

Vol. 3 No. 2 Fall 2024

# PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



## Ellis Sandoz: In Memoriam

Remarks at the Sandoz Panel, the EVS Annual Meeting, 2024  
by Martin Palouš

Common Sense and the Rule of Law: Returning Voegelin to Central Europe  
by Martin Palouš

The Continued Significance of Political Sermons of the  
American Founding Era  
by Philip D de Mahy

Ellis Sandoz, American Patriot:  
How and Why He Celebrated a Christian, Lockean Founding  
by Glenn A. Moots

Ellis Sandoz and Chinese Quest for Liberty  
by Promise Hsu

In Defense of Civilization: Scientism and the Covid 19 Response in the U.S.  
by David N. Whitney

## Book Reviews

Reviews of Patrick J. Deneen's *Regime Change*  
by Ethan Alexander-Davey  
by Tiffany Miller  
by Ben Peterson  
by Luke C. Sheahan

# The Continued Significance of *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*

Philip D. De Mahy

*The ethics of resistance is the ethics of hope.*—Ellis Sandoz<sup>1</sup>

In the three decades following the publication of *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, the body of early American sermons that Ellis Sandoz described as “extraordinarily abundant and extraordinarily little known”<sup>2</sup> is now studied in academic subfields of American History, Political Science, and English Literature. Alongside this resurgence of sermon studies, research aimed at developing a more nuanced understanding of the political and religious complexity of the Founding Era has grown increasingly specialized.

Over this period, scholarship has tended to avoid rehashing either-or debates more common in the twentieth century about the primacy of Enlightenment theory, Christian belief, or economic expediency in the American Founding. While perspectives have grown more eclectic, the sheer range of material has sometimes left room for caricatures to reemerge that portray eighteenth-century American political actors as either naively pious or shrewdly willing to employ religious means for secular ends. The consensus, however, has moved toward a greater recognition of the crucial role of religious revivalism during the American Founding, and the study of unpublished sermon manuscripts continues to shed new light on how Christian communities shaped and were shaped by the political climate of their time.

Amidst these developments, over thirty years later, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era* remains the authoritative collection of political sermons published during the period. Given the scope of Ellis Sandoz’s scholarship, it is worth revisiting briefly how his collection related to his larger intellectual project.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ellis Sandoz, “The Crisis of Civic Consciousness: Nihilism and Political Science as Resistance,” *The Political Science Reviewer*, 25, The State of Political Science: A Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Symposium (1996): 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, ed. Sandoz, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1:xii.

## PIETAS

On a purely practical level, re-presenting the published sermons as an area of political study demonstrated that religious belief was in fact intimately intertwined with the American Revolution and its claim for what many then called sacred liberty. Furthermore, by prioritizing a sermon collection beyond the more common New England sources and covering the broad range of political and regional voices of the time, Sandoz showed how these voices had begun to coalesce into a truly national phenomenon.

As an Aristotelian political scientist, Sandoz understood the importance of beginning from the living language of everyday citizens when articulating political principles. He approached the sermon literature as, in a sense, particular expressions of these communities' *politeiai*—not literal constitutions, but articulations of a shared moral and spiritual foundation grounding the politics of the day. It was through engaging with these texts in their particularity that broader claims, such as the one in Israel Evans's election sermon that "The true spirit of the gospel contains the true spirit of liberty," could be evaluated in context and in its own terms.<sup>3</sup>

More fundamentally, Sandoz's project went beyond merely staking a historical claim. The centrality of his sermon anthology to his overall project can only be understood in light of a scholarly mission that was at once philosophical and practical. In his final published essay, "The Philosopher's Vocation," Sandoz articulates the insight of his mentor Eric Voegelin that, "within the limits of possibility and persuasion, the philosopher is called actively to resist untruth through searching noetic critique, grounded as in Aristotle in robust common sense which is the foundation of prudential rationality and of political science itself."<sup>4</sup> It was Sandoz's insight that the early sermonic literature was fertile ground for developing an articulation of a particularly American critique that could serve as the spiritual foundation for a commonsense politics of resistance against the ideologies of the day. He understood the revivalism of the eighteenth century in America to be a reorientation toward philosophical truth and an affirmation of the lived experience of everyday citizens—in line with a noetic revolution that extended to the origins of Western Civilization and continued to ground the American project into the present. His first comprehensive articulation of this project, *A Government of Laws*, developed out of his engagement with the sermonic

---

<sup>3</sup> Israel Evans, "A Sermon Delivered at the Annual Election," in *Political Sermons of the American Founding*, 1062.

<sup>4</sup> Sandoz, "The Philosopher's Vocation: The Voegelinian Paradigm," *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 57.

## THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF ELLIS'S *POLITICAL SERMONS*

literature and established a mode of inquiry that he would develop throughout his mature work.

It's crucial to note that these were not political claims he would have understood as simply traditionalist, or conservative, or necessarily exclusive to evangelical faith, or even Christian religion. Rather, he understood the particular Christian expression of the early American sermons to be in continuity with the universal truths of human existence. He likewise diagnosed the historical sources of disorder as something more than an imbalance between competing interests or ideologies, but as a more fundamental rupture in the fabric of what constituted a shared political vision.<sup>5</sup> The shared vision that coalesced in the Founding era was complex, nuanced, and evolving, but what held it together was a shared spiritual foundation. He was in agreement with G.K. Chesterton's often-quoted line that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence."<sup>6</sup> Sandoz's claim was that this political creed concerning human affairs was rooted in common sense that reflected the religious insights expressed in the early American sermon literature.

Following his mentor Eric Voegelin, Sandoz understood the idea of common sense to be best exemplified by the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid. It was his writings that articulated most clearly how the spiritual and philosophical foundations of the Founding Era were connected by shared classical origins. In an interview conducted by Ellis Sandoz, Voegelin recollected, "This English and Scottish conception of common sense as a human attitude that incorporates a philosopher's attitude toward life without the philosopher's technical apparatus, and inversely the understanding of Classic and Stoic philosophy as the technical, analytical elaboration of the common sense attitude, has remained a lasting influence in my understanding both of common sense and Classic philosophy."<sup>7</sup> In Sandoz's account, it was Reid who was able to most effectively argue against the skepticism of Hume by affirming that man's widely recognized capacity to act freely entailed the responsibility to act justly.<sup>8</sup> This common sense case for liberty was rooted in a shared Christian recognition

---

<sup>5</sup> See Sandoz, *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), chap. 4, "Power and Spirit in the Founding."

<sup>6</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1922), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Sandoz (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 56-57.

<sup>8</sup> See *A Government of Laws*, 169-70.

## PIETAS

of divine moral authority, as the reality of judgment presupposed the ability to act freely. The claim that such principles of liberty were common, therefore, did not entail that they could not be obscured or collectively forgotten.

Common sense, an essential aspect of the American project as Sandoz understood it, must be continually cultivated and inherited through community—communities that inculcate it through habit and custom, as well as through sermonizing. Sermons therefore served both individual and collective political function. They foster the community's common sense principles by affirming the individual's experience of liberty, and with that liberty the shared accountability to act justly.

The fact that published sermons, rather than the more typical unpublished sermons that were preached to congregations, were formalized literature did not detract from their communal character. Cotton Mather was known to distribute published copies of his sermons to people and emphatically say, "Remember that I am speaking to you, all the while you have this book before you!"<sup>9</sup> His conception of personal encounter through the reading of texts underlines the communal significance of these more formalized published sermons. In his decision to limit his collection to sermons that were published, Sandoz argued that he was including the best and most significant work available.<sup>10</sup> Published sermons had the advantage of being official, on the record statements delivered by the most respected preachers of the time, representing their most refined and carefully crafted work.

It is significant that an alternative approach to the study of American sermons had already emerged by the time Sandoz was assembling his collection. This growing critique of relying too much on published material, most clearly articulated by Harry S. Stout, argues that the unpublished manuscripts of sermons best represent what was most frequently heard by the people of the day. Speaking of how rare published sermons were, he writes, "In the real world of colonial public assembly, such sermons often occurred only six or seven times a year in the life of any particular church—a figure representing less than ten percent of the total sermons preached."<sup>11</sup> He argues that published sermons were more polished and comparatively less critical of the English government, and generally more conservative in

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding*, 1:xxi.

<sup>11</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4–5.

## THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF ELLIS'S *POLITICAL SERMONS*

tone. Furthermore, most unpublished manuscripts were the product of a collective effort, transcribed by listeners and refined by members of the congregation, thereby representing a shared expression of a religious community.

While much significant scholarship continues to produce new insights through engagement with unpublished manuscripts, the argument for restricting the collection to published sermons extends beyond the claim that these works were the most representative. The majority of the sermons in the collection were delivered on occasions commemorating significant past events, observing days of fasting or thanksgiving, or as election sermons that affirmed the roles and responsibilities of both citizens and their governors. Fostering communities of common sense involved deliberate and collective effort to memorialize and recollect key moments in their shared history and to connect that history with the social and political events of the present. It is in this particular way that the promulgation of published political sermons fostered a shared common sense that functioned as an accrued resistance to error and ideological deformation.

The act of affirming a philosophy of common sense and resisting the revolt against basic truths of the human condition was the central aim of Ellis Sandoz's reflections on the American political sermons. He argued that a politics of resistance cannot be affirmed in the abstract; that it can only be understood by reflecting on the responses of individuals to the crises of particular communities.<sup>12</sup> This requires engaging with and encountering these earlier articulations of reason and faith, not merely as dogmatic pronouncements of the past but as articulations of principles that continue to inform and partially constitute the political present.

---

<sup>12</sup> Sandoz, *The Politics of Truth and Other Untimely Essays*, "The Crisis of Civic Consciousness," 134.