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PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



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The Declaration in the Sermons of the Revolutionary Era

Kevin Slack

Long ago historian Perry Miller questioned what he called the “obtuse secularism” of those who interpreted the American Founding ideas: “A pure rationalism such as [Jefferson’s],” he noted, “might have declared the independence of [Americans in 1776], but it could never have inspired them to fight for it.”¹ He was making a point about the transcendent nature of politics. Every political community must educate its citizens that it is more important than life itself—that it is worth sacrificing for. Aristotle in his *Politics* said that the political education consists in beautiful speeches that inculcate noble images and provide a measure for honor and shame; this he opposed to the education of the vulgar by pleasure and pain. Thus, every political order requires some religious teaching. In the colonial period, that teaching was conveyed by American ministers. Mark Noll reminds us that the average American colonist heard more sermons each year than he received pieces of mail.² And so in this brief essay, we will first look at the Election Day Sermons—what they were and the role they played; how they changed during the 18th century; the teachings they instilled; and finally, the role that the ministers played in the revolution.

The election day sermon was a Puritan inheritance from Protestant England,³ and it was a fixture of American civic and religious life for 250 years.⁴ In Boston, the election of selectmen took place in the March town meeting. Massachusetts citizens elected representatives to the General Court in mid-May. And Election Day, a holiday, took place on the last Wednesday in May.⁵ The election sermons were delivered after the votes but

¹ Perry Miller, “From the Covenant to the Revival,” in *The Shaping of American Religion*, ed. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison (Princeton University Press, 1961), 343.

² Mark A. Noll, “The Election Sermon: Situating Religion and the Constitutional in the Eighteenth Century,” *DePaul Law Review* 59, Iss. 4 (Summer 2010): 1225.

³ Ministers preached sermons before the House of Commons and at the Lord Mayor of London’s election. American political sermons were not just a feature of New England; see William Sith, *A SERMON, Preached before The GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AT WILLIAMSBURG, March 2. 1745–6* (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1746); *The Sinfulness and Pernicious Nature of Gaming: A Sermon Preached before the General Assembly of Virginia...* (Williamsburg: Hunter, 1752); William Giberne, *The duty of living peaceably with all men...* (Williamsburg: Hunter, 1759).

⁴ The sermons were an annual, published event from the Restoration until Massachusetts ended the practice in 1884.

⁵ Election Day in Massachusetts Bay was a civic festival day that included large gatherings, militia parades, and celebrations, especially in Boston. In Connecticut, Election Day was initially held on the second Thursday in May,

before the new government began its work, allowing the minister to address both the outgoing and incoming officials. After the sermon, the new assemblymen elected their Speaker and a new council. Puritan leader John Cotton gave the first recorded election day sermon in 1634. He urged the reelection of John Winthrop. The General Court ignored his recommendation. Sermons were not just reserved for Election Day. Ministers preached on Thanksgiving days, fast days, and other state holidays.

The role of the election sermons was first to instruct magistrates, the new deputies, and the public on their duties to God and the community. They frequently drew on Old Testament themes: the “New-England Israel” was a covenant with God.⁶ Many followed the style of the “jeremiad,” a form of lamentation based on the prophet Jeremiah, warning of divine punishment for public and private sins.⁷ A second important function was reconciliation: to remind the people and leaders who differed over policy of a higher purpose of their political covenant. The religious language—*ligare*, to bind—unified the people in a common moral order. God was not of one party or another. Finally, election day sermons used eloquent rhetoric to craft an image of a distinct *people*—what they were and *ought* to be.⁸ The images educated a certain character type by drawing the affections of listeners to an ideal, worthy of imitation and sacrifice. Jonathan Mayhew, Congregational minister at Boston’s Old West Church, and an intimate of James Otis, John Adams, and Sam Adams, preached in 1766:

Having, also, from my childhood up, by the kind providence of my God, and the tender care of a good parent now at rest with him, been educated to the love of liberty, tho’ not of licentiousness; which chaste and virtuous passion was still increased in me, as I advanced towards, and into, manhood, I would not, I cannot now, tho’ past middle age, relinquish the fair object of my youthful affections, liberty, whose charms, instead of decaying with time in my eyes, have daily captivated me more and more.⁹

accompanied by a large turnout of voting freemen in Hartford. In the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, elections were held on the first Wednesday in May, with celebrations in Newport.

⁶ Cotton Mather, *A pillar of gratitude. Or, A brief recapitulation, of the matchless favours, with which the God of heaven, hath obliged the hearty praises, of his New-England Israel...* (Boston: Green & J. Allen, 1700).

⁷ See Samuel Dunbar, “The Presence of God With His People [1760],” in *Political Sermons of the Founding Era, 1730–1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, 2 vols. (2nd, Liberty Fund, 1998), 218: “When God’s professing people forsake him ... it is necessary ... that God testify his displeasure against them, and punish them” to “bring them to repentance.”

⁸ See George Whitefield, “Britain’s Mercies, and Britain’s Duties [1746],” in *Political Sermons*, 123.

⁹ Jonathan Mayhew, “The Snare Broken [1766],” in *Political Sermons*, 261; See also John Allen, *An Oration Upon the Beauties of Liberty; Or the Essential Rights of the Americans* [1773], in *Political Sermons*, 303.

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Mayhew's sermon praised the Boston merchants who participated in a nonimportation agreement to refuse to purchase British goods in response to the Stamp Act, but it also pled for unity with those set against the policy, so the colony might "begin our civil, political life anew."¹⁰

The election day sermons also changed throughout the 1700s. While the New England colonies already had a long history of both self-government and resistance by ministers to arbitrary rule, the sermons of the 1740s and 1750s accompanied changes from the First Great Awakening, or the series of revivals that swept through the colonies.¹¹ First, as the American colonies grew to include more Christian sects, the sermons originally exclusive to Congregationalists began to include others. There followed a convergence amidst theological differences. George Whitefield's 1739-1741 American tour (immediately preceding the Presbyterian schism from 1741-1758) challenged the established ministers who had dismissed the emotional revivals by preaching that true conversion comes from personal heart-change, not one's parents' church affiliation. Itinerant minister Gilbert Tennant warned of an unconverted ministry. Both men supported King George's War as a Protestant war against French Roman-Catholics.¹² But this nondenominational Christianity laid the foundation for a broader effort against the British. On a public fast day in 1774, Connecticut minister Samuel Sherwood said:

There are many good men, of sound integrity, of unblemished morals, and truly lovers of their country in every denomination of Christians. [I]t matters not with me, whether a man be a stated member of this or that church, whether he be in communion with that established in Old England, or in New; provided he be a good man, actuated by evangelical principles and motives, and will stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made him free."¹³

¹⁰ Mayhew, *The Snare Broken*, 261-62.

¹¹ See Sandoz, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America* (University of Missouri, 2006), chs. 1-3; Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty* (Basic Books, 2010); Noll, "The Election Sermon," 1224: "The key development ... was the combination of fervent revivalism and imperial warfare. From that combination arose the particularly American amalgamation of religion and politics that carried the colonies toward independence..." By 1800, sermons included themes like religious liberty and American exceptionalism; see Thomas Baldwin, *A Sermon, delivered before His Excellency Caleb Strong, esq., governor...* (Boston: Young & Minns, 1802).

¹² Gilbert Tennant, *The late association for defence, farther encouraged, or, Defensive war defended* (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall, 1748); Whitefield, "Britain's Mercies," 126: "So that if the Lord had not been on our side, Great Britain, not to say America, would, in a few weeks, or months, have been an Aceldama, a field of blood."

¹³ Samuel Sherwood, "Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers [1774]," *Political Sermons*, 377-80, preached to the "Freemen" of Connecticut that all denominations, even "those who have gone off from the scheme and plan of religion professed by the first fathers of this country," had common cause to defend the "Civil government" (403-404).

Moreover, American Catholics and Protestants (even Baptists) could agree on a natural law that included the right to conscience.¹⁴ In 1773 Charles Carroll, whose brother John would become the first American Catholic bishop, waged a pamphlet war against Tory Daniel Dulany in making the case for Catholic Whiggism and natural rights. In 1779, Boston Baptist pastor Samuel Stillman was the first non-congregationalist invited to deliver the Election Day sermon.

Second, the Election Day sermons began to synthesize sources from philosophy and theology to educate a coherent political theory, what Thomas Jefferson called the “common sense” of the Revolution. They supplemented references to the Old Testament with writers like Locke, Sidney, and Hoadley. Both reason and revealed Scripture, preached Benjamin Colman, demonstrate a “Supream Governour of the World,” who has ordered both the natural and the moral worlds by his law.¹⁵ In appealing to both the laws of Nature and Nature’s God, the Americans provided a resolution to the problem of the conflicting authorities of Church and State. In the words of Thomas G. West, it taught “political obligation on a new basis consistent with Christianity’s universal claim but independent of any particular religious sect. The God of all mankind could now be the God of a particular political community. For if natural liberty and natural law come from God, only one kind of community will satisfy God’s law: a consent-based republic protecting the equal liberty of all.”¹⁶ Citizens could fight for their country in good conscience, but free of sectarian fanaticism.

Finally, Election Day sermons provided a shared religious-political language to shape the character of the citizens. Here the underlying emotions are more important than the logic. Ellis Sandoz noted that Patrick Henry’s cry, “Give me liberty or give me death!” is not a syllogism. This teaching imbued a view of human nature. Samuel Cooper preached, “We want not ... a special revelation from heaven to teach us that men are born equal and free; that no man has a natural claim of dominion over his neighbours, nor one nation any such claim upon another.”¹⁷ Numerous ministers preached that the “state of nature” preceding civil government is a state of equality. Certainly there were inequalities—“It is never expected,”

¹⁴ On “liberty of conscience,” Sherwood, “Scriptural Instructions,” 404; Isaac Backus, “An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty [1773],” *Political Sermons*, 362: “that dearest of all rights, equal liberty of conscience.”

¹⁵ Benjamin Colman, “Government the Pillar of the Earth [1730],” *Political Sermons*, 19.

¹⁶ Thomas G. West, “Foreword,” Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (Liberty Fund, 1996), xxiii.

¹⁷ Samuel Cooper, “A Sermon on the Day of the Commencement of the Constitution [1780],” *Political Sermons*, 637.

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preached Zabdiel Adams, “that all should be philosophers.”¹⁸ Or in the words of Elisha Williams, “We are born free as we are born rational. Not that we have actually the exercise of either as soon as born; age that brings one, brings the other too.”¹⁹ All are equal who possess the reason to know their equal rights and duties under the moral natural law.²⁰ Thus liberty could not be license. “The law of nature which bounds this liberty, forbids all injustice and wickedness, allows no man to injure another in his person or property, or to destroy his own life.”²¹ Ministers found an analogy between our natural rights and duties in the Golden Rule, “The law of GOD directs us to do unto others, as we would they should do unto us.”²² Upon this basis of equality was grounded the unalienable natural rights to life, liberty, and property. “All are born thus naturally equal,” preached Williams, “with an equal right to their persons; so also with an equal right to their preservation”: “And every man having a property in his own person, the *labour of his body and the work of his hands* are properly his own, to which no one has a right but himself.”²³ This right to property extended to include the Americans’ right to the soil, over which the king could make no claim.²⁴

Yet human passion overcomes reason. The state of nature is one of fallen, sinful man, thus government is necessary for the ends that God designed.²⁵ “The necessity of civil government,” preached Moses Mather, “aris[es] from the depravity of human nature.”²⁶ Thus

¹⁸ Zabdiel Adams, *An Election Sermon, Boston, 1782: Comprehensive view of relationship between citizens and governors*, in *American Political Writing During the Founding Era: 1760–1805*, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald Lutz, 2 vols. (Liberty Fund, 1983), 555; or Charles Chauncy, *Civil Magistrates Must be Just, Ruling in the Fear of God* [1747], *Political Sermons*, 152: “Every man is not fit to have the sword of justice put into his hands.”

¹⁹ Elisha Williams, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants* [1744], *Political Sermons*, 56.

²⁰ See Zabdiel Adams, *An Election Sermon*, 554–55, on virtues and education; on equality; Samuel West, *On the Right to Rebel Against Governors (Election Day Sermon)*, Boston, 1776, *Political Writing*, 413: “is a state wherein all are equal,—no one having a right to control another...”; Sherwood, *Scriptural Instructions*, 382–83. Or Elhanan Winchester, *A Century Sermon on the Glorious Revolution* [1788], *Political Sermons*, 990: “protected all men in the enjoyment of their equal and unalienable rights, such as life, liberty, property, and the lawful pursuit of happiness.”

²¹ Simeon Howard, *A Sermon Preached to the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company in Boston* [1773], *Political Writing*, 187: “In a state of nature ... God has given to every one liberty to pursue his own happiness ... provided he keeps within the bounds of the law of nature.” On natural law, Samuel West, *On the Right to Rebel*, 413.

²² John Allen, *An Oration*, 305, also posits a fundamental equality, under the “law of nature.”

²³ Williams, *Essential Rights and Liberties*, 56–57; on the “right of dominion over [one’s self] and his power’s and faculties,” Moses Mather, *America’s Appeal to the Impartial World* [1775], *Political Sermons*, 444; John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Woodward, 1810), 77: “Private property is every particular person’s having a confessed and exclusive right to a certain portion of the goods which serve for the support and conveniency of life.”

²⁴ John Allen, *An Oration*, 310; Mayhew, *The Snare Broken*, 240.

²⁵ Jared Eliot, *Give Caesar his Due: Or, the Obligation that Subjects are under...* (New London: T. Green, 1738), 27–28; Andrew Eliot, *A sermon preached before His Excellency Francis Bernard, Esq.* (Boston: Green and Russell, 1765), 8.

²⁶ Mather, *America’s Appeal*, 445n.

all just government is sanctioned by God, as it conforms to his rational design.²⁷ To remedy the defects of the state of nature, preached Howard, “individuals ... combine[d] together for mutual defence and security; to give up a part of their natural liberty for the sake of enjoying the remainder in greater safety; to agree upon certain laws among themselves to regulate the social conduct of each individual.”²⁸ It was a social compact: citizens part with some of their alienable rights to protect their unalienable rights.²⁹ “There are some natural liberties or rights which no person can divest himself of, without transgressing the law of nature.”³⁰ Catholic Bishop John Carroll appealed to social contract theory: “Americans associated into one great national union, under the express condition of not being shackled by religious tests; and under a firm persuasion that they were to retain, when associated, every natural right, not expressly surrendered.”³¹

Retaining their natural rights, the people are sovereign.³² Or, as preached Moses Mather, “From whence are authorities, dominions and powers? from God, the sovereign ruler, as the fountain, through the voice and consent of the people.”³³ Government is either by consent, fraud, or violence.³⁴ “When government is founded in mutual consent, it is the undoubted right of the community to say who shall govern them.”³⁵ “The people are the right and foundation of power and authority, the original seat of majesty, the author of laws and the creators of officers to execute them.”³⁶ The importance of this social contract, taught the ministers, was that it limited the ends of government to the power delegated it by the people “The great end of civil government, is the preservation of [citizens’] persons, their liberties

²⁷ Chauncy, *Civil Magistrates Must be Just*, 143: “government ... originates in the reason of things.... For the voice of reason is the voice of God. And he as truly speaks to men by the reason of things...”

²⁸ Howard, Artillery Sermon, 188. They retain that natural liberty “excepting what they have *expressly* given up for the good of the whole society.”

²⁹ Sherwood, *Scriptural Instructions*, 382: “created beings ... in a state of nature, previous to their uniting as members of society, have their liberty and free choice to agree upon ... a form of government, and mode of administration in their civil and temporal affairs, as they judge most conducive to their happiness and good...”; Eliot, *Give Caesar his due*, 31.

³⁰ Howard, Artillery Sermon, 188.

³¹ John Carroll, “To the editor of the Gazette,” *The American Museum* 6, June 10, 1789; Williams, *Essential Rights and Liberties*, 61: “members of a civil state ... retain their natural Liberty or Light of Judging ... in matters of religion.”

³² Chauncy, *Civil Magistrates Must be Just*, 166: “Dominion is not founded in grace”; Williams, *Essential Rights and Liberties*, 58: “the fountain and original of all Civil power is from the people, and is certainly instituted for their sakes.”

³³ Mather, *America’s Appeal*, 444.

³⁴ Jared Eliot, *Give Caesar his due*, 31; Andrew Eliot, *A Sermon*, 17: “all power has its foundation in compact and mutual consent, or else it proceeds from fraud or violence.”

³⁵ Andrew Eliot, *A Sermon*, 18.

³⁶ John Allen, *An Oration*, 307.

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and estates, or their property.”³⁷ The key was the people’s ability to remove those delegates.³⁸ Said Samuel McClintock, “In free governments, where all supplies originate with the people, and the authority delegated by them to their rulers, [it] is revocable at their pleasure...”³⁹ Among a free people, sovereignty is recognized in elections. In the words of John Allen, it is the people’s right “to resume that delegated power and authority they intrusted them with, and call their trustees to an account ... and punish the unfaithful and corrupt officers.”⁴⁰ Those whose property was taxed or taken without their consent were in the position of slaves. John Witherspoon connected the defense of property to the defense of conscience: “There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.”⁴¹ Rulers violate natural justice when they act arbitrarily, tax the people without consent, fail to equally enforce the laws enacted, take on immense public debt, or violate the “natural rights” of the people.⁴²

Thus election sermons also justified armed resistance. Jonathan Mayhew’s 1750 *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission*, one of the most widely read sermons of the revolutionary era, used scripture to support the right to revolution or resistance; it was a Christian duty. The jeremiad became less about how the people had fallen from God and more about how imperial rulers were violating their rights. Moreover, God would punish these rulers through his human instruments, which is why a revolution is an “Appeal to Heaven.”⁴³ John Allen asked in 1772, “For violating the people’s rights, Charles Stewart, king of England, lost his head, and if another king, who is more solemnly bound than ever Charles Stewart was, should tread in the same steps, what can he expect?”⁴⁴ He asked the Earl of Dartmouth:

³⁷ Williams, *Essential Rights and Liberties*, 58.

³⁸ Anonymous Author, PS, 427.

³⁹ Samuel McClintock, *A Sermon Preached before ... the Council ... the Senate, and House of Representatives of the State of New Hampshire* [1784], *Political Sermons*, 808.

⁴⁰ John Allen, *An Oration*, 307–308. Mather, *America’s Appeal*, 446: “In civil government, rightly constituted, everyone retains a share in the legislative, taxative, judicial, and the vindictive powers, by having a voice in the supreme legislature, which enacts the laws, and Imposes the taxes”; Chauncy, *Civil Magistrates Must be Just*, 143, “Whatever power any are vested with, ‘tis delegated to them according to some Civil constitution”; John Joachim Zubly, *A Humble Inquiry into the Nature of the Dependency of the American Colonies upon the Parliament of Great-Britain*, *Political Sermons*, 288.

⁴¹ John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*, *Political Sermons*, 549.

⁴² Chauncy, *Civil Magistrates Must be Just*, 156, 158; the right to property is also violated by inflation (150).

⁴³ Samuel Davies, *The Mediatorial Kingdom and Glories of Jesus Christ*, *Political Sermons*, 193–94.

⁴⁴ John Allen, *An Oration*, 307; William Gordon, “Foreword,” *Political Sermons*, xiii, mocked, “As if the religion of the blessed Jesus bound them tamely to part with their natural and social rights, and slavishly to bow their neck to any tyrant.”

Supposing ... that the Rhode-Islanders, for the sake of blood-bought liberties of their forefathers, for the sake of the birthrights of their children, should shew a spirit of resentment against a tyrannical arbitrary power that attempts to destroy their lives, liberties and property ... (which the law of nature and nations teaches them to do),” would then “be butchered, assassinated and slaughtered in their own streets by their king? Consider, my Lord, that we must all appear before the Judgment seat of Christ, and that it would be a cold cordial for your Lordship, at the bar of God, to have thousands of Americans rise up in Judgment against you. Yet I would rather this was the case, tho’ I suffer’d death with them, than they should lose their essential rights as Americans. But ... if the Americans unite ... to stand as a band of brethren for their liberties, they have a right, by the law of GOD, of nature, and of nations ... to resist any military ... force...”⁴⁵

Samuel Sherwood mocked “the doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance, so zealously preached up by some artful and designing men, who act as creatures of the state, and probably expect high honours and promotions from a corrupt ministry.”⁴⁶ The same principles that required obedience to just government also commanded resistance to tyranny.

Finally, we see the role the ministers played in the revolution. Loyalist refugee Peter Oliver called the American ministers the “Black Regiment.” He wrote that on entering electoral politics, James Otis, the great Boston revolutionary who argued for the rights of the colonists against general writs of assistance, had said, “that it was necessary to secure the black Regiment ... & his Meaning was to engage [the] dissenting Clergy on his Side.”⁴⁷ Christian pastors led the opposition when governors dismissed colonial assemblies.⁴⁸ Leading resistance to the 1765 Stamp Act were the Reverends Andrew Eliot, Charles Chauncey, Samuel Cooper, and Jonathan Mayhew.⁴⁹ Mayhew in 1766 preached a Thanksgiving Day sermon after the repeal of the “unconstitutional, oppressive, grievous [and] ruinous” Stamp Act. He exhorted the preservation of the colonists “enjoyment of their ancient rights and

⁴⁵ John Allen, *An Oration*, 312-13.

⁴⁶ Sherwood, *Scriptural Instructions*, 396; see Samuel West, *On the Right to Rebel*, 412-13.

⁴⁷ Peter Oliver, *Peter Oliver’s Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View*, eds. Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz (Stanford University Press, 1961), 29, 41-45; on the “black regiment,” “An American Merchant,” *Boston Gazette*, December 7, 1772, 2; Z.Z., *Boston Weekly Newsletter*, January 11, 1776, 2; “Dialogue between a Pensioner and a Divine,” *Boston Gazette*, July 25, 1768: “the Clergy interest themselves too much in the political Dispute of the Day. The Gentlemen in Crape have no Right to intermediate in such Things. But Otis says he could not carry his Points without the Aid of the black Regiment.”

⁴⁸ Rev. Samuel Cooper opposed Governor Thomas Hutchinson’s dismissal of the Massachusetts assembly in May 1774. Others challenged the dissolutions of the Virginia House of Burgesses by Governor Botetourt in 1769, the New Hampshire Assembly by Governor Wentworth in June 1774, and the Georgia Assembly by Governor Wright in 1775.

⁴⁹ Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (Duke University Press, 1928), 90.

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privileges” to taxation by representation and trial by jury.⁵⁰ “We have a natural right to our own [money], till we have freely consented to part with it, either in person, or by those whom we have appointed to represent, and to act for us.”⁵¹ If property may be taken without consent, added minister John Zubly, one cannot be said to possess anything at all: “those that have not liberty enough to keep their property in reality have no property to keep.”⁵² After the Townshend Duties, ministers held all-day spinning bees in their homes and on their front yards to spin yarn for domestic cloth, and they supported the non-importation pacts.⁵³

The reverends John Lathrop, Charles Chauncey, and Samuel Cooke preached against the 1770 Boston Massacre.⁵⁴ In June, Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson complained to John Pownall: “It is certain that the present leaders of the people of Boston wish for a general convulsion, not only by harangues, but by the prayers and preaching of many of the clergy under their influence, inflame the minds of the people, and instill principles repugnant to the fundamental principles of government.”⁵⁵ Citing the recent Artillery Election Sermon, he continued, “Our pulpits are filled with such dark covered expressions and the people are led to think they may as lawfully resist the King’s troops as any foreign enemy.” James Madison, the cousin of the U.S. president, president of William and Mary College during the Revolution, and later an Episcopal Bishop, sometimes prayed the Lord’s Prayer, “thy *Republic* come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁵⁶ As tensions grew, in 1775 ministers like Timothy Dwight advocated America’s separation from Great Britain as a divinely sanctioned cause.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Mayhew, *The Snare Broken*, 241, 239; on vice admiralty courts, see John Allen, *An Oration*, 307.

⁵¹ Mayhew, *The Snare Broken*, 240.

⁵² Zubly, *A Humble Inquiry*, 298; Mather, *America’s Appeal*, 474, repeated the point.: “he that hath right to take one penny of my property, Without my consent, hath right to take all.”

⁵³ Baldwin, *The New England Clergy*, 154–55; Oliver, *Origin and Progress*, 65: “Mr. Otis’s black Regiment, the dissenting Clergy, were also set to Work, to preach up Manufactures instead of Gospel—they preached about it ... untill the Women & Children, both within Doors & without, set their Spinning Wheel a whirling in Defiance of Great Britain: the female Spinners kept on spinning for 6 Days of the Week; & on the seventh, the Parsons took their Turns, & spun out their Prayers & Sermons to a long Thread of Politicks...”

⁵⁴ Claude H. Van Tyne, *The Causes of the War of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 362; the Massachusetts House of Representatives ordered that Cooke’s sermon be printed and distributed.

⁵⁵ “Hutchinson’s Letters Continued,” *Massachusetts Spy*, August 8, 1775, 4.

⁵⁶ Sandoz, *Republicanism*, 7. Moses Mather, *America’s Appeal*, 473, taught separate social compacts with the king.

⁵⁷ B.F. Morris, *Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1864), 367–68. In August 1775 William Smith, Episcopal minister, wrote, “all our Clergy [in Philadelphia] within my knowledge, two only excepted, have preached on the Fast of July 20th. Some of their Sermons are printed, and more in the press” (*Life and Correspondence*, ed. Horace W. Smith, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Ferguson Bros. & Co., 1880), 1:539).

More than exhortation, American clergy actually fought in the war. Paul Revere's ride was to the home of the Rev. Jonas Clark in Lexington, where he was lodging Patriot leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams. Hearing of the British regulars, Hancock and Adams asked Clark whether the people would fight, to which he replied, "I have trained them for this very hour!"⁵⁸ According to historian Joel Headley, after the alarm sounded in Lexington: "There they found their pastor the [Rev. Clark] who had arrived before them. The roll was called and a hundred and fifty answered to their names.... The church, the pastor, and his congregation thus standing together in the dim light..."⁵⁹ After the skirmish, some eighteen Americans lay on Lexington Green, eight dead, all from the Rev. Clark's church.⁶⁰ Looking on the dead bodies Clark exclaimed, "From this day will be dated the liberty of the world!"⁶¹ When the news of Lexington and Concord arrived, parson after parson left his parish and marched toward Boston. Some of those who awaited the British along the road were local pastors who led their congregations to arms. Alice M. Baldwin, in her classic work, describes David Grosvenor, of Grafton, who left his pulpit and, musket in hand, joined the minute men who marched to Cambridge.⁶² Or Jonathan French, of Andover, Massachusetts, who left his pulpit on the Sabbath morning, when the news of Bunker Hill arrived, and with surgical case in one hand and musket in the other started for Boston. Ministers, some fighting and preaching, were present at almost every engagement.⁶³

After the bloodshed at Bunker hill, Jacob Cushing preached, "But blessed be GOD, to whose infinite mercy we ascribe our deliverance, who was then a present help. These barbarous savage enemies were put into fear, they were made to flee before us, and hastily to retreat (as wild beasts to their dens) before a few scattered, undisciplined freemen: Not to our courage or conduct, but to God's name be all the praise and glory."⁶⁴ He then roused his

⁵⁸ "Clarke, Jonas," *New American Supplement to ... The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 vols. (Chicago: The Werner Company, 1897), 2:818.

⁵⁹ J. T. Headley, *The Chaplains and Clergy of the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 79.

⁶⁰ Headley, *Chaplains and Clergy*, 79-82.

⁶¹ "Clarke, Jonas," 818.

⁶² Baldwin, *The New England Clergy*, 162-63.

⁶³ Headley, *Chaplains and Clergy*, 68-72; Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States from the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1888), 265: "Of Rev. John Craighead it is said that 'he fought and preached alternately.' Rev. Dr. Cooper was captain of a military company. Rev. John Blair Smith, president of Hampden-Sidney College, was captain of a company that rallied to support the retreating Americans after the battle of Cowpens. Rev. James Hall commanded a company that armed against Cornwallis. Rev. William Graham rallied his own neighbors to dispute the passage of Rockfish Gap with Tarleton and his British dragoons."

⁶⁴ Jacob Cushing, *Divine Judgments upon Tyrants* [1778], *Political Sermons*, 623.

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audience to enlist, “You were spared, it may be ... to do yet greater service for GOD and your bleeding country, which calls aloud to you, and all its hearty friends, to rouse and exert themselves, for the destruction of the common enemy and oppressor; and to wipe away the blood wherewith this land has been stained. To arms! To action, and the battle of the warrior is the language of divine providence.... Cultivate, my friends, a martial spirit, strive to excel in the art of war, that you may be qualified to act the part of soldiers well; and, under providence, be helpful in vanquishing and subduing the enemies of GOD and this people; and be numbered among those who shall be worthy to wear the laurels of victory and triumph.”⁶⁵

One of the most famous stories of colonial era ministers—largely rejected by killjoy historians but, I will point out, for which there is no solid *disproof*—is that of Dutchman John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, Pastor of a Lutheran church in Woodstock in the Shenandoah Valley. He rose in his pulpit one Sunday in 1776, not to preach the sermon, but to plead with his congregation to join the fight for freedom. He opened his ministerial gown to show that underneath he wore the uniform of an American officer. Buckling on his sword, he implored the able-bodied men in the congregation to follow his example: “To everything there is a season ... and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time of war and a time of peace.” One man in the congregation rose to sing [“Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott”] *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. Outside the church door, the drums began to roll as men kissed their wives and then walked down the aisle to enlist. In half an hour 162 men were enrolled. Muhlenberg, who had earned the nickname “Devil Pete,” and his Virginia regiment, known as the German regiment, fought at Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Stony Point, and Yorktown.

When a British force of 2,500 approached the college-town New Haven on July 4, 1779, to enter private homes and desecrate property and belongings, a group of young men agreed to delay their entry to allow the townspeople to flee with their property. Reverend Naphtali Daggett, President of Yale, rode by them ferociously on his old black mare, long rifle in hand. One student recalled, “We knew the old gentleman had studied the matter thoroughly, and satisfied his own mind as to the right and propriety of fighting it out; but we were not quite prepared to see him come forth in so gallant a style to carry his principles into

⁶⁵ Cushing, *Divine Judgments*, 623–24.

practice.”⁶⁶ Standing alone on a hillside, Daggett repeatedly fired his rifle down at the British troops below. Eventually captured, over a period of several hours the British stabbed and clubbed Daggett with their bayonets. Local townspeople eventually secured his release, but he never recovered.

Perhaps the greatest role the ministers played in the Revolution was in supporting the rule of law, both God and man. They were involved in every aspect of introducing, defining, and securing America’s civil and religious liberties. New Jersey Reverend John Witherspoon, for example, served in the Continental Congress, and on over 100 committees, including the Board of War. Ministers served as military chaplains, judges, and on committees to draft new state constitutions.⁶⁷ They participated in the movement for a federal union, both pointing out the flaws of the Articles of Confederation and promoting the new Constitution.⁶⁸ To ratify the new Constitution, dozens of clergy were elected as delegates in the state conventions.⁶⁹ Four ministers were elected to the first federal Congress.⁷⁰

In the Election Day sermons after the war, Christian ministers used the memory of the revolution to unify Americans. Samuel McClintock preached to the New Hampshire senate, “By this revolution, the rights and privileges of men in a state of Civil society, are secured to us; and we have the precious opportunity, which few nations have ever enjoyed, to take up government on its first principles, and to chuse that form which we Judge best adapted to our situation, and most promotive of our public interests and happiness.”⁷¹ The ministers also continued the task of teaching the principles and proper ends of government,⁷² such as the protection of the unequal faculties of men.⁷³ And of course there was jeremiad. Because the laws of nature were moral laws, with a lawgiver, the only proper support for

⁶⁶ William Buell Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 481–82.

⁶⁷ Pennsylvania’s military chaplain Joseph Montgomery served in Congress and as judge of the court of common pleas in Northumberland County. Rev. Jacob Green was member of a committee to draft the New Jersey constitution. Rev. Frederick Muhlenberg helped draft Pennsylvania’s 1776 constitution. In 1799, Jonas Clark was appointed a delegate to the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention; Rev. Samuel Stillman helped draft Massachusetts’ 1780 constitution.

⁶⁸ James Hutchinson Smylie, *American Clergymen and the Constitution of the United States of America* (New Jersey: Princeton Theological Seminary, doctoral dissertation 1958), 127–29, 139, 143.

⁶⁹ John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 352n15.

⁷⁰ Abiel Foster (NH), Benjamin Contee (MD), Manasseh Cutler (MA), and Paine Wingate (NH).

⁷¹ Samuel McClintock, *A Sermon on ... the New-Hampshire Constitution* [1784], *Political Sermons*, 802.

⁷² Elizur Goodrich, *The Principles of Civil Union and Happiness Considered...* [1787], *Political Sermons*, 917: “tho’ all the laws of nature cannot be enforced with civil sanctions, yet every righteous state adopts those ... necessary for the preservation of the public peace, and for an equal and impartial distribution of rewards and punishments.”

⁷³ Nathanael Emmons, *The Dignity of Man* [1787], *Political Sermons*, 900: “In free republics, where liberty is equally enjoyed, every man has weight and influence in proportion to his abilities, and a fair opportunity of rising, by the dint of merit, to the first offices and honours of the state.”

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morality was religion. Zabdiel Adams preached, “Statesmen may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is religion and morality alone which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue.”⁷⁴ A vicious people is incapable of liberty, but will only exchange “tyrants and tyrannies.”⁷⁵ McClintock took the opportunity to remind the New Hampshire lawmakers, “as Virtue is the basis of republics, their existence depends upon it, and the moment that the people in general lose their virtue, and become venal and corrupt, they cease to be free. This shews of what importance it is to preserve public virtue under such a constitution as ours.”⁷⁶ He concluded, “It is of the last importance to the honor of a nation, to maintain the public credit and the faith of solemn treaties inviolate.” For no “No other nation, nor even their own citizens, will trust a people in their exigencies, who have often violated their promises, and defrauded their creditors.” Those without virtue would be ruled despotically. Samuel Wales reminded his congregation in 1784, “But security in happiness is not the lot of humanity. This is equally true of all mankind, whether we consider them as individuals or as united in society. In the midst of all our present publick happiness, dangers surround us and evils hang over our heads.”⁷⁷ Wales reminded them of the vices of ingratitude, injustice, a loss of patriotism, a disregard for civil authority, and the “danger of the evils which arise from luxury and extravagance in our expences.”⁷⁸

Ministers were largely responsible for American education—they played the crucial role of teaching and preserving the religious principles indispensable to civil and religious liberties. There was little strictly secular higher education. The first five presidents of my own Hillsdale College, founded by Freewill Baptists in 1844, were ordained ministers.⁷⁹ In 1860, 91 percent of all college presidents were ministers, and more than one-third of university faculty members.⁸⁰ In 1861 only 17 of the 246 colleges were not affiliated with some

⁷⁴ Zabdiel Adams, *An Election Sermon*, 557; see Chauncy, *Civil Magistrates Must be Just*, 167.

⁷⁵ Zabdiel Adams, *An Election Sermon*, 557; see McClintock, *A Sermon*, 811.

⁷⁶ McClintock, *A Sermon*, 805, 806-809.

⁷⁷ Samuel Wales, *The Dangers of Our National Prosperity* [1785], *Political Sermons*, 840.

⁷⁸ Wales, *Dangers of Our National Prosperity*, 843-53.

⁷⁹ Daniel McBride Graham, Edmund Burke Fairfield, James Calder, and DeWitt Clinton Durgin.

⁸⁰ Warren A. Nord, *Religion & American Education* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 84; George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.

denomination;⁸¹ by 1884, 83 percent of America's 370 colleges were still denominational colleges.⁸²

I'll finish with two quotes by John Adams on Christianity and Revolution. Adams later wrote to Thomas Jefferson of the basis of American unity during the Revolution:

What were these general Principles? I answer the general Principles of Christianity, in which all those sects were united: And the general Principles of English and American Liberty, in which all those young Men United, and which had United all Parties in America, in Majorities sufficient to assert and maintain her Independence. Now I will avow ... that those general Principles of Christianity, are as eternal and immutable, as the Existence and Attributes of God; and those Principles of Liberty, are as unalterable as human Nature and our terrestrial, mundane System.⁸³

And in a letter to Hezekiah Niles, Adams described the religious nature of the revolution:

But what do We mean by the American Revolution? Do We mean the American War? The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the Minds and Hearts of the People. A Change in their Religious Sentiments of their Duties and Obligations. While the King, and all in Authority under him, were believed to govern, in Justice and Mercy according to the Laws and Constitutions derived to them from the God of Nature, and transmitted to them by their Ancestors— they thought themselves bound to pray for the King and Queen and all the Royal Family, and all the Authority under them, as Ministers ordained of God for their good. But when they Saw those Powers renouncing all the Principles of Authority, and bent up on the destruction of all the Securities of their Lives, Liberties and Properties, they thought it their Duty to pray for the Continental Congress and all the thirteen State Congresses.⁸⁴

⁸¹ E. P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States* (Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1919), 204; Luther A. Weigle, *The Pageant of America: American Idealism*, ed. Ralph Henry Gabriel, 15 vols. (Yale University Press, 1928), 10:315.

⁸² Charles B. Galloway, *Christianity and the American Commonwealth* (Methodist Episcopal Church, 1898), 209–10.

⁸³ [John Adams to Thomas Jefferson](#), June 28, 1813.

⁸⁴ [John Adams to Hezekiah Niles](#), February 13, 1818.