A REPUBLIC OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy

JONATHAN D. SASSI

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001

Contents

Introduction 3

1 The Standing Order's Corporate Vision, 1783–1795 19

2 The Two Kingdoms in Concert, 1783–1799 52

3 Jeffersonian Disillusions and Dreams, 1799–1818 84

4 Grassroots Changes and Regional Ideology, 1800–1815 121

5 Public Christianity's Renewal and Realignment, 1815–1833 145

6 Public Christianity's Relevance to Understanding Reform 185

Epilogue 196

Notes 203

Index 291

Introduction

> Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.
>
> — Matt. 5:14

ON THE FOURTH OF JULY, 1825, sixty-four-year-old Samuel Austin addressed an assembly of Christians in Worcester, Massachusetts, "convened for the purpose of celebrating this event religiously." Austin had recently retired from the pulpit after a twenty-five-year ministry at Worcester's First Congregational Church and briefer stints as president of the University of Vermont and pastor in Newport, Rhode Island. In his interpretation, the anniversary of American independence was an occasion for rejoicing, primarily because God had used the Revolution as "a providential event" to advance "the Church." Austin made the usual observation that the Revolution staved off political tyranny, too, but for him the religious achievement was paramount. "What comparison can a mere civil institution, however well it may be organized, whatever temporal hopes it may suggest, or whatever secular advantages it may in fact yield, hold with that kingdom which is properly the kingdom of heaven, and which we are assured can never be moved? Let every man understand that but for the influence of our holy religion, and the purpose of God respecting his own Zion, never would the design have been formed to plant a settlement like that which the pilgrims sought and established on the barren shores of New-England."[1] Thus Samuel Austin fashioned a tapestry of historical understanding that wove together along one providential framework the colonization of New England, the outcome of the American Revolution, and the expansion of the kingdom of God.

Not only did Austin interpret the past, but he also issued instructions for the present with an eye to the future. He delighted in the fact that in the years since the Revolution, American Christianity had grown and seen "a glorious flowing together of repenting sinners to Zion." He foresaw a prominent role for American Christians in the preparation for the millennium, and closed with a call to collective action toward that end. "Let us put our religion, which is [the Lord's] most reasonable service, into its full influence over ourselves, over those committed to our care, and, as far as we can, over the favoured country we enjoy. O that it had its genuine dominion over all the population of these United States . . . and we should indeed be that happy peo-

Samuel Austin. Courtesy University of Vermont Archives.

ple whose God is the Lord."[2] According to Austin's prescription, the American churches would actively engage in the project of social sanctification.

How does one interpret Austin's blend of such patriotic, providential, and covenantal languages? Clearly he was mining a rich vein that extended back to the Puritan and Revolutionary eras. But Austin was not just a living anachronism, mouthing the rhetorical incantations of his youth. His speech did not simply repeat the sentiments of 1776 in a frozen formula; his ideas had evolved with the times. His closing call to reform, for instance, wedded a Puritan understanding of the sanctified community with contemporary initiatives to improve American society. Moreover, Austin was not alone in voicing such opinions but was joined by a younger generation of clerical spokesmen. To understand Samuel Austin's providential account of American identity and destiny circa 1825, one must realize that it reflected the developments of the past half century since the outbreak of the Revolution.

The adult life span of Samuel Austin (b. 1760, d. 1830), and his generation more generally, coincided with what is now known as the early republic. The early republic has emerged in the past quarter century of historical scholarship as a period of central consequence to the formation of subsequent American culture. The Revolutionary movement, it is now clear, had been a coalition of diverse elements united against a common threat. Once the British threat had been defeated, a vacuum of sorts resulted, in which social groups and their values jockeyed for supremacy and earlier cultural formulations had to be renegotiated. The post-Revolutionary period was one of the most hotly contested in American history. It lay at the nexus of elemental developments in the character of the new nation, including its politics, economy, and culture. Historians now view the early republic as an important period in its own right, not simply as a brief postscript to the Revolution or as a prelude to the antebellum era.[3] Religion, too, emerged as a fundamental part of this ferment, regardless of the Constitution's overall silence on the issue.[4] The early nineteenth century witnessed a tremendous spurt of evangelization and organization on the part of American Protestantism. By the Jacksonian era, Christianity played, if anything, a more salient public role than it had a half century before.[5]

Analyzing one aspect of this formative era, *A Republic of Righteousness* examines the evolving character of Christian social ideology in southern New England during the fifty years after the American Revolution. Within the context of enormous institutional and intellectual change, a corporate religious ethic endured within the region's social ideology well into the nineteenth century. This study seeks to understand the complex juxtaposition of Christianity and the American Revolution, of the kingdom of God and the United States, and of an identity as God's people and American nationalism—themes typified in Samuel Austin's July Fourth address of 1825. Clergymen never gave up the struggle to define the righteous community and comment on the relationship of Christians to the new nation, yet within the tumultuous environment of the early republic, their public Christianity had to adapt to new circumstances. In the latter part of the time period under consideration, they made a seminal contribution to American reform.

Statements like Samuel Austin's appear anomalous in the light of the secondary literature on religion in the early republic. The available interpretations cannot accurately account for his complicated synthesis of corporate concepts such as church, nation, and social reform. Certainly, the topic of the New England ministry did not suffer from scholarly inattention during the twentieth century. But historians studying the clergy have tended to "caricature" their subject in one of two ways.[6] For approximately the first two-thirds of the century, most of them overemphasized the clergy's political motives and public influence. Since then, the interpretative pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme, and leading scholars have largely consigned the Congregational clergy, at least, to the dustbin of social irrelevance. Although the last decade has seen a positive reappraisal of some of the Congregational clergy's initiatives, these ministers' political and social detachment is still overstated.

In the first part of the century, the Progressive historians depicted the Congregational ministry as locked in a rearguard political action. Typical of his muckraking generation, Richard J. Purcell found that the crux of the matter regarding religion, society, and politics in the post-Revolutionary era lay in class conflict. In his expla-

nation, Connecticut in the thirty years after the Revolution was undergoing a transformation "from an aristocratic, paternalistic into a modern democratic state . . . [caused] by a natural movement of forces imperceptibly gradual in action."[7] The two political parties embodied either end of this transition. On the one hand, Federalist leaders conspired to buttress the aristocracy of traditional sources of mercantile and financial wealth and the Congregational standing order. They were able to cling to power despite the tides of change brought in by the Revolution because the lack of a frontier in Connecticut retarded social development.[8] The Republicans, on the other hand, represented small farmers, mechanics, and entrepreneurs in new economic sectors like manufacturing, as well as non-Congregationalists. Purcell's characterization of the Republicans as representing everything modern overdetermined the story's outcome, as the Federalists receded into the background as futile opponents of change. In this depiction, Congregational ministers, led by Timothy Dwight, played the part of overt reactionaries. In the similar estimation of a fellow Progressive, Vernon Louis Parrington, Dwight was "little more than a walking repository of the venerable Connecticut *status quo*."[9]

Although pointing to status rather than class as the primary factor driving change, historians writing in the 1950s and early 1960s likewise cast the New England clergy in the role of reactionaries. According to these scholars, ministers responded to their supposed loss of status in the early nineteenth century with contrived efforts to batten down the hatches of orthodoxy and reestablish social control. For example, in John R. Bodo's interpretation, the waning of their traditional "influence and prestige" amid changing social relations inspired "the theocrats," his term for college-educated clergy, to articulate a reform agenda for the United States with the goal of reasserting their "ideological control over the nation." Clifford S. Griffin offered an even more extreme statement of this perspective in *Their Brothers' Keepers*. In his analysis, clergymen and their collaborators among the laity during the early republic "feared new forces in American life, worried about political and social upheavals, deplored new moral standards, and lamented the decline of religion in an increasingly secular age." Although they may have "claimed that they were being benevolent," their reform agencies were in reality "laboring to make men behave." As Griffin summarized, "Religion and morality, as dispensed by the benevolent societies throughout the seemingly chaotic nation, became a means of establishing secular order." This type of approach, which emphasized the effects of status in the minds of historical actors, was quite popular in the literature on antebellum reform during the 1950s and the early 1960s and still crops up occasionally today. These various works share an emphasis on the negative motivation of anxiety over declining social status and an impending breakdown in social order as what really drove the ministry to launch its multiform efforts to engage society.[10]

Over the next two decades, the accumulated pressure of new perspectives exploded the social control thesis. An influential 1973 article by Lois W. Banner marked the beginning of the end for the conventional argument. She indicted Bodo and other historians of his generation for portraying the antebellum reformers as motivated by "the desire for 'social control' not social improvement." Rather than dwelling on the purportedly negative and political motives of the clergy, Banner suggested that more benign impulses were at work. She pointed to ideologies such as re-

publicanism and millennialism as the driving forces behind the benevolent empire of missionary and reform organizations. Along the same lines, Richard D. Shiels's 1980 essay on "The Second Great Awakening in Connecticut" cast doubt on both the politicization of the ministry and the leadership of Yale President Timothy Dwight. Both arguments had been staples of the earlier historiography.[11] The essays by Banner and Shiels knocked the underpinnings out from the interpretative edifice that had been built up over the first two-thirds of the twentieth century regarding the New England clergy of the early republic. By and large, the two essays were more critical than constructive; that is, they helped to destabilize the older interpretation, but they sketched only some preliminary drawings for what a succeeding one should look like.

Rejecting the jaundiced view of the clergy in the then-prevailing social control thesis, Perry Miller was one scholar who had always given credence to the religious beliefs of historical actors. Like Banner would a decade later, he heaped scorn on his colleagues' "obtuse secularism," which, he argued, distorted the historical record and showed mainly that his peers had been "corrupted by the twentieth century."[12] Instead, Miller championed the centrality of covenant theology to Revolutionary America. In his depiction, the Revolution formed the high-water mark of the national covenant, as clergymen up and down the coast blended their jeremiads with the premises of the Lockean social contract. As Miller phrased the situation, "The jeremiad, which in origin had been an engine of Jehovah, thus became temporarily a service department of the Continental army." This was the clergy's most important contribution to the Revolutionary cause in Miller's estimation, because although a "pure rationalism such as [Jefferson's] might have declared the independence of these folk, . . . it could never have inspired them to fight for it."[13]

After the Revolution, however, Miller argued that the idea of a nation in covenant with God became untenable. The threats of the French Revolution and domestic partisan discord, together with the expanding frontier and the sheer scale of the United States, eroded clergymen's confidence in their ability to speak in terms of the corporate concept of a chosen nation. In place of the covenant, ministers promoted revivalism. "[American Protestants] did not need to renounce the Declaration, nor even to denounce the Constitution," Miller explained, "but only henceforth to take those principles for granted, yield government to the secular concept of the social compact, accept the First Amendment, and so to concentrate, in order to resist Deism and to save their souls, upon that other mechanism of cohesion developed out of their colonial experience, the Revival." In this analysis, revivalism differed from the covenant in two key respects. It was individualistic rather than corporate. "For these revivalists," wrote Miller, "it was no longer necessary to find space in their sermons for social theory." The revival was also geared toward the future, whereas the covenant had been "retrospective" and oriented toward preserving the historical legacy of the founders of New England.[14] Obviously, Samuel Austin's aforementioned 1825 speech, which was by no means idiosyncratic, contradicts Miller's scheme on both counts, but Miller's essay is nonetheless still significant historiographically. In addition to his cantankerous insistence on the importance for scholars of understanding religious belief, Miller also reformulated the idea that the early republic was a critical juncture in American religious history. At the same time,

the period really constituted only an epilogue to his magisterial work on Puritanism. This tendency to treat the early republic's religion as a consequential, albeit little-studied aftereffect of the Revolution endured through most of the 1980s.

Important new scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s expanded on some of the themes that Miller had raised. Vigorous debates raged over the character of antebellum reform movements and over the link, if any, between religion and the American Revolution. These debates had indirect implications for our understanding of the post-Revolutionary clergy. Social historians' focus on nonelites continued to push the social control thesis further into obsolescence, because the old emphasis on a status-anxious and reactionary clergy became less necessary as historians examined the local figures behind various reform campaigns.[15] To put things another way, liberated from the responsibility for a supposedly reactionary reformism, the clergy was free to appear in a truer light. In addition, scholars following Miller and his student Alan Heimert, author of *Religion and the American Mind*, explored the connection between the First Great Awakening and the coming of the Revolution. They added to Miller's emphasis on covenant theology the importance of classical republicanism, millennialism, and Hopkinsian disinterested benevolence, among other ideologies.[16] While it is not clear that any of these ideologies exerted the predominating influence in Revolutionary America since claimed for them, all of them did contribute to the discursive inheritance of the early republic's clergy.

Despite this renewed attention being given to the role of religion in the Revolutionary era, these same scholars followed Miller's "From the Covenant to the Revival" in portraying the early republic as a time that saw the collapse of the Revolutionary synthesis of religious and political ideology. They also followed Miller in dispatching the early republic in brief epilogues to their more important work on earlier periods. As Harry S. Stout concluded in *The New England Soul*, regardless of the national covenant's persistence prior to the Revolution, this durable Old Testament symbolism could not withstand the tempestuous environment of the post-Revolutionary era. A new evangelicalism that was both individualistic and without the conventional New England orientation toward the past became the religious currency of the day.[17] Donald Weber also asserted that clergymen abandoned the public sphere: "They had once *acted* in history; by 1800 their secret desire was to get out of history, to a place where all 'remains the same.'"[18] In other words, scholars like Stout and Weber dismissed the Congregational clergy from the main current of American history after 1800. Therefore, by the end of the 1980s, historians had constructed a much more detailed, yet still incomplete rendering of the New England clergy of the early republic and its social ideology. They possessed a more sophisticated grasp of the clergy's multifaceted public Christianity and regarded their subjects in a less pejorative light. Yet, they still assumed that the early republic formed a point of radical disjuncture with the Revolutionary period immediately preceding it. The secondary literature could not explain the persistence of the clergy's social engagement or ministers' enduring ability to mingle past, present, and future in their public pronouncements that a closer examination of early-nineteenth-century sources would reveal.

The traditional discontinuity in the historical literature around 1800 reinforces the interpretation of a decisive break at the end of the eighteenth century. Most de-

pictions of the period from the 1780s to the 1830s are fractured along chronological lines. There exist, as noted, outstanding literatures on the role of religion in both the American Revolution and the reform movements of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. However, fewer efforts have been made to draw connections between the two. Two examples, one sardonic and the other scholarly, point to the lacuna. Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked that "from 1790 to 1820, there was not a book, a speech, a conversation, or a thought in the State [of Massachusetts]." Similarly, as Gordon S. Wood noted in an essay published in 1988, "the early republic tends to fall between two schools of the historical profession, and its significance and integrity are lost. One group of historians knows the period only as an epilogue; the other group knows it only as a prologue. Neither sees it whole."[19]

At the end of the 1980s, the early republic finally took center stage as perhaps the most important period in the overall history of American religion in two landmark books, Nathan O. Hatch's 1989 *The Democratization of American Christianity* and Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, published the next year. Both marginalized the role of the New England clergy, a group that for most of the twentieth century had stood at the foreground of historians' analyses. According to Hatch, the really important aspect of the religious history of the early republic was how "religious outsiders" seized upon the democratic ethos of Revolutionary America to create popular religious movements that validated the visions and voices of ordinary men and women. In contrast to the conservative clerics who inhabited much of the earlier literature, Hatch found insurgent religious leaders among the Baptist, Methodist, Christian, Mormon, and African American churches who embraced the Revolutionary era's egalitarianism and liberalism. He dismissed Calvinist clergymen as hopelessly out of touch with the times and "bewildered" by their new antagonists. Butler's book was an even broader revisionist statement that sought to reorient the whole canon of early American religious history. Instead of emphasizing the New England clergy and its theological tradition, Butler's narrative placed all sorts of unorthodox beliefs and practices at the forefront. The early republic in this portrayal was the scene of "a dramatic American religious syncretism that wedded popular supernaturalism with Christianity."[20] Both books radically diminished the significance of the Congregationalists by casting them as a denomination far removed from the cutting edge of important new developments that shaped the era. The individualism and eclecticism stressed by Hatch and Butler, respectively, had little connection to the Congregational clergy and its corporate social vision.

This new portrayal of religion in the early republic dovetailed with wider syntheses of the period that told of a shift in the nation's cultural paradigm from a corporatist republicanism to an individualistic liberalism.[21] Gordon S. Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, for instance, stressed the atomization of American society and the collapse of earlier authorities and traditions in areas ranging from politics and the economy to literature and the family. Religion was an important aspect of this overall change. "By concentrating on the saving of individual souls," Wood wrote of the early republic, "the competing denominations essentially abandoned their traditional institutional and churchly responsibilities to organize the world here and now along godly lines." Joyce Appleby also neatly summarized this interpretive stance. "Like Jeffersonian liberalism," she compared, "American Protes-

tantism rejected the past, indifferent alike to the historic Church and its traditions. The individual, not the congregation, became the locus of religious power in America."[22] In short, we are told, religion became privatized, confined to the believer's heart, and divorced from its conventional concern with the larger society. Congregational ministers and their public Christianity appeared irrelevant to the really important developments in the religious history of the early republic. It is fair to say that this perspective exerts a powerful sway over the historical literature today.

By the middle of the 1990s, a few monographs had appeared that sought to rectify this dismissal of the Congregational clergy. For example, David W. Kling's study of the New Divinity revivals in northwestern Connecticut revealed Congregational ministers who were effective at making Calvinism relevant to a new generation. In Kling's story, the revivals they led were hopeful, rather than driven by anxiety, and had little to do with conservative political goals. Likewise, James R. Rohrer has persuasively shown that the missionaries sent from Connecticut to carry orthodox Congregationalism to the frontier were adaptable and successful, in contrast to the traditional view that they were aloof, hesitant, and ultimately scorned. He challenged historians like Hatch who "exaggerate . . . the 'competitive edge' enjoyed by Methodist and Baptist exhorters, and underestimate the ability of Congregational missionaries to build up large followings in the new settlements."[23] Both works, however, go too far in trying to distance the clergy from partisan politics. In reaction to the hoary image of standing order clergymen as virtual Federalist apparatchiks, both Kling and Rohrer strain a bit too much in emphasizing the spiritual priorities of their subjects and the ministers' concomitant lack of serious interest in politics and public events.[24]

A Republic of Righteousness joins Kling and Rohrer in seeking to rehabilitate the Congregational ministry from its displacement to the margins. What James M. Banner Jr. has recently written of the fate of Federalist politicians in contemporary scholarship could be applied almost word for word to the Congregational clergy.

> In the last twenty years the Federalists have been lost to view. Banished not because of their silence or the comparative weakness and size of their record but rather, on the contrary, because of their "conservative" politics, their race and gender, their symbolic place in our past history, their very articulateness . . . precisely because they lacked all exoticism and did not seem to need rediscovering, they have been excluded from the great reconsideration of American politics and society of our age. One can say without irony that it is the Federalists . . . who must now be rescued from the dustbin of historiography and the condescending regard of so many historians.[25]

This book goes beyond Kling and Rohrer in restoring politics and public life to a central place within the religious vision of these important ministers. It focuses squarely on the clergy's public Christianity, or the ways in which ministers tried to make religious beliefs and values speak to the problems of life in society. This book aims to find the balance that the secondary literature has been lacking with regard to our estimation of the New England clergy. It portrays these ministers as neither purely self-interested political operatives nor spiritually preoccupied and detached from their surroundings. It instead aims for a truer explication of the clergy's complicated, contested, and changing social ideology. Moreover, this book deals with an

array of religious figures beyond the Congregationalists. Just as "American political culture was fashioned in a dialogue," so, too, the clergy's public Christianity is fully comprehensible only in terms of its pluralistic context.[26]

This study is deliberately centered in the early republic. It strives to interpret the developments between the Revolution and antebellum reform movements as a distinct period in its own right. It takes an in-depth view of a time period that should be, but often is not, conceived as a coherent entity.[27] It commences in 1783, at the end of the Revolutionary War and during a fleeting peak of high optimism regarding the new nation. It then carries through to 1833, the year that witnessed the final, formal disestablishment of Congregationalism in Massachusetts. It explores what Edwin Scott Gaustad in a pithy remark once called Congregationalism's shift during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries "from that of a dominant, sometimes persecuting, majority to that of a sensitive, sometimes leavening, minority." This study traces not the breakdown of the clergy's social vision, as so many scholars from Perry Miller on have prematurely heralded, but the transformation of a distinctively New England variant of public Christianity. Chronologically and topically—if not always interpretatively—*A Republic of Righteousness* takes up a position between the colonial focus of Harry S. Stout's *The New England Soul* and the antebellum one of Mark Y. Hanley's *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth*.[28]

By finding that throughout the period from 1783 to 1833 there were Americans concerned with their collective destiny, this study belies the overall depiction of the post-Revolutionary period as the time of the individualization of American society. Specifically, important segments of the New England ministry retained a commitment to constructing a righteous community and assessing the cosmic meaning of the American experiment. New England's traditional religious leaders remained actively engaged in the search to maintain the connection between Christianity and the society at large; they stood against the liberal juggernaut and raised a prophetic voice.[29] This public Christianity had a number of significant ramifications for U.S. history. It both fostered and critiqued American identity, nationalism, and civil religion and contributed to the political ideology of the first and second party periods. The work of New England's clergymen also relates to the origins of reform in the early nineteenth century. From their pulpits and church-related voluntary societies, ministers continued to question their society's values and meaning. To the extent that the health of a democracy is dependent upon robust debate, the New England clergy furthered the vitality of early republican culture through the application of its social ideology to public issues. In this final sense, ministers acted in a progressive manner, not as knee-jerk or inconsequential conservatives.

The public Christianity of the early national period descended from the Puritans' national covenant. In his famous address to his shipmates aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, John Winthrop had set the tone by calling upon them to "be knitt together in this worke as one man." If they slacked off in their commitment to one another or God, Winthrop warned, "the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against vs be revenged of such a periured people and make vs knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant." Winthrop further sought to inspire everyone to commitment, in an oft-quoted passage, by portraying their colonizing project in world-historical terms: "wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty vpon a Hill, the eies of all peo-

ple are vppon vs; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee haue vndertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from vs, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."[30] This Puritan social vision had been much contested, attenuated, revived, and reformulated in the ensuing century and a half because of the impact of the Enlightenment, Great Awakening, and American Revolution, among other factors.[31] Yet, ministers continued striving to link heaven and earth. Like Winthrop, they proclaimed a vision of a godly society and warned of the frowns of Providence. The southern New England clergy's public Christianity in the post-Revolutionary era included elements of the national covenant, the jeremiad tradition, millennialism, republicanism, liberalism, and even the great chain of being, but went beyond any of these discrete discourses. Clergymen drew on all of these threads as they wove a Christian social ideology.

In their preaching, ministers related Christianity to social existence mainly in two ways. In the first place, ministers—especially the Congregational ones, who regarded themselves as the watchmen over the public culture—kept a running account of the community's status before a providential God. They addressed questions such as How had Providence guided New England's (and later, America's) history? What role would the nation play in bringing about the millennium? Was this a nation with a special covenant with God? Or was divine chastening imminent? Samuel Austin's 1825 address, discussed at the outset, touched on all of these issues. This interpretative tradition was premised on a belief in the direct rule of the living God. The stream of ministerial commentary also connected to the issues of patriotism and national identity. And as we shall see, ministers' reading of the community's standing with Providence closely depended on current events. Second, ministers such as Austin offered their prescriptions for how Christians and their churches should act in society. They did so based on their belief that social stability required Christianity. H. Richard Niebuhr has termed this ongoing debate over the relationship between Christians and society the question of "Christ and culture."[32] Over the course of the half century following 1783, ministers offered a variety of responses to this question. They especially wrestled with the competing natures of Christianity's relationship to society; that is, would it take a conservative or reformist approach? Their answers tended to be intertwined with the state of partisan politics. Non-Congregationalists made the debate over Christianity and society quite dynamic. The dissenters challenged the standing order's formulations, especially regarding the establishment.

This study is based on the premise that such religious language is an important cultural category that must be studied on its own terms. Religious discourse cannot be reduced to a derivative of its social or material contexts; it has a semiautonomous integrity. In other words, this study seeks to avoid what Mark A. Noll has called "the imperialism of social science" or the "aggressive determination to transpose religious language and behavior into what was really going on." Similarly, I concur with Perry Miller that "no interpretation of the [clergy's] religious utterances as being merely sanctimonious window-dressing will do justice to the facts."[33] The older literature tended toward such reductionism and has long been exposed as simplistic. Already in her 1973 article, Lois W. Banner blasted the social control thesis for always insisting on sordid motives behind reform. Banner's essay belonged to a broader revolution taking place in the human studies during the 1960s, led by the anthropologist

Clifford Geertz. His criticisms of "interest" and "strain theory" likewise pinpoint the deficiencies in the earlier approaches to the New England ministry. In the place of a fixation on interest or social disorder, which posits that human beings only "pursue power" or "flee anxiety," Geertz argued for the centrality of meaning.[34] The language used by early-nineteenth-century clergymen, to use an example that Geertz did not, was not arbitrary or the mere reflection of something else in the social structure. Rather, it should be seen as part of an ordered, symbolic system that worked to carry meaning and in turn to order the perceptions and activities of actors.[35]

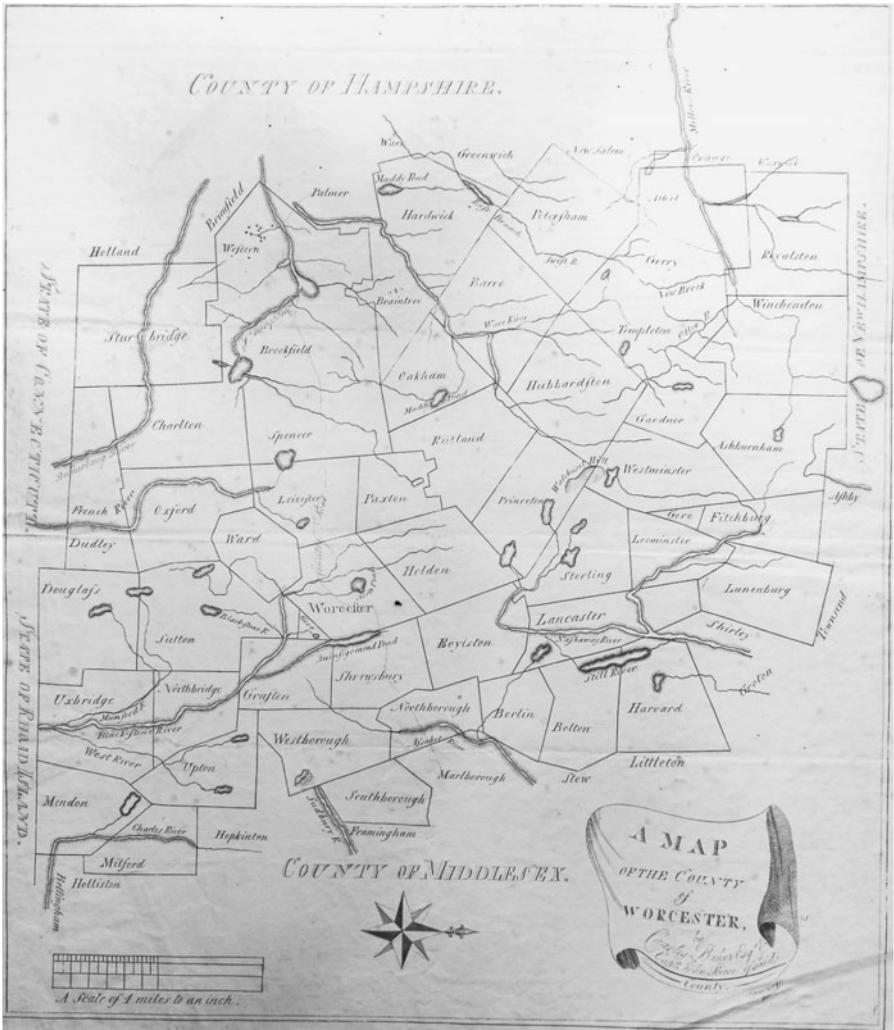
For evidence of the clergy's social ideology, the study draws on a large body of sermons, orations, and polemical treatises published throughout Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Harry S. Stout has noted that most scholars use these more easily obtainable printed sermons and overlook manuscript ones. I accept the validity of his argument that "only from the vantage point of unpublished sermons, however, can the full range of colonial preaching be understood." The reliance on published sermons introduces a distortion into studies of Puritanism, Stout argues, because it does not portray accurately what ministers preached on a typical Sunday. A disproportionate number of published sermons were not *regular*, Sunday ones, but *occasional* sermons delivered for a special event, such as a fast or election day. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, published sources largely suffice. This is a study of the ministry's public Christianity, its utterances on the relationship of faith to life in society. It was in their occasional sermons—the kind that tended to wind up in print—that ministers discussed such matters. Stout writes that "each generation of New England ministers invented and institutionalized a growing range of occasional sermons that allowed for pulpit commentary on social and political themes without corrupting the enduring concern of regular preaching, which was the salvation of the soul."[36] Therefore, we can safely rely on the vast sample of printed sermons as a good source for the content of the clergy's public Christianity.

The book is also premised on the belief that ideas can be understood fully only within their historical background. While concentrating on the *content* of religious beliefs, the study also recognizes the importance of their *context*, without subordinating either one to the other.[37] It does not examine the religiosocial pronouncements of southern New England ministers in a vacuum but situates the ideology under study within the context of the political, intellectual, and religious culture and institutions. As the foregoing discussion makes obvious, many of the developments that influenced the clergy's public Christianity were national if not global in scope, ranging from the American Revolution to the French Revolution and from the struggles of the first party period to the rise of the missionary movement. Yet, other settings for our story are more appropriately smaller in scale, and thus the book also attends to both regional and local contexts.

The proper regional frame of reference for understanding the clergy's public Christianity is the tristate area of southern New England. Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island were the historic homes of the Puritan tradition and its dissenting alternatives. The three states had individual histories, of course, but they also had a long cultural background with much in common. Jerald C. Brauer is correct to complain of the tendency to treat the national religious history as "Puritanism writ large," but on the other side of the coin, the regional history must not be enveloped

in the mists of national generalizations either.[38] Although it is true that "everywhere in the new republic literate citizens were busy harmonizing the two faiths [of Christianity and republicanism]," their activities produced different syntheses in different regional contexts, which need to be recognized.[39] During the period under study, southern New England was set distinctively apart from some of the trends shaping the rest of the new nation. The area deviated from the norm in the early republic with its ethnic homogeneity and staunch attachment to Federalist politics.[40] Compared with the rest of colonial America, the Puritan colonies had always had a well-developed and relatively stable religious tradition, and all of the New England states save Rhode Island maintained the establishment of Congregationalism into the nineteenth century. "Congregationalism," writes one scholar, was deeply rooted "at the heart of New England culture."[41] This contrasts with the situation in the South during the early republic, where the Anglican church, which was not strong to begin with, had suffered a tremendous setback from the Revolution, and evangelicals essentially had to begin the process of Christianization over again.[42] As several historians have demonstrated, the frontier arc stretching across northern New England from Maine to Vermont really does not match this characterization of the religious culture of southern New England on account of the frontier's rapid growth, the newness and flatness of its social institutions, and its religious heterogeneity.[43] To say southern New England was unique—and even unrepresentative of national trends in the early nineteenth century—is not to deem it less representative than any other particular region. Specifically, many New England tendencies in the 1810s emerged on a national scale in the 1820s and 1830s as part of a new "northern" regional culture.

If the language of their public Christianity sounded across the region of southern New England, individual clergymen lived and acted mainly within more local horizons. "Indeed, above all else," writes Donald M. Scott, "the sacred office in eighteenth-century New England was a local office, derived from a special blend of congregationalist ecclesiastical theory and the social order of the New England town."[44] Despite the conspiratorial charges that were sometimes leveled by its enemies, the standing order of Congregational ministers was not much of a statewide monolith. Except for the annual conventions of ministers that were held in Boston and Hartford each spring at the time of the election day festivities, the standing order was mainly a local organism. Clergymen conducted many of their professional activities within networks of other ministers in their vicinity. They associated formally with nearby colleagues to hold discussions, examine and license candidates for the ministry, resolve disputes, and coordinate other activities. Informally, they exchanged pulpits and otherwise supported one another. Ministers joined together to lead revivals in nearby churches. Likewise, reform societies were usually begun locally, and even after the subsequent creation of statewide or national organizations, the local auxiliaries were still critical for grassroots mobilization. Conflicts with regional ramifications often played out locally as well. For instance, the Unitarian controversy was fought out at the level of the parish and church; William G. McLoughlin noted that "the fight for religious liberty was primarily a neighborhood affair."[45] Thus, many of the ministry's utterances about the interface of religion and society were cast in a local frame of reference. Even though the bulk of this study focuses on translocal



A map of the County of Worcester, 1793. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

themes such as the providential shaping of regional and national history or the prescribed structure of the righteous society, it is important to appreciate the local roots of a good deal of ministers' social ideology.

It would be beyond the scope of this study to investigate the local contours of every occasional sermon or to take a comprehensive look at the activities of each ministerial association. Selection is necessary. Fortunately, the confines of Worcester County, Massachusetts, brought together in microcosm most of the important religious developments from across the region. The county was literally a crossroads, and people and trends from every corner of New England intersected there. As John L. Brooke writes in his study of the county's social and political history, "Worcester

County provides a comprehensive view of Massachusetts society in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, incorporating themes and patterns that characterize very different parts of the state."[46] The county's religious development in the early republic exhibited the same "comprehensive" quality. From the east, from the direction of Boston and Cambridge, the county felt a strong Unitarian influence. From the west resonated the orthodox Congregationalism of the Connecticut River valley and the Nutmeg State itself. Up the Blackstone River valley from the southeast, Baptists and Quakers pushed into the county from the direction of Rhode Island. The northwestern and southwestern corners of the county were home to other sectarians, and itinerants passed through as well. In addition to its representative diversity, Worcester County was also the home to several long-serving and active ministers.[47] For instance, Samuel Austin, pastor of Worcester's First Church from 1790 to 1815, was also the editor of an eight-volume set of Jonathan Edwards's works and a principal figure behind the Massachusetts Missionary Society. At the Second Church, Aaron Bancroft served from 1786 to 1839. A luminary of the first magnitude among the religious liberals, he was president of the American Unitarian Association from 1825 to 1836. Joseph Goffe, minister of the North Parish of Sutton, later Millbury, between 1794 and 1830, also had his hand in a host of benevolent and clerical associations. These and other ministers made Worcester County the scene of a full array of ministerial, evangelistic, and reform organizations. Therefore, study of Worcester County sheds light on the history of the larger New England ministry and its public endeavors, and *A Republic of Righteousness* visits the county from time to time to contextualize the ministry's social ideology.

Of course, this local aspect of the book calls for a different body of source material than the sermons and orations that illuminate the ministry's public Christianity. Thanks to great archives, there are outstanding records with which to work.[48] A variety of organizational records are extant. For example, the records of the Brookfield Association of churches are intact for the years from 1757 to 1837, and there are similar records for missionary organizations, individual churches, reform societies, and the like. There also is an abundance of personal papers. Joseph Goffe's diaries and letters, to cite just one example, provide tremendous insight into ministerial networking and revivals. These manuscript sources are supplemented by the works of the many talented historians who have made Worcester County their focus, including both nineteenth-century ministerial authors and twentieth-century academics.

The story of how New Englanders sought to construct their public Christianity falls into three chronological periods. From the early 1780s until the turn of the century, the established ministry aligned church and government in a hierarchical social vision aimed at the creation of a righteous community. The standing order's predominant place in the region's socioreligious pecking order encouraged Congregational clergymen to posit a salient public role for themselves. Convinced of the providential direction and worldwide ramifications of the American Revolution, Congregational ministers worked to secure the republic through the cooperation of magistrate and minister. Congregational clergymen advocated a distinctive ideology that defies categorization as either liberal or republican.[49] However, to a greater degree than is sometimes recognized, they hesitated to endow the new republic with the seal of the national covenant. While some hailed the United States as a chosen

nation, others denied it or carefully qualified the announcement.[50] Dissenters from the establishment challenged the Congregationalists' church-state alliance, but the political turmoil of the 1790s only drove established clergymen into a heightened defense of the status quo. The period from the 1780s to 1800 is the subject of chapters 1 and 2, which also lay the groundwork for later developments in the nineteenth century.

Rising opposition ignited a contentious second period, analyzed in chapter 3, that spanned the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Although dissenters were growing in number, it was not until the late 1790s with the rise of the Republican opposition that they made their presence decisively felt on the question of the religious basis of the social order. Competing political, theological, and ideological factions debated the proper place and extent of Christianity's role in the public sphere. The Democratic-Republicans presented dissenters with a powerful new stick with which to cudgel the standing order. Most tangibly, these years yielded the disestablishment of religion in Connecticut in 1818, but they also precipitated a crisis of ideology. The Congregational ministry had to reevaluate its earlier partnership with the state. As political groups critical of the ministers' social pronouncements and involvement came to power on both the national and state levels, the earlier reliance on the magistracy became problematic. Furthermore, the Congregational ministry interpreted the results of the first party competition by rejecting the U.S. government as a blessing of Providence and now portrayed it as one of God's judgments on a wicked land.

While disaffection with government grew in the years before 1815, the rising tide of evangelical awakening began to foster an alternative vision of the godly community. This is the subject of chapter 4. Successes in both faraway missionary endeavors and homegrown revivals were renewing the church, which suggested a new hope for corporate righteousness arising from the church acting on society. An important group of evangelical Congregational ministers began to articulate how this revived church would have a profound and salutary influence on the surrounding community. They organized a variety of new institutions to put their ideas into effect. The activities of clergymen in Worcester County epitomized all of these developments, as revealed particularly by the manuscript record left by Joseph Goffe.

By the late 1810s and 1820s, the period covered in chapter 5, the 150-year-old division between the standing order and the dissenters was finally giving way to a new alignment. The Connecticut establishment had fallen to the Republican coalition. In Massachusetts, the standing order broke up over an internal debate within Congregationalism, the so-called Unitarian controversy, that split the denomination into Unitarian and Trinitarian wings. The Unitarians, while theologically unconventional, remained conservative socially; they were the last defenders of the establishment. The Trinitarian (or orthodox) Congregationalists likewise retained elements of their traditional corporate ethic but were compelled to innovate without the establishment. The orthodox came to espouse new strategies of implementing their belief in the social necessity of religion. Orthodox ministers called for a conscientious electorate and a revitalized church to fulfill the roles formerly occupied by the establishment. They pioneered new organizational forms to carry this into practice. In their move away from the establishment, orthodox Congregationalists found com-

mon ground with the old dissenting groups, particularly the Baptists. A new, evangelical coalition emerged that would send powerful ripples through antebellum politics and reform nationwide. Both sides of the new evangelical-liberal divide voiced renewed patriotism around the nation's semicentennial in 1826, reaffirming hope in the providential destiny of the United States.

Yet the ministry's public Christianity, as shown in chapter 6, could also censure nationalism, along with other perceived defects in the national character, such as intemperance, intoxication with the emerging market economy, violations of the Sabbath, and chattel slavery. Both evangelicals and Unitarians critiqued national values from a standpoint apart from both the expanding market and the state. The reform initiatives of this period are better understood with this study's perspective on their roots in New England religious culture, rather than by simply invoking concepts such as status anxiety that make them appear as an ad hoc response to the immediate social environment.[51]

Overall, this study challenges the portrayal of the early republic as a period of secularization, individualization, or the withdrawal of religion from public life. Rather, ministers found new strategies for staying engaged with their society. Their public Christianity evolved over the period from 1783 to 1833 but continued both to endow social experience with providential meaning and to offer a program for the godly society. Evangelicalism ultimately proved it could carry with it a collective identity and was not synonymous with individual piety alone. Thus, the clergy's social ideology became an engine for reform and missions in the antebellum period. For the socially critical voice it inspired, New England's public Christianity deserves credit as an important element in the intellectual world of antebellum politics and reform. The Congregationalists' corporate ethic was a countervailing integrative force in an era better known for its social atomization; hyperindividualism was not the only ideology conducive to social ferment in the early republic. Ultimately, *A Republic of Righteousness* raises the (admittedly anachronistic) question of which Americans in the early republic were the most "modern." Nathan O. Hatch claims the title for his "insurgent religious leaders," others for secular liberals, but surely those who were the predecessors of Protestant liberalism, a progressive evangelicalism, and the Social Gospel could also stake a legitimate claim to the designation.[52] By articulating, often in opposition, an inclusive ideal that went beyond partisan political ideologies, the clerical figures under study stimulated a debate over social morality that was vital to the development of American culture.