Evolution of Ideas: The American Revolution's Impact on Evangelicalism in America

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HIUS 512: American Revolution

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December 12, 2011
Religion plays a substantial role in defining America’s identity. Historians cannot accurately tell the story of the American people apart from understanding their religious beliefs. Although religion’s significance ebbs and flows, its influence is always evident. A majority of scholars agree that religion often provides direction and motivation for individuals and groups. It therefore has substantial bearing on the outcome of important events and movements. One subject historians seldom address, however, is how America’s identity has defined its religion. When religion pierces into political, economic, and social issues, whether or not those things simultaneously penetrate it demands attention. Whether religion bends beneath external pressures and conforms to new standards, producing a hybrid system of belief that eventually differs in fundamental ways from its predecessor, is important for a complete picture of religious history. A handful of historians contend that such evolutions in religion do happen, and one particularly potent example is the series of changes that occurred in Christian thinking during the American Revolution.

Yet the contentions of historians who purport certain changes in Christianity during the Revolutionary era often lack substantial detail. They summarize their findings in broad generalizations or tarry only briefly on the subject before moving on to tackle different issues like politics, military movements, economic influences, and cultural transformations. Historians of the Revolution seldom probe into particular cases that illustrate the changes in evangelicalism during that period.

Validation of the idea that the Revolution catalyzed alterations in evangelical Christianity demands further evidence. Although an exhaustive study of evangelical pastors during the Revolutionary years will require voluminous study, scholars must begin to consider the sharp proofs of change that are available. One way to spearhead such an endeavor is to examine
several influential sermons by evangelical pastors whose ideas represent a large portion of the teaching disseminated by prominent religious leaders during the Revolutionary period and then compare them to the sermons and writings of Jonathan Edwards to determine if changes occurred. Although Edwards does not monolithically represent Christian evangelical orthodoxy prior to the Revolution, he stands out as an obvious starting point in making the comparison. The goal, then, is to determine whether evangelical American Christianity deviated from the evangelical doctrines of Edwards and incorporated new ideas into its theology as churches passed through the Revolution. Significant evidence indicates that evangelical Christianity infused Enlightenment rationalist and republican thinking in the decades prior to the Revolution. The Revolution then catalyzed an intensification of the expression of these ideas. In the process, fundamental changes occurred in American evangelicalism. The primary arena in which these changes transpired was the pulpit, as evidenced by the sermons preached by evangelical pastors who were willing to harness biblical rhetoric as a vessel for political and temporal causes.

Mark Noll provides a definition of evangelical Christianity. He writes that a series of interconnected church movements that arose during the middle third of the eighteenth century and that grew out of the legacy of the Protestant Reformation “marked the origin of a distinctly evangelical history.” From these revivals emerged “a consistent pattern of convictions and attitudes that have been maintained over the centuries since the 1730s.” David Bebbington identified four key ingredients of evangelicalism. The first is conversion, or the belief that lives need to be changed. The second is the supremacy of the Bible, or the belief that all spiritual truth is found in its pages. The third is activism, or the dedication of all believers, including laypeople, to lives of service for God, especially as manifested in evangelism and foreign

2 Ibid., 19.
missions. The fourth and final component is what Bebbington calls “crucicentrism,” or the conviction that Christ’s death was the crucial matter in providing atonement for sin.³ These four elements distinguish evangelicalism from the liberal forms of Christianity that rose up parallel to evangelical churches in the eighteenth century. Of course, the line differentiating these two groups is not completely clear. The theology of both groups sometimes overlapped. However, a clearer understanding of the evolution that occurred primarily in evangelical American Christianity requires the study of pastors hailing from that tradition.

One essential preparatory study before examining the works of Revolutionary pastors is to ascertain whether evangelicalism actually entered the political dialogue of the Revolution on a widespread scale. The only way to make conclusive assertions about potential changes in Christianity during the Revolution is if a large portion of influential evangelical pastors really became political and preached patriotism from the pulpit. Fortunately, the vast majority of scholarship already produced on religion and the Revolution proves that very point. Alan Heimert sparked a vigorous discussion with his *Religion and the American Mind*, in which he contends that evangelical Christianity provided pre-Revolutionary America “with a radical, even democratic, social and political ideology.”⁴ Much of the scholarship following Heimert’s work sought to define how American Christianity contributed to mobilizing the numbers necessary for the Revolution to succeed.

Revolution historians largely agree that ministers helped create a providentialist interpretation of the Revolution. Providentialism instilled in Americans a sense of purpose and destiny in their war with Great Britain. Mark Noll points out that colonial Christians assumed

God singled out the American nation for special privileges and responsibilities. They increasingly believed Europe was a center of decadence while America would become the center of the Kingdom of God on earth during the “millennial rein.”

Nathan Hatch likewise argues that ministers linked an apocalyptic vision to the cause of American liberty. Such a vision caused Americans to view the struggle of liberty versus tyranny as nothing less than the conflict between heaven and hell. Charles Royster contributes a similar idea. He notes that Americans in general believed God chose them for a special purpose and never intended them to be subjects of a tyrannical government. Ministers therefore promised God’s favor and tacitly forgave Americans for both fearing and killing their enemies.

Thomas Kidd likewise writes that the “conflict summoned Americans to support God’s sacred cause of liberty.” Such civic spirituality equated the cause of America with the cause of Christ.

Ultimately, these contributions mobilized the numbers necessary to make the Revolution a reality at the grassroots level, an absolute necessity for its success. Cedric Cowing boldly asserts that without the large evangelical component in the colonies, “there would have been no military victory over the redcoats, and beyond that no Independence, no Constitution.” Even though Enlightenment rationalism was helpful for inspiring leaders of the Revolution, it “could not by itself have commanded the numbers to bring off the American Revolution.”

Gordon Wood also posits that the clergy made the Revolution meaningful for the common people. For

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7 Royster, 15.
8 Kidd, 4.
9 Ibid., 9.
11 Ibid., 224.
every gentleman who read scholarly pamphlets and delved into complicated Whig theory, there were dozens of ordinary people who read the Bible and looked to their pastors for an interpretation of the Revolution’s meaning. T.H. Breen similarly argues that a revolution had to occur at the grassroots level for the War for Independence to succeed. Basic passions had to be aroused to succeed in mobilizing popular support. He contends that one of the major sources for arousing these passions was evangelicalism.

The previous scholarship on Christianity’s influence on the Revolution helps us understand how involved religion was in the conflict. Most scholars agree at least on these points: ideological elements of evangelical Christianity were hard at work during the American Revolution, and the primary avenue through which those ideas disseminated among the population was the pulpit. Many pastors delivered patriotic messages to their congregations. However, whether Christianity emerged on the other side of the crisis unaltered requires further study.

Scholars seldom address evolutions in evangelicalism during the Revolutionary period, but a number of them at least suggest possible changes. Some historians, such as Cowing, note that Enlightenment ideas filtered into America from the 1680s onward, but flooded in after 1750. Thus, Enlightenment ideas became a significant part of the American worldview. Other historians like William G. McLoughlin go further by proposing that a syncretism of Enlightenment ideals and Christianity started to form in the years preceding the Revolution. He writes that the Revolution helped catalyze the syncretism by combining the popular spirit of pietism with a new commitment to inalienable natural rights. Pulpit rhetoric remained the same,

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14 Ibid., 9.
15 Cowing, 224.
but its meaning changed. Americans insisted that Christ died for the Christian liberty of his saints. Historians Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer also agree that something happened to religion in America during the Revolution. In addition to precipitating legislation that separated church and state, the Revolution also initiated a pattern common in subsequent American wars “that associated God with America’s cause.” Despite the simultaneous push for disestablishment, the Revolution enlisted the church for the war effort. It tied the church’s dreams to the American Dream.

Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch delve deeper than the aforementioned historians. They surmise that the Revolution’s rationalist and republican ideas had a significant effect on evangelical thinking. In *Christians in the American Revolution*, Noll explores developments in America’s religious history during the Revolutionary period. He notes that, at least partially because of the war, “American society in general replaced the church as the locus of communal Christian values.” The Revolution encouraged Americans to believe more than they ever did before that God was concerned with the entirety of the American experience instead of just ecclesiastical expressions. Over the course of several decades, churches transitioned from Puritan Christianity to American Christianity. Noll points out that even non-Christian Americans have been only slightly less eager than evangelicals to assume the United States has a unique spiritual role in the world.

Nathan Hatch agrees with Noll in *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*. Hatch demonstrates how republican sentiments influenced traditional religion and gradually produced what he calls “civil
millennialism.” The origin of the change was the transition from the evangelical millennialism of the Great Awakening, in which conversion of sinners was central, to a focus on the defense of civil and religious liberty and the thwarting of tyrannical power. Like Noll, Hatch contends that civil millennialism had a major impact on religion in America. During the French Wars, the Revolution, and the founding of the Republic, “many of the clergy endowed republican thought with deep religious meaning.” The week-to-week articulation of Christian republicanism, often through sermons, convinced many Americans that their divine election as a people was the logical result of their faithful commitment to liberty.

Noll and Hatch lay solid groundwork for the discussion on the changes in evangelicalism observable during the Revolution, but their claims also mark the need for more research. Noll’s assumptions are too broad, and Hatch’s focus remains on the development of civil millennialism in New England society. Noll himself acknowledges in The Old Religion in a New World (2002), “A rich historiography now exists for the question of how the churches and religious rhetoric contributed to the American break from Britain. Less work has been devoted to the impact of the Revolution on churches, even though that is the critical issue for a history of Christianity.” Thus, validation of the idea that the Revolution catalyzed alterations in evangelical Christianity requires further evidence.

The focus on evangelical ministers, however, first demands an understanding of how Enlightenment rationalism permeated evangelical Christianity in the years preceding the Revolution. Again, it appears that the Revolution served more as a catalyst for the intensification and expression of ideas already infused into evangelical Christianity. Perhaps no

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20 Hatch, 24.
21 Ibid., 174.
single individual contributed more to the infusion of Enlightenment thinking into American Christianity than Presbyterian pastor John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. Although Witherspoon’s theology falls between evangelicalism and liberalism, we cannot ignore his impact upon American churches. In 1768, he became president of the College of New Jersey in Princeton, where he promulgated the moral sense philosophy of Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid. Henry F. May argues that he was “the most effective college president of the late eighteenth century.” Witherspoon blended moderate orthodox Calvinism with Scottish moral philosophy. He believed the path to salvation began with obedience to moral law and to conscience. Jeffry H. Morrison notes that Witherspoon fed his students a curriculum “laced with republican theory.” He contends that, particularly through his annual lectures on moral philosophy, Witherspoon “almost single-handedly gave a philosophy to the embryonic nation and helped transform a generation of young idealists into hardheaded politicians of the first rank.” May also underscores the impact his teaching had upon his pupils. Combined with the academic products of other American colleges, Witherspoon’s intellectual progeny formed a formidable vessel for Enlightenment thinking. May argues that, for certain purposes, the leaders of Enlightenment-infused moderate Calvinism “could muster much of American Protestantism.”

Martin E. Marty remarks that many of the themes and approaches of both the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening “came to be blended in the public expression of

24 Kidd, 104.
27 Ibid., 51.
28 Ibid., 65.
A case study of the mixture of Enlightenment ideas and evangelicalism is evident in John Fea’s biographical work on Philip Vickers Fithian. Fea explains how Fithian’s Christian convictions merged with his Enlightenment ideals to form a sort of philosophical syncretism characteristic of the American Enlightenment. While at the College of New Jersey, Fithian came under the influence of Witherspoon, who stressed to Fithian the importance of virtuous acts of morality for the betterment of society. The focus on virtue and morality fundamentally detracted from the traditional evangelical concerns regarding conversion and revivalism. Inculcation of Enlightenment ideas in the years preceding the Revolution prepared American minds for a change in worldview. At the outset of the Revolution, the focus on freeing sinners from slavery to sin and eternal bondage in hell shifted to freeing people from bondage to tyrannical rulers and the securing of their individual rights and liberties. That shift is evident in the preaching of several prominent evangelical pastors.

Baptist pastor John Allen, preaching in the pulpit of the Second Baptist Church in Boston to mark the British burning of the schooner Gaspee in 1772, referred to American liberties as “blood-bought treasures,” signifying the sacrifice of the forefathers to secure liberty. He argued that Americans “will not give up their rights; they will not be slaves to any power upon earth.” He called upon the sons of America to show their love for liberty, guard their freedom, and prevent Britain from shackling them in chains. Defending their rights was the first law of nature. Allen preached that a man who does not defend his rights was a rebel against God,
against the laws of nature, and against his own conscience.\textsuperscript{34} The right to the blessings of freedom did not come from kings, but from God. Liberty was to them “the breath of life, and essence of our existence.”\textsuperscript{35} Allen was one of many pastors who sought to motivate his listeners to defend their political rights.

Minister Samuel Sherwood, a graduate of Yale and a former tutor at the College of New Jersey, preached a sermon in August 1774 in Fairfield, Connecticut that became one of the most famous of all Revolutionary War sermons.\textsuperscript{36} He urged colonists to recognize the necessity of just rule for free men. In the preface to the published version of his sermon, he railed against those who detract from the American cause by praying “that we may be ruled by the iron rod of oppression, and chained down to eternal slavery and bondage.”\textsuperscript{37} He vociferously decries those who speak against American interests by referring to them as those “base, traitorous and perfidious enemies” who deserve to have “a public brand of infamy put upon them, to mark them out as the worst of villains.”\textsuperscript{38} Instead, he calls to steadfast endurance those who are not among those who are “inferior species of animals, made to be beasts of burden” to a corrupt administration.\textsuperscript{39} He notes that only by being incessantly vigilant will the American people keep themselves from slavery to British tyranny.

In the sermon itself, Sherwood calls upon Americans to recognize the importance of protecting their temporal privileges. He points out that much of the rest of the world have lost their liberties and are oppressed by cruel tyrants. He notes that America’s forefathers endured the greatest of perils to procure the privileges of liberty for future generations. Thus, Americans

\textsuperscript{34} Allen, 323.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{36} Sandoz, 374.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 380.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 378.
ought to be willing to do their utmost to preserve those privileges and hand them down to their posterity. He writes, “Our treasure, and our blood too, are not too dear and costly sacrifices for such valuable things.”⁴⁰ Here we see a theme that resounds throughout much of the rhetoric employed by Revolutionary pastors: the idea that political liberty is a treasure worthy of the greatest of sacrifices to protect.

Jonathan Parsons provides another example of a kind of preaching similar to Allen’s and Sherwood’s. Parsons was a leading evangelical separatist during the Great Awakening. He delivered the eulogy at George Whitefield’s funeral before Whitefield’s burial at Parsons’ church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. In March 1774, Parsons delivered Freedom from Civil and Ecclesiastical Slavery, a Purchase of Christ to commemorate the Boston Massacre. The text for the sermon was Galatians 5:1, “Stand fast therefore in the Liberty wherewith CHRIST hath made you free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”⁴¹ The sermon represents some of the more strikingly patriotic rhetoric to come from the mouths of evangelical pastors during the years preceding the Revolution.

Parsons used similar language as Allen and Sherwood to glorify liberty. He wrote that the ultimate triumph of liberty in society will be a time when, quoting Amos 5:24, “justice will run down our streets as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”⁴² To him, the source of such good was liberty. Yet regardless of whether their endeavors were going to be successful, Parsons called upon his hearers never to give up. Their liberties are “the purchase of his blood,” referring to the blood of Christ, so Americans should not “tamely submit to be entangled with the

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⁴⁰ Sherwood, 394.
⁴¹ In the New International Version, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).
⁴² Parsons, 11.
yoke of bondage.” He implored them instead to preserve their Christian liberty, which would cause a “happy era” to commence. He then railed against the British troops who instigated the Boston Massacre. He referred to them as “butchering Soldiers” who stained the streets of Boston with “INNOCENT BLOOD.”

Parsons claimed not to presume to dictate political decisions, but he did claim it was his duty as a minister to say that “what any man call[s] his must remain his.” He acknowledged that Americans should maintain a “benevolent and Christian spirit” not inclined to defend their liberties by external force. Yet he coupled his statement with clear fighting words. If peaceful appeals to Britain for their liberties do not prevail, “Christian benevolence will inspire us to secure our rights, and repair our injuries at the point of the sword.” If it is right for an individual man to defend his rights against an assailant, it is certainly just for a whole country to defend itself when tyranny usurps its rights. In such case, “the spirit of Christian benevolence would animate us to fill our streets with blood, rather than suffer others to rob us of our rights.” If their old friends in Britain endeavored to enslave them, then Americans were right to take up arms and fix the problem.

Parsons encapsulated a major American creed in these words. He carefully articulated the desire to have liberty with peace, but if the blessings of liberty cannot be protected with peace, then “God forbid that we should suffer them to cut off our limbs and mangle our whole body to gratify their injurious demands.” According to Parsons, God himself mandated a violent course of action. Not only did God call Americans to defend their temporal liberties, but

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43 Parsons, 11.
44 Ibid., 12, 13.
46 Ibid., 15.
47 Ibid., 16.
48 Ibid., 17.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 16-17.
he also would be their guide and their defense. Like other patriots at the time, Parsons’ words sent to the world the common Revolutionary message: “DON’T TREAD ON ME.”

Parsons even said that civil tyranny is what “crucified the Lord of life and glory.” He then went on to say that one of the major products of Christ’s work was the purchasing of civil privileges that Parsons called Americans to defend. Thus, Americans should not consent to suffer the injuries of a tyrannical power, but they instead should fight hard not to relinquish those temporal rights and privileges that Christ purchased for them.

In June 1774, only a few weeks after the British closed the port of Boston, evangelical pastor Nathaniel Niles delivered a sermon at the North Church, also in Newburyport. He provided an insightful and dispassionate analysis of liberty in which he called upon Americans to persevere. Charles Hyneman claims that the latter portions of the sermon comprise a “rhetorical masterpiece that has to be one of the best examples available for conveying a sense of that time in our history.” For its analysis and rhetorical power, he believes it is at least equal to Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense.*

Niles’s sermon text was 1 Corinthians 7:21, “Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it; but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.” Niles believed the text indicates that civil liberty is a great good, and improving upon that liberty brings glory to God. He drew up several examples of tyranny from Scripture, including Saul’s tyranny over David and his

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51 Parsons, 17.
52 Ibid., 18.
53 Ibid., 17.
54 Ibid., 18.
56 Ibid., Chapter 22 Introduction.
57 In the New International Version, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so” (1 Corinthians 7:21).
remnant as well as the terrible persecutions endured by Jesus and his apostles.\textsuperscript{59} He argued that these evils came from those who are unfriendly to liberty. Thus, a society must have a constitution that defends its liberties from excessive power.\textsuperscript{60}

Niles acknowledged that no state will be perfect. Some degree of partial oppression is understandable.\textsuperscript{61} However, if the presiding government denies the God-given rights of its citizens, such as their right to property, the people should view such denial as a terrible attack and strive to right the wrong. Niles described liberty as an “inexhaustible fountain” that God ordains for human happiness.\textsuperscript{62} It motivates men to be industrious, and it inculcates an interest in the arts and sciences that improves society as a whole. It provides for freedom of conscience, in which citizens enjoy religious liberties. He wrote that the pleasures that spring from liberty are “the life of every other enjoyment,” and its censure leads to “the most abject slavery.”\textsuperscript{63}

Much like Allen, Sherwood, and Parsons, Niles’s language evinces the idea that the spring, the source of every other enjoyment, is liberty. Although Americans could not have perfect liberty in society, they still could strive toward it: “The more we can obtain, the greater will be our enjoyment. Each degree of liberty is a precious pearl.”\textsuperscript{64} Only a person possessed of a “free spirit” is able to “extract and taste all the sweets of liberty.”\textsuperscript{65} Niles went on to encourage his listeners to recognize “how great a tendency liberty has to produce happiness,” and to “attend to the glory and pleasures of liberty.”\textsuperscript{66} The objective of every free society should be to avoid

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\item Niles, par. 4.
\item Ibid., par. 8.
\item Ibid., par. 12.
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\item Ibid., par. 20.
\item Ibid., par. 21.
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the selfishness that prevents their pursuit and enjoyments of the “delights of perfect liberty.”67 Likewise, liberty is a “blessing too great to be compared to any other earthly good.”68

Niles offered another justification for defending personal liberties. Liberty is a loan from heaven, for which everyone will have to give an account to God. Thus, Americans must make a strong stand against every attempt “to wrest the jewel from us.”69 Although Niles cautioned against entering a civil war with their British cousins, they must also be willing to struggle for the preservation of those rights “which are inexpressibly dear.”70 To him, the decision is a matter of “life and death, good and evil, blessing and cursing.”71

Niles communicates his ideas more dispassionately than Parsons. Unlike many other revolutionary pastors, Niles criticized himself and his fellow Americans for their hypocritical praising of liberty while enslaving Africans. He argued that they will not have the privilege of enjoying liberty unless they grant it to others. He wrote, “let us either cease to enslave our fellow-men, or else let us cease to complain of those that would enslave us.”72 Even with these concessions, however, Niles’s views on liberty and true happiness likened strongly to the worldviews of more passionate Revolutionary pastors.

Abraham Keteltas, a Presbyterian pastor who did ministerial work in New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts, preached a sermon in Newburyport in 1777 to portray the Revolution as a holy war.73 Keteltas discoursed on what he called the “cause of God,” as evidenced throughout Scripture. He then wrote that Americans had reason to conclude that the cause of

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67 Niles, par. 22.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., par. 31.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., par. 41.
72 Ibid., par. 40.
73 Sandoz, 580.
America against Great Britain “is the cause of God.” He noted that if the principles on which the war was carried on by the Americans were universally adopted, “they would turn a vale of tears, into a paradise of God.” Similar to the pastors mentioned previously, Keteltas argued that “Liberty is the grand fountain” of every temporal blessing. It is the parent of truth, justice, virtue, “and every generous and noble purpose of the soul.” Liberty is an inestimable blessing, the loss of which is inconceivably great. This makes tyranny and oppression the cause of the devil. In short, it is the cause of heaven against hell, the same cause “for which the Son of God came down from his celestial throne, and expired on a cross.” Thus, patriots should be ready to fight for liberty and surrender every drop of their blood until its cause succeeds. Much like Parsons and Niles, Keteltas provides another potent example of the infusion of political meaning into religious rhetoric.

Jacob Cushing, a Harvard graduate who ministered in Waltham, Massachusetts, managed to satisfy evangelical conservatives as well as liberals with his modest and biblical approach to preaching. Despite the fact that only one of his fifteen published sermons was political in nature, it nonetheless yields several ideas consonant with the political preaching of other pastors. On April 20, 1778, he preached a sermon denouncing the inhumane acts of two brigades of British soldiers in Lexington on April 19, 1775. He noted that Americans should be gracious for God’s kindness and provision in the war thus far. Likewise, they should not doubt that they are engaged in the work of the Lord by using swords as instruments of righteousness to engage in

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75 Keteltas, 595.
76 Ibid., 597.
77 Ibid., 597-598.
78 Ibid., 598.
79 Ibid., 603.
80 Ibid., 604-605.
81 Sandoz, 608.
the shocking but necessary duty of shedding human blood. Not only was this in defense of their property, life, and religion, but it was in obedience to God.⁸² He writes, “To arms! To action, and the battle of the warrior!”⁸³ Duty, liberty, religion, “every thing worth enjoyment,” demanded that the colonist soldiers excel in the art of war and vanquish the enemies of God.⁸⁴ Despite being relatively moderate in his theology and approach compared to most evangelical pastors, Cushing here joined the more strident appeals to colonists to strive hard in defending their temporal liberties.

Two post-war sermons shed light on how the American way of thinking changed by the end of the Revolution. George Duffield was a New Light Presbyterian, a partisan of the views of Whitefield and Edwards who favored a converted ministry and revivalism. He pastored a church in Pennsylvania, but he was also popular with members of the Continental Congress, who attended his services while in Philadelphia. He preached a sermon in that city in December 1783 to offer thanksgiving to God for the recent restoration of peace after the Revolution.⁸⁵ He reminded his listeners that Britain marked out America for “servile submission, or severe subjugation.”⁸⁶ In response, America chose “Freedom or Death” as her motto “and nobly resolved on war with all its horrors”⁸⁷ in order to win the prize of liberty. He venerated the patriots who sacrificed for the Cause, and he declared that posterity would admire and revere them for it.⁸⁸ They helped purchase for America a “happy equality” and a “joyous freedom” that

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⁸³ Cushing, 624.
⁸⁴ Ibid.
⁸⁶ Ibid., 778.
⁸⁷ Ibid.
⁸⁸ Ibid., 780.
will bless America in ages to come. Duffield’s rhetoric seems to display Hatch’s civil millennialism, which virtually makes American patriotism a religion.

Nathanael Emmons was a Congregational Massachusetts pastor of the “New Divinity” espoused by evangelicals such as Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins, former friends of Jonathan Edwards. He preached a sermon in 1787 in which he championed the dignity of man. Laced throughout his teaching are ideas stemming from natural rights philosophy. He mentioned Locke and particularly Newton at several points. Emmons glorified the rationality of man and his capacity for holiness, knowledge, and happiness. He did not mention much about God being the source of such capabilities. Instead, he praised Newton as an example of a man superior to most of his own species, and he argued that any man is capable of learning all that any man has learned or can learn. The only natural distinction between one man and another is that some are capable of acquiring knowledge more easily and more swiftly than others. Emmons championed the “sons of science,” and the act of cultivating one’s mind. He tried to motivate others to improve themselves by studying “nature, men, and books.” Emmons thereby supplies further evidence of changes that occurred in American thinking by the end of the Revolution.

Of course, two postwar sermons are insufficient to determine the nature of American Christianity after the Revolution. However, several potential alterations are discernible. Namely, Duffield’s sermon displayed the presence of the new civil religion that Hatch argues began during the Revolution. America’s civil religion is complete with its own heroes, relics, creeds, and unifying doctrines. Emmons’ sermon illustrated how pastors could talk comfortably

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89 Duffield, 783.
91 Emmons, 898, 899.
92 Ibid., 901.
about Enlightenment philosophies and biblical truths side-by-side, giving seemingly equal
authority to both. Both Duffield and Emmons were less radical in their rhetoric than some of the
pastors who delivered their sermons before and during the Revolution. Their tone indicated that
the crisis of the Revolution was over. Nonetheless, their rhetoric provides strong evidence for
the infusion of Enlightenment rationalist and republican thinking that sunk deeper into American
evangelical thought during the Revolution.

As mentioned previously, one way to highlight the distinctive changes in evangelical
thinking during and after the Revolution is to compare the pastors already addressed to some sort
of pre-Revolutionary evangelical standard. One way to underscore the changes is to examine the
writings of Jonathan Edwards. Again, Edwards does not monolithically represent Christian
evangelical orthodoxy prior to the Revolution, but he does stand out as an obvious starting point
in making the comparison. Thus, the aim is to see whether the evangelicalism that emerged from
the Great Awakening deviated from the doctrines of Edwards and incorporated new ideas into its
theology as churches passed through the Revolution.

Edwards pastored a church in Northampton, Massachusetts. The Northampton revival
sparked by his preaching in the early 1730s helped give rise to the Great Awakening.93
Historians agree that Edwards’ voluminous writing career left one of the richest intellectual
legacies in American history. Scholars in multiple academic fields still consider him one of
America’s greatest thinkers. Three ideas from Edwards’ work are noteworthy. The first of these
is his description of spiritual slavery and liberty. The second is his view on human nature. The
third is his description of what is sweetest and most to be treasured in this life. Each of these
points correlates to the ideas in the sermons previously described.

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The first important idea from Edwards’ work is his description of spiritual slavery and liberty. Not all Revolutionary pastors ignored the slavery and liberty related to a person’s spiritual life. For example, evangelical pastor Henry Cumings implored his congregation in 1781 to remember that they were fighting for civil liberty. Yet “there is another kind of liberty of an higher and nobler nature, which it is of infinite importance to every one to be possessed of… a freedom from the dominion of sin.”94 However, as seen in the sermons already described, contemporary events often caused pastors to avoid making the distinction between spiritual and political liberty. Not only did they not differentiate between the two kinds of slavery and liberty, but they also applied passionate rhetoric to civil slavery and civil liberty, the kind of rhetoric that Christian leaders such as Edwards only reserved for sermons involving spiritual realities.

In a sermon on Christian liberty, Edwards spoke of a spiritual slavery and liberty different from the slavery and liberty described in civil discourse. He asserted that in Christ alone could a person find freedom from “the worst of servitudes and bondages.”95 The world saw Christian discipline and obedience to biblical commands as a great burden. Yet Edwards argued that the way of Christ is the way of liberty. Humans are never free until they become servants of God. They are never “from under the yoke of bondage” until they “take Christ’s yoke.”96 Servants of Christ have freedom from “cruel servitude” to the power of sin and Satan.97 Edwards beckoned his listeners to understand how glorious it is to be free from Satan, “from his shackles and chains and cruel yoke and heavy burden” so that they might be the Lord’s freemen forever.98 While Satan tempts people to believe the way of Christ demands that they abandon all

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96 Ibid., 623.
97 Ibid., 623, 624.
98 Ibid., 625, 627.
pleasure, Edwards argued that it actually offers deeper and greater pleasures in God.⁹⁹ The language Edwards used to describe spiritual slavery and liberty likens to the language used by Revolutionary pastors to describe political slavery and liberty. The connotation of his rhetoric, however, points to fundamentally different realities.

The second distinguishing characteristic of Edwards is his view on human depravity. Although the majority of Revolutionary pastors had Calvinist backgrounds, their teachings mingled with the Enlightenment idea of man’s innate goodness. Rather than viewing humans as helplessly enslaved until freed by Christ, Enlightenment thinkers purported that humans are essentially good and capable of improving the world apart from God’s grace. One example of that idea is Emmons’ sermon, parts of which focused on the innate capacity of man to improve himself and accrue glory to his name by improving the world around him. Edwards, however, firmly maintained that humans are incapable of redemption and genuine virtue apart from Christ. In a sermon on “Wicked Men’s Slavery to Sin,” Edwards argued that a depraved person is devoted to the commands of sin, “under slavery to it.”¹⁰⁰ Sin is a lord and master trampling over the sinner. It maintains a tyranny over hearts.¹⁰¹ Edwards pointed to Ephesians 2:3 to remind his listeners that all people are born into a state of “bondage and servitude” to sin.¹⁰² In a different work, Edwards argued that unconverted people are “deceived and seduced into erroneous opinions” and commit all manner of sin.¹⁰³

Clearly, Edwards’ language again likens to the rhetoric employed by pastors in the Revolutionary era. The meaning, however, is fundamentally different. While a number of

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., 344.
Revolutionary pastors used it to summon their congregations to support the cause of civil liberties, Edwards used it to elucidate the doctrine of human depravity and the absolute need of every person for Christ’s redeeming work in order to be free from the bondage and tyranny of sin. Regardless of the rightness or wrongness of either application of this language and the radical response invoked from its listeners, both are clearly referring to essentially different goals: one of them external and political; and the other inward and spiritual.

A third major dissimilarity between Edwards’ theology and the worldviews preached by revolutionary pastors is his description of what is sweetest and most to be treasured in life. His description of such delights stemmed directly from his understanding of human depravity and Christ’s redeeming work in his own life. Edwards acknowledged his own incapacity because of the former, and therefore he treasured Christ more because of the latter. It caused him to be captivated by a “God-entranced worldview.” Edwards recounted his conversion experience by describing an “inward, sweet delight in God” at contemplating the work of Christ in transforming his heart. He often penned entries in his journal that expressed how he was “glad from the hope that my eternity is to be spent in spiritual and holy joys.” Such descriptions arose from the manifestation of God’s love in his life and the resultant “burning love” that he felt for God. Edwards found in the things of God “the spring of all their delights, and the cream of all their pleasures.” Edwards also wrote that enjoying God is the “only

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107 Ibid., 24.
happiness” with which a person’s soul can be satisfied. To go to heaven and *enjoy* God is infinitely better than the most pleasant things on earth. Again, we see a sharp similarity in rhetoric to the Revolutionary pastors who spoke of liberty as a “pearl,” a “jewel” that is “inexpressibly dear,” the source of “sweets” and “pleasures” and “delights,” the “grand fountain,” the very “source” and “spring” of good wrought by the “purchase of his blood.” The meaning behind these phrases and terms, however, is exceedingly different.

The disparity between Edwards and the Revolutionary pastors is apparent. One potential cause of this dissimilarity is the different circumstances in which the pastors preached their sermons. Edwards preached in peacetime. The Revolutionary pastors preached in wartime. Edwards perhaps focused on inward examination rather than society because there was not a conflict like the Revolution brewing around him at the time. Perhaps wartime experiences caused pastors to focus more on external affairs. The presence of differing circumstances certainly helps explain the difference in meaning behind the rhetoric, but it cannot alone explain major theological shifts in evangelical doctrine. It also cannot explain why American churches increasingly followed the thought and activity of the American nation after the war.

Noll provides penetrating insight on the effect the Revolution had on the theology of American churches. He writes that during the war, “religion lent its weighty support to political and social values emanating from nonreligious sources.”109 Christianity’s support of values originating from secular sources continued after the war ended. Where colonial Christians in 1700 derived much of their worldview from strictly theological sources, “American Christians in 1800 absorbed much of their basic outlook on life from their surrounding culture.”110

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110 Ibid., 166.
American Revolution helped America become an “importer” of ideas and behavioral patterns in American society. The ideas that affected people’s lifestyles increasingly came from nonreligious sources as the eighteenth century wore on. Even though evangelical Christians during the early history of the United States maintained active religious lives, the major influence shaping their life was no longer the product of religious thought. Instead, the nature of religious activity “came more and more to be influenced by ideas from outside the church.”

The thought and activity of American churches developed the habit of following the thought and activity of the American nation. The ideals fought for in the Revolution or embedded in the arguments for independence also became the ideals of the church. The conviction that men had rights by nature, that the pursuit of personal happiness was one of these unalienable rights, and that people had the power to secure the blessings of liberty for themselves and their posterity “became the dogmas not merely of the new nation but also of its churches.” Thus, a strong mixture of libertarianism and Christianity arose from the infusion of republican thinking into American churches.

Even though no official council or unified confession marks the change, deviations from post-Awakening orthodoxy are discernible in the decades following the Revolution. Noll suggests that ideas of the Revolution affected theological life in America in a subtler and more pervasive phenomenon than just the outward coupling of Patriotism and Christianity. He points out that evangelical Christianity shifted away from a Calvinistic orientation in theology. The influence of libertarian ideas on American theology during the Revolutionary period helped instigate that change.

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112 Ibid., 167.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., 170.
115 Ibid., 169.
Noll explains the theological shift by commenting on the “five points” of Calvinism. “Total depravity” did not stand up well to the Enlightenment belief that individuals are inherently good and capable of shaping their own destinies. Americans generally no longer believed human evil deprived men of the power to determine their own religious or political destinies. “Unconditional election” undermined the contract theory of government. If the establishment of a relationship with God was God’s doing and not an individual’s, it made a mockery of the conviction that each man had the inalienable right to secure happiness because of his own efforts. “Limited atonement” threatened the American belief that all God created all men equal. It was difficult to see how God would arbitrarily limit the efforts of the work of Christ to only a few. That would be very anti-democracy. “Irresistible grace” flew in the face of the idea that Christians made a self-determined choice of their own wills to have a relationship with God. It asserted that God exercised a kind of irresponsible power likening to the power against which the colonies had rebelled. “Perseverance of the saints” was usually retained by American Christians. However, they did not view it as the result of God’s power. Instead, it was the result of the continuing effect of a person’s own choice for God. The believer possessed the sure hope of eternal life as a due right in consequence of his own decision to become a Christian.116

Noll acknowledges that the Revolution was not completely responsible for the growing aversion to these five tenets of Calvinism, but it was certainly important in the process. He laments the loss, pointing out that freedom in the earlier Calvinistic sense of the word had implied freedom for something: the fulfillment and hope found only in God being the master and

the person being his bondservant. Freedom in the Revolutionary generation came to mean primarily freedom from something: tyranny, oppression, arbitrary exercise of power.\footnote{117}

General evidence does lend support to the idea that Revolutionary principles undermined the basic tenets of Calvinism. Whereas evangelical Christians were largely Calvinists in the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening saw the burgeoning of Arminian denominations. Arminian preaching drove the revivals of the early nineteenth century. Not only was Christianity in the Early Republic characterized by civil religion, but it largely magnified man’s agency in his own salvation and minimized the sovereign power of God in that process. The Arminian branches of Methodism arose before the Revolution under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley, but they met with great success in America only \textit{after} the Revolution. Perhaps one reason for Methodism’s success is that America’s newly-forged worldview incorporated enough individualism and natural rights philosophy that evangelical Christianity was ready to embrace it.\footnote{118}

Surviving colonial sermons highlighted for their political overtones show the mixture of the two major systems that underscored eighteenth-century American thinking. They speak of natural rights and biblical principles in the same breath. The American Revolution provided a stage for the public marriage of Enlightenment thinking and Christianity. Liberty became the greatest good in American society. Freedom to pursue temporal happiness became the worthiest aspiration. It required the utmost efforts of citizens who intended to protect it. That sentiment did not remain in the public sphere alone. Butler, Grant, and Wacker acknowledge that “most colonists supported independence. In doing so, religion followed politics”\footnote{118} and merged further into the prevailing philosophical trends. American Christianity thereby put on the ideological garments of patriotism and American individualism.

\footnote{117} Noll, “American Revolution,” 170. 
\footnote{118} Butler, 149.
Numerous Christian leaders in America already held to the basic tenets of natural rights philosophy. Witherspoon’s College of New Jersey and other academic institutions had planted the seeds. Enlightenment ideas had already mixed with Christianity in America. The Revolution catalyzed an intensification of this mixture’s expression. Although not all of American Christianity supported the Cause, many of its leaders, particularly in New England, enthusiastically joined the defense of civil and religious liberties. In the process, church spokesmen developed a rhetoric in which increasingly the most treasurable and desirable attainment in life was the lifestyle of temporal happiness procured by the defense of temporal liberties.

An entry in Edwards’ journal elucidates a worldview quite different from the worldview espoused by many American Christians in the decades after the Revolution.

I have been before God; and have given myself, all that I am and have to God, so that I am not in any respect my own: I can claim no right to myself, no right in myself, no right in this understanding, this will, these affections that are in me; neither have I any right to this body, or any of its members: No right to this tongue, these hands, nor feet: No right to these senses, these eyes, these ears, this smell or taste. I have given myself clear away, and have not retained any thing as my own… And I pray God, for the sake of Christ, to look upon it as a selfdedication; and to receive me now as entirely his own, and deal with me in all respects as such; whether he afflicts me or prospers me, or whatever he pleases to do with me, who am his.119

Edwards speaks of spiritual ideas here. However, this journal entry serves as a potent expression of a worldview significantly different from that expressed by well-known and influential pastors during the Revolution. Although there is still much work to be done defining the evolutions in American evangelicalism in the eighteenth-century, even a focused study on a handful of influential pastors demonstrates not only that American evangelicalism was hard at work during

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the Revolution. It also proves that the Revolution stimulated fundamental changes in American evangelicalism.
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