

Politics of Righteousness: Christian Political Movements in the Early 19th Century

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Contra Mundum, No. 4, Summer 1992

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The most useful vote I ever cast was for Ron Paul in the 1988 Presidential election. I still remember my wife's reaction when I returned from the polls and announced that I had not voted for George Bush. "What!'", she said, with narrowing eyes, "Don't tell me you voted for Dukakis!" I assured her that I had not, outlined Paul's pro-life Libertarianism, and explained why I didn't trust Bush. The last four years have provided ample and delightful opportunities for me to say "I told you so." and "I'm glad I didn't vote for him!"

Still legitimate, however, is my wife's concern about throwing away a vote as a symbolic protest. Does refusing on principle to vote for the "lesser of two evils" (or in 1992, the least of "three evils") accomplish anything—besides making one feel politically self-righteous? How much can Christians compromise at the ballot box? And Christians may have different perspectives on what constitutes legitimate compromise. In I Kings 18:1-15, for example, two godly men held opposite views about participating with a despicable ruler. Obadiah worked within Ahab's court; Elijah refused to do so. When is it legitimate to support a less than perfect candidate or party, then, and when must Christians demand a distinctive alternative?

This essay is about Christian political movements in the early 19th century. It is a study of the people who initiated such movements, the critical issues which provoked them, the reasons they refused to work within existing political structures, and the level of their success.

The Christian Constitutional Society

The period around 1800 was one of the darkest and most dangerous times in American history. The excesses of the French Revolution cast a pall on the infant republic. Ideology sharply divided the new American political parties, which shrilly denounced each other for monarchism and Jacobinism. Between 1797 and 1802, partisan presses spread scandalous reports about the debauched behavior of national leaders and raised serious questions about the very survival of the young republic. In the disputed election of 1800,

marred by intrigue and backroom politicking by both parties, it appeared that the nation could not even elect a president under the relatively new constitutional system. Rumors of secession and publicity about treasonous conspiracies only heightened fears about the country's future.¹

Concerned about these things, in 1802 Alexander Hamilton proposed the Christian Constitutional Society. The Society was to be dedicated to Christian ideals and the U.S. Constitution, governed by an elected national council and various state organizations, and committed to disseminating information, electing “fit” candidates, organizing charities for the poor, and establishing schools to educate immigrants. Though the Society never materialized, it was the first self-conscious attempt to introduce Christian principles into U.S. politics.²

A crisis-driven religious conversion late in life prompted Hamilton's interest in this Christian society. It is important to note this since Hamilton, “Mr. Big Government”, is usually an anathema to conservative Christians who have passionate commitments to limited government and political decentralization. Having suffered personal scandal, family tragedy, and political defeat; having observed the moral decay of the nation; and having experienced a renewed interest in religion, Hamilton saw the Christian Constitutional Society as a way of restoring the country.

Hamilton's constitutionalism had deeper roots and was motivated by fears of disorder, chaos, and anarchy. Believing that unfettered democracy would inevitably lead to national deterioration, he was convinced the country was unraveling. Suspicions about anarchy arose from a keen sense of human depravity; Hamilton felt that a strong national government was necessary to control and limit base human passions. (And his concern was sincere, no matter how naïve it seems in our statist age where government institutions are a greenhouse for every human corruption.) In short, Hamilton's convictions about order and society were rooted in general Christian conceptions of human nature and British political traditions, which he admired.

Hamilton's concern for order and political stability was obvious throughout his career. He called for the Annapolis Convention, which led to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. He was a tireless spokesman for nationalism, both at the federal convention and in the *Federalist Papers*, which urged New York's ratification of the Constitution. As Washington's Secretary of the Treasury in the early 1790s, he outlined a plan for national consolidation and centralization, including a national bank, federal assumption of state and national debts, and perks for manufactures through high tariffs, subsidies, and federally funded internal improvements. In all this, Hamilton became the leading spokesman of the Federalist Party and the antagonist of Thomas Jefferson's Republicans.

Conservative Christians usually identify with Jefferson because of his reputed emphasis on agrarianism, states' rights, limited and frugal government, and strict construction of the

1 Famous conspiracies include Aaron Burr's and one engineered by Tennessean William Blount, whose shady dealings in 1796 made him the first—and only—Senator ever to face impeachment. See “The Blount Conspiracy”, *Constitution* 2:1 (Winter, 1990): 60-66.

2 Hamilton proposed the Society in a letter to James Bayard, April 1802; in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (N.Y.: Knickerbocker Press/Putnam's, n.d.) 10: 432-437.

Constitution. While that has been Jefferson's persona, and certainly was true of Jefferson's early commitments and rhetoric, as president he largely abandoned those ideals. Judged by the Barbary War, a pro-business foreign war funded by a tariff; the Louisiana Purchase, which raised the federal debt and forced Jefferson into constitutional gymnastics; the heavy-handed use of federal power in the Embargo of 1807 and the Force Act; and the challenge to constitutional checks and balances in his assault on the Court; Jefferson acted like a Federalist. He stole the principles of the Federalist Party, one historian argues, "appropriating its nationalism and its belief in strong energetic government." Those who exalt Jefferson's states' rights and decentralist passions as a model of Biblical Republicanism have hitched their wagon to the wrong infidel.³

A fear of infidelity was a major part of Hamilton's opposition to Jefferson. The French Revolution, especially the violent excesses of the Reign of Terror, had reinforced Hamilton's suspicions about unrestrained democracy and anarchy. Jefferson's intemperate remarks that "a little revolution is a good thing" and that "the tree of liberty is watered with the blood of patriots and tyrants" only confirmed Hamilton's apprehensions about American Republicanism. He also warned that political radicalism encouraged atheism and moral dissipation, noting that the French Revolution tended as much "to deprave the morals as to extinguish the religion of the country". For Hamilton, then, radical democratic movements threatened to undermine the nation's political, religious, and moral structure.⁴

Licentious Leaders

His concern for morality might seem strange since Hamilton was the object of the nation's first disgusting sex scandal. The scandal eventually destroyed his career, making him the first national figure to be driven from office for committing adultery.

The affair began in 1791 when Hamilton was "set up" by a pair of swindlers, James and Marie Reynolds. Claiming that she had been abandoned by a "prodigal Husband", the very comely Mrs. Reynolds sought financial assistance from Hamilton, who had a reputation for "Benevolence and Humanity to the distress'd". After Hamilton gave her the money, "it was quickly apparent that other than pecuniary consolation would be acceptable", and he yielded to temptation. Mr. Reynolds interrupted the affair according to plan, acting the part of a grieving, cuckolded husband and demanding (monetary) satisfaction for Hamilton's seduction of a "poor Brokenhearted woman". Hamilton paid \$1000 up front and gave Mr. Reynolds periodic "loans" during the year that the affair continued. The affair was, in fact, quite cozy. Mr. Reynolds invited Hamilton to visit more frequently, urged him to use the front door, and explained that his wife was always in high spirits after his visits. When his own wife and children were away, Hamilton

3 John Miller, *Alexander Hamilton: Portrait in Paradox* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 539. The best argument for the "federalization" of Jefferson as president is in Henry Adams's classic *The History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*. Adams, a great grandson of John Adams, whom Jefferson defeated in 1800, delights in documenting Jefferson's conversion to the Federalist agenda.

4 Claude Bowers, *Jefferson and Hamilton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), p. 40.

entertained Mrs. Reynolds at home.⁵

This was not a one-night stand by a petty official. This long-term adulterous relationship, with overtones of both blackmail and prostitution, occurred while Hamilton was the Secretary of the Treasury and was in the middle of writing his famous three reports—a “whoremonger” founded the National Bank.

The good times came to an end when Mr. Reynolds was thrown in prison for one of his scams. When Hamilton refused to engineer his release, Reynolds accused him of malfeasance and embezzlement. Three hostile Congressmen, including Senator James Monroe, investigated. Hamilton admitted to the adulterous affair, but proved he was innocent of any wrongdoing in the Treasury Department, and the Congressmen pledged themselves to secrecy. When Mr. Reynolds vanished after his release from prison and Mrs. Reynolds secured a divorce (with Aaron Burr as her attorney) to marry one of her ex-husband's criminal associates, Hamilton thought his secret was safe.

He did not expect the Congressional investigators who were pledged to secrecy upon their sacred honor to leak the affair. The leaker was future president Monroe who, immediately after the investigation, passed the embarrassing and incriminating Hamilton documents to Jefferson. Jefferson, in turn, gave them to James Callender, a gossipy scandal-monger who published them in 1797. The revelations almost prompted a duel between Hamilton and Monroe, but Monroe's “second” (Aaron Burr) intervened and reconciled the two.

These revelations ruined Hamilton's reputation. For damage control he issued a pamphlet denying the charges of corruption and embezzlement, but admitting an “irregular and indelicate amour” which he could not recall “without disgust and self condemnation”. Political enemies used this titillating confession to condemn Hamilton as the consummate profligate who made his own home “the rendezvous of his whoredom; taking advantage of his wife and children to introduce a prostitute to those sacred abodes of conjugal, and filial retirement, to gratify his wicked purposes”. With the tawdry affair made public, Hamilton's political career was finished.

It is ironic that Jefferson, after leaking sensitive information about his political enemy's sexual transgressions, nearly had his own career destroyed by scandalous rumors. In 1802 Callender published an exposé on Jefferson which suggested the new president possessed a hypercharged libido. Thus concluded Jefferson's strange friendship with the rascally publisher. Over the years Jefferson had passed Callender the Hamilton papers, given him money, encouraged his scurrilous attack on John Adams, supported him during a trial and conviction for “seditious libel”, and, as new president, granted the muckraker a pardon.

5 Miller, for instance, describes the blackmail plan as follows: “The plot necessitated the sacrifice of Mrs. Reynolds's virtue, but James Reynolds had already set a cash surrender value upon his wife's honor; his only regret seems to be that he had only one wife to sacrifice in such a good cause.” I have drawn information about this tawdry affair from Alexander Hamilton, “The Reynolds Pamphlet (1797)”, in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, 7: 369-479. Correspondence from the semiliterate James and Marie Reynolds is truly pathetic; see their original blackmail letters to Hamilton, 15 December 1791, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1791-92 (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1966), 10: 376-379. Excellent secondary sources are Miller, Alexander Hamilton, pp. 333-340, 458-463; Bowers, Jefferson and Hamilton, pp. 187-190; and Page Smith, *The Shaping of America, vol. 3: A People's History of the Young Republic* (N.Y.: McGraw Hill, 1980), pp. 257-259.

Nonetheless, Callender turned against him. Only Callender's mysterious death in late 1802 silenced his continuing revelations about Jefferson's character.⁶

Callender's most salacious charge was about “the African Venus”, a beautiful mulatto slave on the Jefferson plantation named Sally Hemings, who beguiled the president with her “dusky charms”. Of the several children she allegedly bore Jefferson, one, “Yellow Tom”, was supposed to bear an uncanny resemblance to the president. Another son, Madison Hemings, claimed that Jefferson was his father and in 1873 wrote a detailed account of his life at Monticello and his mother's duties as Jefferson's “concubine”. The Federalist press thoroughly enjoyed this publicity and elaborated upon it, charging that Jefferson kept everything from a single “sable wench” to a whole “Congo harem”. The following ditty from a genteel and popular Philadelphia magazine typifies the period humor directed at the White House:

Of all the damsels on the green,
On Mountain or in valley
A lass so luscious ne'er was seen
As Monticellan Sally

(chorus)

Yankee Doodle, whose the noodle
What wife were half so handy
To breed a flock of slaves to stock
A blackamoors the dandy.⁷

6 For the Jefferson scandals, see Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (N.Y.: Norton, 1974); and Smith, *The Shaping of America*. I assigned a staunchly Democratic student a research project on the Jefferson scandals this semester; he reported back that Jefferson was “one sick puppy”. The best discussion of this topic is Douglass Adair's “The Jefferson Scandals”, in *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, ed. Trevor Colburn (N.Y.: Norton, 1974), pp. 160-191. Defenders of Jefferson's honor, who invariably have connections with the University of Virginia, include Virginius Dabney, *The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal* (N.Y.: Dodd & Mead, 1981); and Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: The First Term, 1801-1805, vol. 4: Jefferson and His Time* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1970), and *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty, vol. 3: Jefferson and His Time* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1962), pp. 468-472. Malone, for example, Jefferson's most diligent hagiographer, bends over backwards to exonerate Jefferson, attributing his dealings with Callender to the “gullibility of a personally generous man”, and dismisses the Jefferson scandals in a chapter on a “Torrent of Slander”. Of all the dopey sex-scandal stories of the time, I like one Jefferson circulated about John Adams the best. Adams had allegedly sent his vice presidential running mate to England to get four pretty girls to serve as mistresses. When he heard of this rumor, Adams quipped, “I do declare on my honor that if this be true General Pinckney has kept them all himself and cheated me out of my two!”

7 Adair, “The Jefferson Scandals”, p. 163. The ordinarily staid *Boston Gazette* offered this alleged Jefferson composition:
Thou Sally, thou my house shall keep,
My widower's tears shall dry!
My virgin daughters—see! they weep—
Their mother's place supply.
Oh Sally hearken to my vows!
Yield up thy sooty charms—
My best beloved! My more than spouse,

While historians have usually been dubious of Callender's charges and other rumors, recent scholars accept the substance of the story. Most famous is psycho-biographer Fawn Brodie, author of a heavy-breathing “intimate biography” of Jefferson. Even more significant is distinguished historian Page Smith, who argues that Jefferson loved and was “genuinely fond” of Hemings (who was officially valued at \$50), speaks highly of their thirty-nine year relationship that produced five offspring, and suggests that attempts to denigrate the story are prompted by racism. As Smith puts it: “it is inconceivable to Jefferson's admirers that he could have done something so 'disreputable' as take a 'half black female slave' to his bed. But after all she was handsome, intelligent, the half sister of his dead wife.”⁸

But even if Sally Hemings was safe around Jefferson, married women were not. As a young widower in Europe in 1786 Jefferson had an affair with Maria Cosway (whose husband was apparently more interested in men). Even worse was his earlier “annoyance” of the wife of John Walker, to whom Jefferson was a friend (he was a “brideman” in their wedding), neighbor, and attorney. When Walker left for Indian Wars in 1768 he made his “best friend” the executor of his will and asked him to look after his wife and daughter. Jefferson did—and for the next eleven years he made advances toward Mrs. Walker. (There is no way of knowing how welcome these advances were). Finally revealing the “base transactions” to her husband, Mrs. Walker described how on different occasions Jefferson slipped her a note trying to convince her of the “innocence of promiscuous love”, was a peeping Tom who watched her bedroom to see her undressing (and was driven off with “indignation & menaces of alarm”), and, in the worst instance, was found outside her private chamber “in his shirt ready to seize her on her way from her chamber—indecent in manner.” Mrs. Walker's confession cooled the two men's friendship. It cooled even more in 1802 when Callender made Jefferson's indiscretions public. Least pleased with this publicity was Revolutionary war hero Light-Horse Harry Lee, the father of Robert E. Lee and the husband of Mrs. Walker's niece, who was concerned about his in-law's good name. His demand for satisfaction from President Jefferson if the Walker family's honor was not vindicated carried the threat of a duel. Jefferson offered this wimpy confession: “When I was young and single I offered love to a handsome lady. I acknowledge its incorrectness.”⁹

Oh! take me to thy arms.

- 8 Smith, pp. 492-493, 577-578. Sally Hemings had a light complexion, and was not a “dusky wench”. Her son, Easton Hemings, was listed as “white” according to the 1830 Census. There are other explanations for Jefferson's kind treatment of Hemings and her brood. Jefferson might have been related to the Hemings children in other ways. Jefferson's father-in-law was a miscegenational philanderer and it is possible that Sally Hemings was Mrs. Jefferson's half-sister. Jefferson thus would be an uncle to the Hemings children. Others argue that Jefferson's favorite nephew sired Hemings's children. Again, this would place Jefferson in the family tree and explain his interest in the children. Finally, one can think of reasons that a slave child of unknown paternity would want to claim Jefferson as his father.
- 9 Brodie, pp. 202-215; and Charles Royster, *Light-Horse Harry Lee and the Legacy of the American Revolution* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1981), pp.208-209. Jefferson's apologists usually emphasize the time between the alleged affair and Mrs. Walker's confession. (She waited until Jefferson was in France, perhaps fearing for her husband's life in a duel). They also suggest Jefferson's promiscuous behavior was acceptable because he was young (twenty-five) and single (although Mrs. Walker clearly stated that the last advances came after Jefferson was married). Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President*, pp. 216-223.

But Jefferson was a paragon of virtue compared to his vice-president, Aaron Burr, Jr. Burr belonged to one of the country's most distinguished religious families. His maternal grandfather, Jonathan Edwards, was a prime mover in the Great Awakening and a president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). His father, Aaron Burr, Sr., also served at the Princeton helm during a time of great revival. Burr's cousin, Timothy Dwight, was president of Yale College and a leader in the Second Awakening. But Burr did not share their Christian convictions; notoriously immoral and relentlessly ambitious, he ranks as a “genuine villain” in American history.¹⁰

Burr's seedy character was evident in the events of 1800-1805. In the disputed election of 1800, where by a constitutional quirk Jefferson and his vice presidential candidate received the same vote total, Burr attempted to steal the election with Federalist help. Hamilton tried to prevent this, for despite his personal hostility to Jefferson, he felt the Virginian at least had the semblance of integrity. Hamilton said of Burr “that he is a man of *extreme* and irregular ambition; that he is *selfish*, and that he is decidedly *profligate*”. Jefferson eventually won, but never again trusted Burr. In 1804 Burr, still the Republican vice-president, ran as the Federalist gubernatorial candidate in New York. (This is the only instance of a *sitting* vice president running for *lesser* office with the *opposition* party!) Losing in New York because of Hamilton's opposition, Burr manipulated his enemy into a duel in 1804 and killed him. With his political career shot and under indictment for murder, Burr turned his attention to the west, where he was involved in a dark conspiracy in the Louisiana Territory. His subsequent treason trial and retreat to Europe closed the public career of Jonathan Edwards's most famous descendant.¹¹

When Hamilton accepted Burr's duel challenge, it was with knowledge that the end was near. Hamilton probably had a death-wish, since after scandal and political failure life had lost its savor. The final blow came in 1801 when his brilliant son Philip died after a duel with an ardent Burr supporter. Hamilton had no knowledge of the affair until his mortally wounded son was brought home; Philip eventually died in his father's arms “professing the Christian faith”. Hamilton saw his son as the perfect example of Christian honor and noted that he was now “out of the reach of the seductions and calamities of a world full of folly, full of vice, [and] full of danger”. The boy's death and the ensuing tragedy of a daughter who went mad with grief over the loss of her brother, coupled with his own political defeat and personal scandal, prompted Hamilton to write: “Every day proves to

10 There was at least one time when Burr was concerned about spiritual matters, for as a student he was under deep conviction when a revival swept Princeton. Princeton president Witherspoon urged Burr to be cautious, however, believing the revival was but “enthusiasm”. See Nathan Schachner, *Aaron Burr* (N.Y.: Perpetua, 1961), p. 24. It is interesting to consider how our national history might have changed had Burr been converted. (I hope people won't use this story to resume griping about the “apostate” Witherspoon.) Gore Vidal's *Burr* (N.Y.: Random House, 1973) makes a big deal of Burr's profligacy; he uses as teaser the idea that Burr was the father of Van Buren. Gary North (while making fun of Rushdoony's historical methodology) confuses Aaron Burr, Jr. (the U.S. vice president) with his father, Aaron Burr, Sr. (the Princeton president and son-in-law of Edwards). These godly men, incidentally, were not responsible for Burr's spiritual condition. Burr senior died early and left Burr an orphan. See North, *Political Polytheism*, p. 318n.

11 Hamilton to Bayard, 16 January 1801; in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, 10: 412-419. In 1799 Burr fought and was wounded in a duel with Hamilton's loyal brother-in-law. See Herbert Parmet and Marie Hecht, *Aaron Burr: Portrait of an Ambitious Man*.

me more and more that this American world was not made for me.” Hamilton accepted Burr's challenge but, because he objected to dueling on religious grounds, resolved to discharge his gun harmlessly into the air. Hamilton deliberately reenacted his son's duel: he took his son's brace of pistols, went to the same dueling grounds (at Weehawken, N.J.), similarly fired into the air, and, mortally wounded, lingered in pain for twenty-four hours before his death.¹²

The last period of Hamilton's life, concluded by the duel, was bittersweet. Perhaps never in American history, writes one historian, “has there been a fall from power so rapid, so complete, so final as Hamilton's.” Between late 1799 and early 1801, Hamilton suffered numerous setbacks: Washington's death, the split with Adams, Burr's rising power, the Federalist loss to Jefferson, and Philip's death. In his despair, Hamilton turned to God. Family members noticed a new religious intensity beginning in 1801. One historian describes Hamilton's religious conversion as follows: “beginning in anger, changing to bitterness, turning to despair, and ending in what theologians call a new birth of the spirit.” The conversion influenced his public life as well as the private. Hamilton tried, for instance, (without success) to prevent the Federalist press from repeating Callender's attacks on Jefferson. It was precisely the personal tragedies and political disappointments that ruined his political career that prompted Hamilton's conversion to Christianity.¹³

Hamilton's motivations in outlining the Christian Constitutional Society are difficult to determine. Some historians see it as a calculated political maneuver to attack his enemies, and perhaps personal politics did figure in. But Hamilton's religious concerns were also real. And in the base political climate of the early 18th century there was a desperate need for a Christian Society.

The problem of gross immorality was not confined to Hamilton, Jefferson, and Burr, for it was a national malady. The 1798 pastoral letter of the Presbyterian church, distributed nationally by the General Assembly, included this sobering assessment of the country's spiritual condition:

We perceive, with pain and fearful apprehension, a general dereliction of religious principle and practice among our fellow citizens, a visible and prevailing impiety and contempt for the laws and institutions of religion, and an abounding infidelity which in many instances tends to Atheism itself.... The profligacy and corruption of the public morals have advanced with a progress proportionate to our declension in religion. Profaneness, pride,

12 Smith, pp. 475, 499; and Miller, pp. 548-550. For a different, though ultimately unpersuasive, perspective on the senior Hamilton's duel, see Merrill Lindsay, “Pistols Shed Light on Famed Duel”, *Smithsonian* (November 1976): 94-97.

13 The finest treatment of Hamilton's religion is Douglas Adair, “Was Alexander Hamilton a Christian Statesman?”, in *Fame and the Founding Fathers*. See also M.E. Bradford, *A Worthy Company* (Marlborough, N.H.: Plymouth Rock Foundation, 1982), p. 49; John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 145-160; and Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Profile* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1979), pp. 356-357. McDonald says: “He sought consolation in religion. His youthful faith had never entirely departed him, and the overt atheism of the French Revolution had rekindled his sense of the importance of religion. Now, in the wake of Philip's death, he became as devout as he had been as a protege of the Rev. Hugh Knox.”

luxury, injustice, intemperance, lewdness, and every species of debauchery and loose indulgence greatly abound....

The eternal God has a controversy with this nation.¹⁴

This sordid story of national declension offers some important lessons. First, public corruption in general, and sex scandals in particular are not new. Christians today, feeling that national debauchery is at an unprecedented level, foolishly despair about the future. Second, even gross public scandal can be used of God for good. In Hamilton's case, his public humiliations led to faith—or at least renewed faith in Christ. Without the shame and crushing defeats he experienced, Hamilton might never have sought the Lord. And third, despite the darkness of the period, there is a positive side of the story, for God granted national revival. When Hamilton proposed the Society in 1802, he was pessimistic about the future. Yet unbeknownst to him, the Second Great Awakening had already broken out, initiated by revivals at Cane Ridge on the Kentucky frontier and at Yale College under Timothy Dwight (Aaron Burr's Federalist cousin). God can bring revival at anytime, even in the gloomiest periods of history, with or without a Christian party.

The Antimason Party

When I was a boy the Fourth of July parade always included fezzed Shriners zipping around in miniature convertibles. Most people enjoyed the show, though I remember one little fellow along the parade route who was terrified by the speeding knights of the Orient and darted behind his mother's skirts. I didn't know what Shriners were. Someone told me that they were a fraternal organization; another said that they were some sort of charity. My father thought they had something to do with the Masons and drank quite a bit. But no one realized that they were part of one of the most controversial and sinister groups in American history.¹⁵

In 1826, in upstate New York, ex-Mason William Morgan revealed the secrets of Freemasonry to the world. He thus violated the Masonic oath of secrecy, the penalty for which was “to have my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by the roots, and my body buried in rough sands of the sea, at low water mark”. Lodge brothers from around western New York gathered for vengeance. Arrested on a trumped up charge for a bad debt (he owed three dollars), Morgan was imprisoned, released to a hostile mob by the Masonic sheriff, kidnaped and hauled off to an abandoned fort, and never seen again. A badly decomposed body found floating in the Niagara River was thought to be his.¹⁶

14 Quoted in Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1986), p. 49.

15 When I read hyper anti-Masons who argue that the lodge spearheads a gargantuan conspiracy to control the United States and the planet, I think of that terrified child. I find it doubtful that the chubby Masons who drive around in old Lincolns with prominently displayed lodge logos threaten global conquest.

16 Paul Goodman, *Toward a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (N.Y.: Oxford, 1988), pp. 3-5. Some Masons argued that Morgan simply ran off (someone subsequently claimed to have seen him in Turkey). I know one Mason who believes, somewhat

Morgan's disappearance and probable murder sparked the Antimasonic movement. Since Masons were frequently wealthy and held positions of power, they were generally resented and feared. Fueled now by widespread suspicions of a Masonic conspiracy and cover-up, grand juries investigated the lodge throughout upstate New York. (Among the indicted was the sheriff in the Morgan case). And tensions ran high throughout New England. One armed Rhode Island Masonic leader stormed into a church and “threatened to shoot the preacher, a seceding Mason, if he ascended the pulpit.” Another ex-Mason found that people were determined to destroy him, for vandals smeared his house with filth, broke windows, secreted rattlesnakes into his granary, and slit the throat of his dog from ear to ear. Terrified by the potential threat from the lodge, people organized into vigilante mobs. One Antimason group burst into a Boston lodge expecting to find an arsenal for 2,000 Masons (but was disappointed to uncover only forty-three swords and thirty-four spittoons).

Concerns about freemasonry eventually spawned the Antimason Party. The party was very strong in New York, Pennsylvania, and New England, and was a nursery for anti-Democratic northern politicians, most of whom eventually migrated from the Antimasons to the Whigs to the Republicans. Future president Millard Fillmore got his start in the party; ex-president John Quincy Adams ran on the Antimason ticket as the Massachusetts's gubernatorial candidate. In the election of 1832, because the Whig and Democratic candidates (Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson) were both Masons, the Antimasons forged a national party with its own presidential candidate. The Antimason Party was thus the first “third party” in American history, and contributed to the political process the first “nominating convention”.¹⁷

The Antimason Party gained strength in areas influenced by the revival and reform impetus of the Second Great Awakening, particularly in the “burned-over district” of upstate New York. Revival churches were often suspicious of the lodge and forbade their

improbably, that Antimasons killed Morgan just to create a pretext for attacking the lodge. To this day, the lodge has mysterious aura. A student once told me about how her husband, a naturalized Philippino, who was seeking initiation in a rural Southern lodge, told her where he was going and instructed her to call the police if he failed to return from the meeting!

- 17 Besides Fillmore and Adams, Antimason leaders included Thurlow Weed, William Seward (who purchased Alaska for the United States), and Thaddeus Stevens (the abolitionist and radical Republican leader during Reconstruction). When Antimasons merged into the Whig Party, they continued there as a strong anti-Clay faction. Jackson decided to run for a second term in 1832, incidentally, because the Democratic Party had been torn apart by the Peggy Eaton affair, another adultery scandal. Peggy Timberlake was supposed to have had an affair with Senator Eaton, one of Jackson's cronies from Tennessee. When her husband died mysteriously (probably a suicide), Peggy quickly married the Senator. Tongues wagged, and Peggy Eaton was excluded from polite Washington company. Jackson rose to Peggy Eaton's defense, perhaps remembering his own marriage. (Rachel Robards Jackson did not secure a divorce from her first husband until after she had married Jackson. This prompted nasty press treatment in the election of 1828, which Jackson blamed for his wife's untimely death.) Jackson proclaimed Peggy Eaton “chaste as a virgin”. (Jackson's antagonist Henry Clay quipped that “neither custom nor use can pale her infinite virginity.”) When Floride Calhoun persisted in snubbing Mrs. Eaton, Jackson was furious, and distanced himself from Vice President John Calhoun. The upshot of all of this is that the rather silly Eaton affair tore up the Democratic Party in 1832, forced Jackson to run again, and left no non-Masonic candidates for President. (If people tell you that politics are exceptionally dirty and complicated today, don't believe them!)

members from joining. The greatest Antimason of them all was archevangelist and reformer Charles G. Finney. (That Finney was also a hyper-Arminian who was driven from the Presbyterian church for heresy only makes the theological issues more fascinating.) And there was a strong connection between antimasonry and abolitionism. Radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, for instance, equated the “slavery of whites called freemasons” with “the slavery of colored people, called negroes.”¹⁸

Antimasons attracted supporters for many reasons besides the emotional catalyst of the Morgan murder. First, there were political concerns. A secret order, whose politically-active members dutifully voted for lodge brothers, seemed antithetical to American republicanism. The same hostility had greeted the Society of Cincinnatus, a fraternal association of Washington's officers, who passed the right of membership to their oldest sons. The society was considered aristocratic and unAmerican, and was banned and persecuted in numerous states. Given the experience of the French Revolution, Americans distrusted secret groups, especially those, like the Masons, who were tainted with the radicalism of continental Illuminism.

Second, there was a general concern about Masonic morality. Lodge meetings, it was widely believed, were occasions for drunkenness, immorality, and performing unnatural acts with goats. Of greatest concern was the idea that there were two codes of ethics, one for Masons, and one for society's “drones”, or the non-Masons. There were “repeated allegations that Masonry gave its members license to assault the virtue of women outside of Masonic protection”.¹⁹

But most important was the theological opposition to the unitarian and anti-Christian dimension of Freemasonry. In addition to revival groups, Presbyterian, Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman bodies published their opposition to the lodge. While Baptists seemed most at ease with the order, Calvinists were in the forefront of the antimason movement.²⁰

First, Masonry stressed natural revelation, rather than the special revelation of the Scripture. Masons aspired to moral perfection through “the light of reason”. The emphasis on natural religion and natural moral perfection was a legacy of the Enlightenment and was antithetical to Biblical Christianity.

Second, Masonry had pagan dimensions. Besides having “warlocks” and “worshipful masters”, they borrowed heavily from the symbols and terminology of the East. Shriners

18 Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (N.Y.: Harper, 1962), pp. 351-358. Historians have made connections between Antimasons and the temperance and sabbatarian movements as well. See Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium* (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 75, 129. Finney himself makes the connection with abolitionism; in the introduction to his work on the lodge, he writes that, “while we were busy in getting rid of slavery, Freemasonry has revived, and extended its bounds most alarmingly.” Finney, *The Character and Claims of Freemasonry* (Chicago: National Christian Association, [1869] 1848), p. 3.

19 My students always enjoy hearing about Masons and goats. One fellow volunteered in class that he had just joined the Masons and that they didn't have a goat at the ceremony. He admitted he wouldn't tell us about the goat, anyway, if it was part of the secret ritual. From then on, the other students enjoyed bleating at appropriate times and inquiring about the goat's health.

20 Goodman, p. 171; Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (N.Y.: Harper, 1965), pp. 121-23.

wear fezzes, for instance, hats first used by Muslims so they could bang their foreheads on the ground in daily prayers without impediment. Also prominent are pyramids and obelisks, the long, tapered fertility objects made famous by the Washington Monument. One of the heros of the lodge is Pythagoras, the weird Greek mathematician who worshiped numbers and created a strange religious cult around the veneration of the holy tetrad and eastern religious practices, such as reincarnation.²¹

But the most compelling testimonial to Masonic paganism comes from Thomas Paine, the drunken and dissolute author of *Common Sense* during the American War for Independence. After the war, Paine bounced around the world. An exuberant participant in the French Revolution who declared himself the first “citizen of the world”, Paine quickly retreated to the United States when the French started whacking off heads with the guillotine. He brought with him an enthusiasm for Freemasonry, which he saw as an occult alternative to Christianity. In the “Origin of Freemasonry”, Paine joyfully argues that ancient Druidism, which was identical to the sun worship of ancient Egypt, had been diverted into Freemasonry. Since Paine was a lodge enthusiast, his connection between Freemasonry and paganism is significant.²²

Third, Masonry has a universalistic dimension. Lodge theology holds that everyone can serve God in his own way and that there are many paths to God. This undermined the gospel claim that salvation comes through Christ alone (See John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Masons in the early 19th century, furthermore, despite their reputation for detached pluralism, were not neutral on religious and church questions. They actively campaigned for the disestablishment of the Massachusetts Church in 1833. Masons usually supported the Unitarians and Universalists, while Antimasons usually supported the Trinitarian and orthodox branch of the church.²³

The best example of Christian Antimason activism is Charles Finney. He had joined the Masons as a young fellow. But after his conversion, Finney was so depressed in spirit following a visit to the lodge and so disturbed by the religious and moral character of its members that he decided to resign. He explained: “I soon found that I was completely converted *from* Freemasonry *to* Christ, and that I could have no fellowship with any of the proceedings of the lodge. Its oaths appeared to me to be monstrously profane and barbarous.” Finney's *The Character and Claims of Freemasonry* attempted to explain the non-Christian character of the organization and urged people to reconsider their affiliation with it.²⁴

21 Not too long ago, on a visit to the lodge, a mason insisted that obelisks were not Masonic symbols. He also told me that pyramids were not Masonic symbols. When I pointed to the three pyramids adorning the top of the lodge's tower, he said that they were just there “for decoration”. If that's so, it is the only emblem among the myriads of lodge symbols that is just for “decoration”.

22 Thomas Paine, “Origin of Freemasonry”, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner (N.Y.: The Citadel Press, 1969), II: 830-841. I think Masons are embarrassed by this. When my Masonic student (of goat fame) did a paper on the history of the lodge he never got around to looking for the Paine piece I told him about. When I photocopied it for him, he lost it. I suspect that most Masons see the lodge as a benign fraternity and don't want to see contrary evidence.

23 Goodman, p. 162.

24 Charles Finney, *The Character and Claims of Freemasonry*. Finney's work is later, after the decline and revival of Freemasonry, but still reflects the sentiments of the Antimason movement.

Finney wrote during a time of Freemason resurgence. After the lodge declined in the late 1820s and 1830s, it rebounded in the 1840s. Its character, however, had changed. Many of the new lodges were in the south and the west. This revived and revised Freemasonry tended to be socially conservative, and it has remained largely a rural, southern, male, and often Baptist organization. Today, it seems as politically and socially harmless as Howard Cunningham, the tubby father on *Happy Days*, who was the “Grand Poobah” of some sort of local lodge.²⁵

But Freemasonry is a serious theological error. The Presbyterian Church of America recently showed the incompatibility between Christian doctrine and Masonic teachings. Unfortunately, and to their shame, churches have been slow to respond to this doctrinal challenge. It is tragic that those committed to the gospel, who profess that there is no salvation apart from Christ, would make covenant with an organization which proclaims that there are many ways to God and that following Christ is merely one option.²⁶

In summary, the Antimason movement of the early 1800s was successful, at least for the short term. In the 1830s, Freemasonry was in decline. Christians successfully worked against what they perceived as the most serious threat to their church and nation. Even if the fellows driving little sports cars at parades are not today a threat to overthrow the government and subvert the Constitution, their fraternal ancestors were the catalyst for the nation's first “third” party and the first largely Christian reforming association.

Abolitionism

Most successful of all Christian political initiatives was the movement to end slavery. Within a generation of 1831, when the movement began in earnest, slavery was gone. Most abolitionists came of age in the Second Great Awakening and participated in the reform movements it spawned. And for many today, abolitionism is the paradigm for all Christian social activism.²⁷

Slavery was a visible, easily caricatured, and regionally defined institution. It was an easy target for social reformers, especially those from evangelical ranks. Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is* (1839), which cataloged horror stories about slavery drawn entirely from accounts in the Southern press, was an instant best seller and touched a raw moral nerve in the country. Harriet Beecher Stowe, scion of America's most distinguished religious family, used *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a sentimental novel with explicit Christian lessons, to rivet the nation's attention to the institutional evils of slavery.

25 Freemasons in Congress today include conservatives like Bob Dole and Jesse Helms. I still remember Lum Eders and Abner Peabody from Pine Ridge, Arkansas (on the Lum and Abner Show) faithfully going to their lodge meetings. For them, it was just a benign feature of Southern culture.

26 John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on The Masonic Lodge* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1989).

27 Episcopalian historian Gary North writes that “*Jesus Christ was in principle an abolitionist* (emphasis his)”. See *Tools of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 187-188. For a critique of the hermeneutic employed by the “quasidoxical” Dr. North, see “Evangelical Meltdown: The Trouble With Evangelhistoire”, *Contra Mundum* 2, pp. 45-46. To his credit, North has responded by modifying his position in a recent I.C.E. newsletter.

Despite claims from Christians in Dixie that slavery had scriptural sanction, southern slavery was not Biblical slavery. In the Old Testament, slavery was clearly limited; a pagan could be held in perpetual servitude, but a Hebrew brother could be enslaved only for a limited time (Exodus 21; Deuteronomy 24). In the late 17th century, some black slaves successfully sued for their freedom in colonial courts, arguing that they could not be held in permanent bondage after their baptism, because their conversion made them brothers with their Christian masters. Southern legislatures, no doubt fearing massive revivals among slaves (who longed for physical, as much as spiritual liberty), immediately passed laws stating that one's baptism or religious profession had no bearing on one's condition of servitude. Early on, then, some two hundred years *before* the War Between the States, southerners explicitly repudiated Biblical conditions for slavery.²⁸

The Biblical commitment of abolitionists, however, was just as suspect. Almost all abolitionists had vigorous Christian backgrounds (frequently they were preachers' kids); most were connected to evangelical revivalism; some were Quakers. Many, however, ultimately drifted into Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, Universalism—the liberalism of the 19th century. Struggling with their rejection of orthodox Christianity or reluctance to enter a pastoral ministry, they threw themselves into reform as a way of justifying themselves, demonstrating their righteousness, and achieving recognition. Psychohistorians have a field day with John Brown, for example, a seriously disturbed man with Messianic pretensions that rivaled his apocalyptic pronouncements, whose abolitionist zeal was a form of self-authentication and auto-salvation. For some, especially women who lacked access to the prestige of office, being a crusading reformer conferred status and power.²⁹

Even evangelical abolitionists possessed dubious theological credentials. Lyman Beecher, Charles Finney, and Albert Barnes, the most famous Presbyterian anti-slavery agitators, were all accused of and faced ecclesiastical trials for perfectionist heresies. Barnes, most famous for his Biblical commentaries, is a good example of the wavering commitments to the Scripture and orthodoxy among evangelical reformers. In an important exchange on the nature of slavery with Frederick Ross, a Southern Presbyterian leader who argued that

28 Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (N.Y.: Norton, 1975), pp. 331-332. For the best southern apology for slavery, see Robert Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia and the South* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1977). What is important, however, is that Dabney and other southerners tried to develop a social theory from the Bible. They noted that the Bible allowed, but regulated slavery, and appended to their arguments numerous prooftexts. Abolitionists, on the other hand, annoyed by the Scriptural references to slavery, frequently ended up denying the authority of Scripture altogether and relied upon mushy sociological arguments about compassion and the negative effects of slavery. Some southerners used pragmatic arguments as well, insisting that slavery was a good institution (or a necessary evil) because of its beneficial effects. Blacks, they claimed, became civilized, learned the Christian faith, had a higher standard of living than the people of Africa or peasants of Europe, and had greater economic security than the “wage slaves” of the North. One southern apologist, in fact, argued that slavery was good because it was a form of benign, paternalistic socialism. (And if slavery is considered in terms of twentieth century liberalism, there was full employment, free medical care, social security, free food and clothing, etc. Paternalists of today's statist plantations simply are not as straightforward about their new and improved form of slavery.) For the best comparison of the south's paternalistic system with northern capitalism, see George Fitzhugh's *A Sociology for the South*.

29 Otto Scott's *The Secret Six* (Foundation for American Education, 1977) is the definitive treatment from a Christian perspective.

the Bible condoned slavery, Barnes essentially said he didn't care what the Bible said, since slavery violated the “spirit of love” found in the New Testament. His final salvo against slavery was that “the instinctive feeling in every man's bosom...is a condemnation of it.” Given his emphasis on the ethical ultimacy of instinctive human feelings, it comes as no surprise that Barnes was deposed from the ministry in 1835 for Pelagianism.³⁰

An excellent example of the theological confusion and rootlessness among evangelicals is Theodore Weld. Though reared in a strict Calvinistic manse, he was a protege of Charles Finney and studied at Lane Seminary (at which Lyman Beecher was president), where he was part a group that styled itself the “Illuminati”. Weld's early reform passions were for education and abolitionism. He became a women's rights advocate after his marriage to Angelina Grimke, a Quaker feminist. (The Welds helped promote reforms like “bloomers”—progressive women's attire in the 19th century). His *American Slavery* sold 100,000 copies in its first year and, in becoming an anti-slavery classic, made Weld the nation's leading abolitionist spokesman. His wife, however, pursued a different track, latching onto the millennialism of William Miller, who predicted Christ's imminent return in 1843. The Welds eventually drifted into spiritism, Swedenborgianism, and Transcendentalism. After struggling with a son's insanity and suicide, and trying his hand at organic vegetable farming and teaching at a Utopian commune, Weld finally became a Unitarian. His life personifies Ephesians 4:14.³¹

An even better example is the Beecher family. The family patriarch, Lyman Beecher, was a fiery evangelist, whose intense concern for societal renewal led to spirited opposition to the evils of his day (dueling, slavery, liquor, and loose morals). Daughter Catherine was an early feminist, while daughter Harriet, after marrying liberal seminary professor Calvin Stowe, became an abolitionist novelist.³² But the most famous child was Henry Ward Beecher, the silver-tongued preacher at the nation's largest and most prestigious church. He was active in abolitionist causes—guns shipped to Kansas during the anti-slavery chaos were dubbed “Beecher's Bibles”. He was the leading ecclesiastical popularizer of evolution. But he received the most national attention in a 1875 adultery trial for the seduction of a friend's (and church elder's) wife. Clearly, the second generation's commitment to evangelical Christianity had waned.³³

30 See Albert Barnes, *The Church and Slavery* (Philadelphia: Perry and Macmillan, 1856), and Frederick Ross, *Slavery: Ordained of God* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1857). Ross insisted that it was dangerous to jettison scripture for speculative systems of ethics, noting that abolition rhetoric employed strained hermeneutics and was hostile to Biblical ethics. My impression is that Barnes, like most abolitionists, usually employed strong emotive and visceral arguments, while Ross was far more careful in dealing with Biblical texts. Barnes was tried before the General Assembly in 1831 (acquitted), 1835 (deposed), and 1836 (restored); his case exemplified the growing tensions between the Old and New Schools.

31 On Weld, see Robert Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (N.Y. Oxford, 1980). Weld's heterodox tendencies evidently began early. After asking his preacher-father a series of challenging questions, the senior Weld told the boy: “Shut your mouth, you little infidel!”

32 See Katherine Sklar, *Catherine Beecher* (N.Y.: Norton, 1976), and *Catherine Beecher, A Treatise on Domesticity* (N.Y.: Schocken, 1977).

33 In addition to fat salaries from the church and lecture circuit, Beecher collected fees for endorsements (including an endorsement for soap!). The rank story of his adultery trials are outlined in Robert

Abolitionists were just as confused about the means they should use. Some endorsed immediate abolition, using violence if necessary. Others were committed to peaceful means and gradual emancipation. Some, such as the American Anti-Slavery Society, were simply committed to ending slavery. Still others, such as the American Colonization Society, driven by fears of post-emancipation racial tensions, wanted liberated slaves resettled in Africa. While some stressed abolition throughout the United States, others focused on preventing the spread of slavery into the territories.

What abolitionists lacked in consistency and sanity, they made up for in enthusiasm. I like Cassius Clay (the original one). A converted slaveholder, Clay became a fiery abolitionist editor with a knack for confronting rowdy Kentucky crowds. He fortified his printing press with steel plate, long lances, barrels of powder, and two brass cannons. Facing one mob, Clay pulled out a copy of the Constitution (“for those who’d listen to fundamental law”), a copy of the Bible (“for those who would listen to God’s law”), and two pistols and a dagger (“for those who only understood force”). Eventually Clay was caught and severely beaten. But he survived, helped found the Republican Party, and died at the ripe age of 93 in 1903.

Transforming disparate opposition groups into an effective political organization was difficult. “Conscience” Whigs and “Barnburner” Democrats were the anti-slavery voices of their parties. The first formal abolitionist party was the Liberty Party, which had a modest showing in the election of 1844. Its successor in 1848, the Free Soil Party, nominated ex-president Martin Van Buren as its presidential candidate and proved to be the spoiler in the election. In 1856, after the crisis in Kansas, the Republican Party emerged from the rubble of the Whig Party as the leading anti-slavery party. With the triumph of the Republicans in 1860, and the secession and war which followed, slavery was finally outlawed.³⁴

Though the abolitionist movement was ultimately successful, one wonders at the cost of success. Six hundred thousand soldiers were killed in the war, which cost perhaps one million lives over-all. The physical destruction of the war itself, and the economic costs of emancipation devastated the South. Most important, however, was the way the nation was torn apart and reconstituted by the federal government during Radical Reconstruction. The constitutional amendments (illegally) ratified during the period, in what has been called a “second American Revolution”, fundamentally changed the nature

Shaplin, *Free Love and Heavenly Sinners* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1954). The trial is very unusual, for at the same time that Beecher was allegedly having an affair with Mrs. Tilton, her husband was cozy with Victoria Woodhull, the notorious free-love advocate and the first publisher of Marx in the United States. The cases were dismissed (in ecclesiastical and civil courts), in part because Mrs. Tilton’s testimony was confused. She confessed to adultery, recanted her testimony, and confessed again; she later went insane. Boys in Brooklyn had little doubt about the charges. One of their favorite ditties was:

Beecher, Beecher is my name, Beecher til I die!

I never kissed Mrs. Tilton, I never told a lie!

34 The Free Soil ticket in 1848 symbolically united the nation. Van Buren was an old Jacksonian Democrat. Charles Francis Adams, the vice-presidential nominee, was the son of John Quincy Adams, a life long opponent of slavery and the old nemesis of Andrew Jackson. The Free Soil Party received 10% of the popular vote. Because Van Buren split the Democratic vote in his native New York, throwing the state’s electoral vote to the Whigs, he probably determined the election.

of the Republic and laid the foundation for our modern Leviathan state.³⁵

And it was all avoidable. In 1831, Virginia narrowly defeated a measure for the gradual abolition of slavery. Had it passed, then or in subsequent years, the course of history would have been much different. Two other events in 1831, however, made the South increasingly reactionary: Nat Turner's slave revolt in Virginia and *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison's incendiary abolitionist magazine. In the ensuing turmoil, both sides resorted to violence, trampled on the Constitution, and used every means available to secure political victories. It was truly the triumph of Power Politics.

Evangelical Enthusiasms

Evangelical activism extended beyond abolitionism. Christian reformers embraced a whole range of proposals in hope of transforming both society and individuals. While many of these reforms were positive and good, others manifested the theological rootlessness and idiocy so characteristic of Theodore Weld.

Evangelical reform moved through three levels. First it emphasized personal renewal or sanctification. This was a positive and Biblical concern, though sometimes overladen with extra-Biblical and perfectionistic requirements. Second, it encouraged voluntary Christian associations, which promoted Sunday Schools, the publication of Bibles and tracts, missions organizations, and reform societies. Finally, it culminated in statist reform, in which the power of the government was used to promote change.³⁶

Voluntary moral improvement associations are excellent examples of Christian political activism. Sabbatarians were concerned about the widespread profaning of the Lord's Day by individuals and businesses. Christians responded with alternative companies, such as stage lines, which did not run on Sundays and refused to stop at taverns. One sabbatarian group, in 1829, proposed a Christian political party, which would oppose any "known advocate of Deism, Socinianism, or any species of avowed hostility to the truth of Christianity". Others encouraged "blue laws". Of special concern were Sunday newspapers and Sunday postal deliveries. (Imagine a time when the Post Office was so efficient and zealous that it wanted to deliver mail seven days a week! It is doubtful that this "blue law" will be repealed anytime soon.) By 1820 sabbatarian reforms, which were distinctively Christian, were eclipsed by more general moral reforms, such as temperance.³⁷

And temperance reformers were far more successful. In the early 19th century alcohol was a real problem (per capita consumption in 1830 was three times higher than in 1985!). Travelers on the frontier noted that the staples of life were saltpork and whiskey. It is small wonder that the almost universal complaint of soused frontiersmen was

35 The war was not over slavery, though slavery was its catalyst. The war was over the nature of the federal government and states' rights, which is why Yankees call this a Civil War, and Southerners a War Between the States. For Lincoln, it was first a War for Union, but after 1863 (and the Emancipation Proclamation) it became a war to end slavery.

36 Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992).

37 Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, p.131ff.

dyspepsia—indigestion. Reformers initially urged temperance, or moderation, in alcohol consumption. Later they pushed total abstinence, even urging people to take a “pledge” and place a “t” by their signature, thus originating the “t-totallers”. Finally, temperance supporters urged prohibition, using communities, counties, and states to make drinking a criminal act.³⁸

Evangelicals opposed other forms of consumption as well. Charles Finney denounced alcohol, coffee, tea, all stimulants, and even condiments (believing they would arouse suppressed passions). Oberlin even boasted a “Cold Water Club”, whose members swore off all things except plain water. (In an age of cholera epidemics, this was a most imprudent reform.) Perfectionist reforming zeal clearly moved beyond Biblical commandments.

Tied to fears of improper consumption was a spiritual emphasis on health. The most famous health and exercise nut was a Presbyterian elder, Sylvester Graham, who believed that “Graham Crackers” would launch the millennium! (He believed the millennium wouldn't come until people obeyed God's physiological laws.) Preaching against eating meat, wearing corsets, using stimulants, having frequent conjugal relations, and “continual constipation”, a common bugaboo among health advocates, Graham developed a health regime of calisthenics, purgatives and laxatives, and whole-wheat breads and crackers (thus the “Graham cracker”). And Graham was not the only vegetarian whacko. In an 1860 address before the American Vegetarian Society, on the eve of the Civil War, Russell Trall complained that neither Lincoln, nor Douglas, nor any other candidate had raised the question of greatest importance to voters: “beef versus bread, hogs versus hominy, mutton versus squash ...[or] chickens versus whortleberries.” (In 1992, candidates have again refused to address the critical issue of whortleberries!) As one historian puts it, health reformers were “Physical Arminians” who believed people earned their “physical salvation”.³⁹

Evangelicals also got on a feminist bandwagon. Catherine Beecher articulated one brand of feminism, urging women to take control of the home, rule the domestic sphere, and thus shape the next generation. (The idea that “the woman's place is in the home” was originally a feminist notion.) Angelina Grimke Weld, before her drift into exotic religions, saw herself as an abolitionist crusading against two types of slavery—chattel and “domestic” (i.e., the bondage of women). Most famous of all feminist gatherings was the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, under Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, which demanded political rights for women.⁴⁰

38 Mark Lender and James Martin, *Drinking in America* (N.Y.: Free Press,), pp. 205-206. Annual per capita consumption of alcohol (gallons/decade) was as follows: 6.6/1800; 7.1/1810; 6.8/1820; 7.1/1830; 3.1/1840; and 2.6/1985.

39 James Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 5. The first building in northwest Arkansas with modern plumbing was erected by the Harmonic Vegetarian Society. Adventists like John Kellogg, the breakfast cereal baron, experimented with new foods because of their religious zeal for health. Alternative medical treatments experimented with at the time included Hydropathy, Homeopathy, and Osteopathy.

40 Miriam Gurko, *The Ladies of Seneca Falls: The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement* (N.Y.: Schocken, 1974) Dabney argued that abolitionists and feminists were driven by an egalitarian principle that would undermine all American institutions.

Women were behind other reforms as well, such as custodial institutions. Dortha Dix, an evangelical being transmorgified into a Unitarian, became a spokesman for the mentally ill after being outraged at conditions in a Massachusetts institution where she taught Sunday School. She not only pushed for reforms, but sought federal money for her crusade. President Franklin Pierce, correctly noting the statist nature of the request, vetoed the bill, arguing that it would violate the Constitution by “making the federal government the great almoner of public charity in the United States.” Reformers for custodial institutions also targeted prisons. Biblical ideas of “punishment” or “restitution” were dropped in favor of the new notion of “rehabilitation”. This “reform” presupposed that people were inherently good, were corrupted by an unhealthy environment, and, if given enough time to reflect on their misdeeds in a “penitentiary”, would feel sorrowful and resolve to do better.⁴¹

The best way of encouraging the natural goodness of people, of course, is through education. It is no coincidence that apostles of common schools, such as Horace Mann, were Unitarians who repudiated the Biblical doctrine of depravity. Even evangelicals were captivated by this new anthropology. Fontaine Richard Earle, the leader of a revivalistic denomination, became the “Father of Public Education in Arkansas” (this appellation is supposed to be an honor!) after promising that government education would produce a utopia. Public schools would allow “intellectual vigor” and “moral beauty” to flourish in every community, override barriers of ignorance and prejudice, and “raise the great mass of people to the true dignity of manhood”. The operative assumption, again, was that people were inherently good—the culprit was ignorance.⁴²

There are valuable lessons in the experience of these 19th century evangelical reformers. They had a vision to transform their society along Christian lines, something evangelical pietists and retreatists need to relearn today. Some of their reforms—temperance and women's suffrage—were enshrined in the constitution as amendments. At the same time, these reformers made serious errors. First, many reforms were not scriptural, denied Christian liberty, or had perfectionist overtones. Second, reformers frequently had unbiblical views of human nature. Rather than seeing man as depraved and in need of the personal redemption of Christ, they argued that humans were essentially good and only in need of reform and improvement. Since the real evil was in the environment, salvation came through a “social gospel”, in which the “structures of society” were redeemed. Third, perfectionist zeal grew into statism. Longing for a righteous society, but without clear Biblical parameters for state authority, they increasingly employed statist coercion to transform the nation. In an age when the state increasingly usurps the authority of God-ordained institutions, it is imperative that Christians have a clear Biblical concept of the role of the government.⁴³

41 Olasky, *Tragedy of American Compassion*, p. 49f.

42 Roger Schultz, “Revival and Reform: F.R. Earle and the Cumberland Presbyterian Tradition”, *The Ozark Historical Review* 17 (Spring, 1988): 48.

43 No one better exemplifies this evangelical confusion about the role of the state than Ronald Sider. In a mid-80s interview Sider insisted that the government enforce Old Testament provisions for charity through higher taxes and the redistribution of wealth to the poor. The interviewer asked if he would also be in favor of also enforcing Old Testament adultery laws. Sider said, “No, that is a matter of personal choice.” Then why shouldn't charity and aid to the poor be a matter of personal choice? According to

The American Party

Evangelical action turned against a foreign menace in the early 19th century, when a flood of immigrants constituted a new challenge to the American Protestant order. Primarily from Germany and Ireland, these immigrants piled into crime-infested urban slums, were easy prey for corrupt urban political bosses, and were unfamiliar with Protestant ethics (especially sobriety). Moreover, most were Roman Catholic. Between 1830 and 1860, when the population of the U.S. doubled, the Roman Catholics increased ten-fold, from 300,000 to three million, raising fears that the newcomers would destabilize the nation's political and moral foundations.⁴⁴

Lyman Beecher, for instance, living in immigrant-flooded Cincinnati, wrote *A Plea for the West* in 1834. He argued that these new European immigrants, mainly from monarchical and papist countries, were unfamiliar with American Republicanism and would have difficulty fulfilling their responsibilities as citizens. He further warned of a foreign conspiracy, funded by the Austrian emperor and directed by his chief minister Metternich, that aimed at undermining the United States. (Metternich was behind the Holy Alliance, a post-Napoleonic association of European states committed to suppressing democratic movements and preventing another French Revolution.) While Beecher had no fear of simple Catholicism, he was concerned about the papism which was manipulated from abroad. (And most bishops at the time were foreign.) The solution to the problem, Beecher felt, was public schools, which would inculcate homogeneous American values in immigrants.⁴⁵

scripture, people are commanded to aid the poor, but there is no criminal penalty for failure to do so—it is a personal and moral matter. God will judge the greedy and heartless. On the other hand, God specifically commands the civil authorities to judge adulterers. Adultery was a criminally punishable public offense. Sider's stand makes absolutely no sense. I can conceive of a libertarian hermeneutic in which Sider could argue that state has no business enforcing any moral standards in our day—regarding either charity or adultery. I can also conceive of a statist hermeneutic, in which Sider could argue that the government should enforce all moral standards—regarding both charity and adultery. But I cannot see Sider's flip-flop hermeneutic. It only makes sense if he is deliberately trying to bamboozle his evangelical audience by “spoof-texting” his socialist ideas. Since he was reared in an Anabaptist environment (which has socialistic overtones) and was trained as an historian (and thus knows nothing about economics), Sider's transgressions are forgivable. Unforgivable, however, is the ridiculous puff-piece on Sider in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*. It is a sign of how far modern evangelicalism has tumbled. For those who want a first-rate Biblical analysis of Sider's position, see David Chilton's *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators*.

- 44 We still need a Biblically oriented study of what constitutes a “nation”, say in terms of Genesis 10, Acts 17:26, Deuteronomy 32:8.. Twentieth century Americans, simmered in our “melting pot”, usually think in political and geographical terms of a “nation-state”. The Bible includes the sense of ethnic, linguistic, religio-cultural solidarity. In the multi-ethnic context of United States, unity has been founded upon language, political heritage, and a common civil religion. [For a good example of a Jewish immigrant's perspective on “Christian America”, see Ralph Raimi, “The Separation of Church and State”, *The Freeman* (June, 1992), pp. 214-215.] As the “nation” loses its religious and cultural homogeneity, it will unravel into feuding, polyglot factions. In the recent Los Angeles riots, an excellent example of this fragmentation, one third of all looters arrested were illegal aliens.
- 45 Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (1834). Common schools were vehicles for the conversion of papists to America's civic religion, a kind of generic Protestantism. Not surprisingly, Roman Catholics zealously built parochial schools to educate their numerous progeny. Humanists and pluralists use

The most interesting anti-immigration spokesmen was Samuel F. B. Morse. His evangelical roots were deep—his father had led an exodus from Harvard, when it capitulated to Unitarianism, and helped found the new evangelical seminary at Andover. Samuel Morse's first calling was as a painter. He is most famous, however, for the invention of the telegraph and the “Morse code”. In *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institution of the United States*, Morse also warned of a foreign conspiracy, contending that Metternich was funding the St. Leopold Society, a secret Jesuit group with ties to the Bavarian Illuminati, to undermine the republic. The book established Morse as the leading evangelical conspiracy nut of the 19th century.⁴⁶

That the new immigrants had a penchant for violence and anarchy was clear, however, as Lighthorse Harry Lee discovered. In 1812, on the onset of the war with Britain, Lee was besieged and attacked in Baltimore by a Republican mob. Questioning the patriotism of all Federalists, the mob accused Lee and his friends of being pro-British traitors. One of Lee's companions, who was also a veteran officer of the Revolution, taunted the mob by thundering that he was fighting for his country while they were “still in the bogs of Ireland”. The mob killed him and then severely beat and mutilated Lee, whom they left for dead, with broken ribs, a gouged out eye, and a nearly severed ear. Lee was so shamed by the fiasco that he went into self-imposed exile to the West Indies, from which he never returned. (He left behind a young son, Robert E. Lee.) Lee's experience highlighted fears about radical and drunken immigrants.⁴⁷

Others were more concerned about the religious threat from Romish immigrants. Salacious tell-all sex books about (and by) papist clergymen sold briskly. *Awful Confessions of the Hotel Dieu*, by Maria Monk(!), was purportedly the autobiographical tale of a poor woman kidnaped and held as a love-slave by lascivious monks in Montreal. *Confessions of a French Catholic Priest* (edited by Morse) described priestly drunkenness, problems with celibacy, and the diabolical ways priest transformed confessionals into “schools of vice”. Other eye-opening stories were told about the underground tunnels between monasteries and convents which provided quiet love nests for secret trysts and places for lime pits to dispose of their illegitimate progeny. Most famous was the story of ex-priest Father Chiniquy, whose *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome* included the revelation that the Jesuits had assassinated Abraham Lincoln.⁴⁸

Anti-Roman nativism culminated in the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, a secret organization that opposed immigration. Because the members were secretive and answered all questions about their fraternity with, “I don't know”, the Order was dubbed the “Know-Nothings”. The Know-Nothings became political with the formation of the American Party. The party was strong in the 1850s, when it dominated state politics

government schools in the same way today against Biblical Christians.

46 Samuel Morse, *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States* (1835). See also his *The Present Attempt to Dissolve the American Union, a British Aristocratic Plot* (1862). Morse had reason to distrust the British, as they were in the process of ripping off his telegraph patents.

47 Charles Royster, *Light Horse Harry Lee* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1981) p.164. Historians love to speculate on how this event influenced Lee's childhood, since he was abandoned by his father. No doubt this, and his father's other failures contributed to Lee's serious, sober, and compassionate demeanor.

48 Samuel Morse, ed., *Confessions of a French Catholic Priest* (1837).

throughout the North, which was soggy with immigrants. The Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1854, for instance, contained 376 “Know-Nothings”, 1 Whig, and 1 Free Soiler. And it was seen as *the* national party of the future. In 1856, ex-president Millard Fillmore became the party's presidential standard bearer. The party drew more votes than any other third party in U.S. history until Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party in 1912.⁴⁹

The American Party is the least understood and most vilified political party in American history. Historians, eager to attribute nativism to Protestant xenophobia, have unfairly equated the party with shallowness, violence, and bigotry. With titles like *The Brass Knuckles Crusade* and *The Protestant Crusade*, their books wrap up the whole movement as “mean Protestants attack nice Catholics”.⁵⁰ Though party attitudes toward the Roman church varied from region to region, the American Party was not officially nor universally anti-Catholic. The American Party included foreign-born and Catholic members. The Louisiana delegation to the 1856 national convention, for instance, was entirely Roman Catholic. And in the same year, presidential nominee Millard Fillmore explicitly repudiated all nativist-sounding platform planks.⁵¹

Essentially, as its name suggested, the American Party was a pro-American party. Styling itself a “people's party”, it committed itself to democratic reform, such as a direct primary for presidential candidates. Attempting to be a moderating, compromise party during a time of sectional controversies, it avoided divisive issues (such as slavery) and required its members to take a “Union Oath” (to do nothing to disrupt the federal union). The American party's main concern with foreigners was with foreign political radicalism.

In the 1850s, it looked like the party might succeed. The Whig Party and the whole second party system were dying. The American Party seemed to be a fresh alternative, and, after doing well in the mid-term elections in 1854, it expected to take the presidency in 1856. With the explosive situation in Kansas, however, the slavery question commanded more attention, and both the Whig and American Parties died. The Republican Party, which took a tough stand on and gained momentum from the slavery question, became the party of the future.

The fate of the American Party offers some current lessons. There is value in a party that strives to protect and perpetuate American values, especially in this politically correct, multiculturalist age of America-bashing. But there are problems with this, as well. First, any party which refuses to identify its program, while insisting that it alone represents the

49 There was a Masonic dimension to the Order, which had secret oaths and rituals in addition to the hostility to Romanism characteristic of Freemasonry. Chiniquy's book, for example, was originally dedicated to “Freemasons of the world”. American nativism culminated late in 19th century in the American Protective Association, which was founded by Henry Bowers, a Mason, to combat Catholics and Jews. Bowers claimed that the pope was secretly the priest of Jupiter (or, “Jew-Peter”).

50 Books on American nativism that give away their biases include Carleton Beals, *Brass-Knuckles Crusade: The Great Know Nothing Conspiracy, 1820-1860* (N.Y.: Hastings House, 1960), Ray Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*. (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1938), and Martin Lipsett and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1970).

51 The fairest recent treatment of the American Party is in Jean Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).

people (whether it purports to speak for “middle America”, or “the poor and downtrodden”, or a certain Texas billionaire with big ears), should be approached with caution. A second danger is posed by a status quo party whose only objective is to preserve a fuzzily-defined American traditionalism, or the “good old days”. Contemporary evangelicals have publicly stated that their vision for the future is to return to the way things were in the Fifties. (Some vision!) Third, since Scripture commands that justice be done to the alien (Leviticus 19:34), Christians must be careful of bigotry. Nativism can become a calcified nationalism that is ultimately hardened to the gospel. In the 1850s an Arkansas evangelist complained that there was little interest in spiritual things or progress for the kingdom of heaven—all because the people were “know-nothingized”.

Conclusion

Christians in the early nineteenth century were active in the political arena. They addressed the declining moral conditions of the nation. They responded to political crises and threats, both real and only perceived. Though their analyses of issues and the organizations they created were imperfect, they sincerely attempted to transform their society for the glory of God.

They had varying degrees of success. Some third parties had brief periods of initial influence, but most were regional movements and were short-lived. Historically, the most successful third parties died because the major parties absorbed them and their key ideas. This was true, for instance, of the abolitionists and prohibitionists. Though the parties died, their real influence was in incubating and popularizing these critical “single issues”.

Perhaps single-issue third parties will gain an audience in the Nineties. The Pro-Life Party and the Taxpayers Party have the best chances for success because of the watershed issues they represent. (If the Republican Party drops its pro-life stand, for instance, look for the immediate growth of the Pro-Life Party.) And if these single issue parties are successful, they will not last long, for one of the major parties will surely preempt their issues.

Christians who are tired of pragmatic political compromises and want a distinctively Biblical voice in the political sphere could also try organizing political societies, perhaps similar to Hamilton's Christian Constitutional Society. They could start by debating a Christian platform along the lines, say, of David Rockett's outline for the Covenant Party. By not organizing as a party, the society would avoid the messy and expensive requirements of recruiting and financing candidates and could focus on education and building a distinctively Christian political perspective. G. Thatcher Darwin's program for the Conservative Party charts ways in which a non-aligned party could resolutely stand on key principles and still influence the direction of electoral politics.

Christians can legitimately disagree on whether to support established party candidates, create third parties, or form societies. Historically, they have done all three. But they will all agree, that as citizens of the land God has placed us in, we are responsible to the Lord for our actions. For “righteousness exalts the land, but sin is a reproach to any people.”