state and federal authorities in a nation where religion flourishes as a voluntary force. The religious-political principles of the revolutionary and constitutional eras looked backward to a European past. By contrast, the religious-political realities of the era in which the political sermon reemerged defined issues, problems, and situations that are still very much alive in the ongoing American present.