

The Production of American Religious Freedom

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Introduction

Freedom is hard to bear.

—James Baldwin

Americans are a people captivated by freedom. Few agree, however, about what freedom means. At times, freedom challenges injustice. At other times, freedom justifies the way things are. Freedom fights for the laborer and defends corporations from regulation. Freedom protects the traditional family and protests against sexual restrictions. Freedom decries discrimination and insists that none exists. Freedom invites foreigners to American shores and restricts their entry. Freedom longs for a Christian nation and welcomes religious diversity. Freedom calls for more and less government. Freedom is cherished by sinners and saints, immigrants and nativists, slaves and slaveholders, corporations and employees.

Many see in freedom the promise of liberation from rules and regulations, a protection of individual rights from state power. A free person is someone left alone by the state. Citizens who seek to be left alone also leave alone structural inequalities in American life. Those who defend individual rights accept persistent inequality as part of a free society. Wrestling with the vexed relationship between freedom and equality, those propagating liberal views of freedom broadened their interpretation over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to address the practical distribution of social, economic, and political power.¹ This led to what John Dewey described as the “inner split” within liberalism.² This inner split marked the fault line between proponents of limiting freedom to formal protection of rights and advocates for substantive equality who argued for more expansive conceptions of the public good.³

When it comes to religion, substantive critiques of inequality have been less visible. Popular and scholarly narratives have often imagined that American religious freedom protects individual choices in a mar-

ketplace. Writing in the nineteenth century, for example, the French tourist Alexis de Tocqueville attributed the persistent strength of religion in the United States to the principle of voluntarism resulting from the separation of church and state.⁴ Religiosity flourished when citizens were free to choose their own religious loyalties. While not always sharing Tocqueville's political views, scholars of religion in America often take as axiomatic that religious freedom is a good thing and welcome the range of spiritual choices made possible by secular liberal institutions.

This book argues that there is no such thing as religious freedom, or at least no one thing. Religious freedom is a malleable rhetoric employed for a variety of purposes. Part of the reason for this malleability is that religious identities are themselves produced in response to social and political contests. Without conflict among political actors, there would be no need to define a discreet area of social life called religion and then insist that it should be protected.⁵ Conflict is not what happens when already formed religions bump into each other in public life; conflict makes religions.

One response to social contests is to make religion into a form of private property possessed by an interior self that requires protection. Interior religiosity focuses attention on individual freedom to deflect attention from the distribution of power among persons, families, legislatures, courts, corporations, and religious organizations.⁶ Appeals to the sanctity of private property, for example, have been ubiquitous in everything from defenses of slavery to protests against regulations of corporations. In the fluid relationship between property and persons, corporate personhood has often found legal protections that have eluded human beings.

The centrality of individual voluntarism is also in tension with the practical role played by regional, racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identities in shaping religious adherence. This is not to say that these diverse forms of identification are any less malleable than religion.⁷ It is to say that the rhetoric of freedom often produces persons loyal to groups pursuing imagined collective interests. These groups have supported and opposed social inequality. At times, religious commitments have fueled public engagement with movements that worked to fight perceived social injustices. At other times, religious freedom advocates have attacked public institutions as enemies of individual liberty and have strengthened private forms of institutional power.

That religion is an interior, individual concern in need of political and legal safeguards is part of American common sense. This book argues that logic of the commonsensical equation between religion and privacy is itself a product of a political economy. By “economy,” I have in mind something broader than financial transactions. Expanding on the classical sense of economy as household administration, this book analyzes governance in a self-governing nation.⁸ An economy of religious freedom addresses institutional forces that define, produce, and distribute contested social resources in American life. This economy does not provide options for already formed citizens; it produces persons who make choices about how to govern themselves. The peculiar features of self-government encompass regulatory forces as well as resistance to dominant forms of governance. An economic analysis measures this push and pull, the contests over the production and distribution of power.

Considering the work it takes to produce religious freedom requires a different analysis from measuring how consumer demands are met by ever expanding free markets. The tendency to equate economic production with limitless expansion and growth testifies to the role that capitalism has played in defining the American economic imagination. This is especially evident when free markets are portrayed as politically neutral institutions. As Lisa Duggan explains, “The most successful ruse of neoliberal dominance in both global and domestic affairs is the definition of *economic* policy as primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise. This expertise is then separated from *politics* and *culture*, and not properly subject to specifically political accountability or cultural critique.”⁹

To understand contests over the production of religious freedom within political institutions, the book begins in the nineteenth century with the famed revivalist Charles Grandison Finney. Stressing human agency in promoting revivals, Finney appears as a skilled religious entrepreneur willing to meet consumer demands. Far from giving people what they wanted, however, Finney used emotional and social pressure to discipline subjects who would form a Christian society. Images of a sentimental Christian order also informed the economic visions of the novelist Louisa May Alcott and the populist crusader William Jennings Bryan, both of whom saw capitalist wage labor as an alienating force that eroded social bonds between human beings. While Alcott and Bryan

believed that better working conditions could foster solidarity, they disagreed about who would be included in their idealized social worlds. Alcott labored to overcome social divisions, whereas Bryan yearned for a white Christian nation. Like Bryan, the filmmaker D. W. Griffith drew on white populism to craft a religiously and racially exclusive body politic. Unlike Bryan, Griffith saw violence as the necessary means to protect Christian freedom.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian nation ideals met challenges from religious minorities. Al Smith, the New York governor and 1928 Democratic presidential nominee, used a populist language to fight for American workers, but he did so as the spokesman for immigrant, urban, ethnically diverse, and often Catholic and Jewish masses who were gaining political power in the early twentieth century. Smith's defense of religious freedom protected hyphenated identities and institutional loyalties in ways that challenged proponents of a Protestant Christian nation. Later in the twentieth century, the Nation of Islam spokesman Malcolm X articulated a radical vision of racial solidarity that refused liberal inclusion altogether. Rejecting liberal discourses of freedom and tolerance, he insisted that inequality was at the center of American history. Malcolm X taught that American promises of freedom were based on distorted views of social reality, and that freedom required revolutionary change.

This book also examines how privatization in the current political climate has countered attempts made by religious, racial, and ethnic minorities to expand American freedom. Harkening back to Griffith's nostalgic embrace of Confederate ideals of state's rights, limited government, and the sanctity of property, antistatist populists reject the expansion of democratic institutions and turn instead to libertarian privacy. Arguments made for intelligent design emphasize private choices and invoke liberal virtues of tolerance in order to attack the scientific establishment as representative of public institutions that pose tyrannical threats to liberty. Recently, decrying tyranny has manifested itself as nostalgia for a lost nation as the grounds for abandoning political loyalty to the state. Antigovernment sentiment of groups like the Tea Party is only one example of a broader trend toward privatization in which attacks on a leviathan state serve to expand private forms of institutional power. As we will see in this book's analysis of attempts to grant to religious cor-

porations the status of persons entitled to First Amendment rights, this defense of corporate rights sanctifies property. Evangelical corporations like Hobby Lobby have found common cause with the Catholic Church to argue that in order to protect sacred property rights, they should not have to provide health care coverage for forms of contraception that offend their consciences. This usage of religious privacy does not protect individual choices, but empowers a private sphere that contains institutions (such as churches, schools, hospitals, or other corporate bodies) that seek regulatory power over human bodies. The rhetoric of religious freedom expands the power of private institutions acting outside of democratic deliberation and accountability. This model of privacy derives its persuasive force from a defense of individual liberty, but in practice supports the interests of large corporations. This evacuation of public life is consistent with Patricia J. Williams's observation that fears of government power have justified legislative restraint that has eroded public institutions in favor of private power. Speaking of increasing monopolization of public space by private interests, she notes, "There is today precious little 'public' left, just the tyranny of what we call the private."¹⁰ The rhetoric of religious freedom has played a central role in empowering private tyranny.

While the chapters of this book address varied subject matter, they by no means tell the whole story of American religious freedom.¹¹ The selected case studies do not offer a balanced, exhaustive, or inclusive coverage of American history; I chose them to highlight different conceptual problems in the study of religion. The goal is not to propose any one explanation for how religious freedom works but to highlight how freedom has been contested, challenged, and transformed. Different chapters illuminate competing visions of the proper relationship between public and private life. If there is any single common theme, it is that while religious freedom often promises individual liberation from social constraints, this is the one thing freedom does not do. There is no such thing as unconditioned freedom that exists outside of social life. As the economy of religious freedom produces, distributes, and challenges different social arrangements, it addresses contradictions between formal promises of religious liberty and the practical exercise of freedom. To this end, this book draws on recent scholarship that investigates internal tensions within American religious freedom, especially in the role

that Protestantism plays in shaping supposedly religiously neutral secular institutions.¹² Both Tracy Fessenden and John Lardas Modern, for example, suggest that Protestant forms of freedom and subjectivity have become so ingrained in American common sense as to be invisible to critical analysis.¹³ Others, like Steven D. Smith, agree that Protestant religious commitments have shaped religious freedom, but draw different conclusions about what this means. In Smith's view, because American religious freedom was based upon Christian theological commitments, it is imperative to protect Christian influence in public life.¹⁴

While I accept that public Protestantism has shaped American democracy, I am also interested in how people fight about this. Whereas Modern looks for an underlying epistemic unity, I see religious freedom as something fragmented, in tension, and under duress. This is not to say that I reject discursive analysis in order to recover the agency of subjects. Instead of addressing anxieties about whether people are able to make choices, this book examines how freedom can force people to make choices or allow them to avoid making choices. Following James Baldwin's observation that freedom is hard to bear, I grapple with how people respond when freedom makes them uncomfortable.

What is common to all of the chapters of this book is that they study citizens who are not fully formed persons otherwise constrained by social forces. In practice, the production of religious freedom creates divided selves. Rather than study free people, then, this book examines the social processes that produce a variety of persons, whether they be sinners, laborers, victims, voters, revolutionaries, scientists, embryos, or corporations.

You, and You, and You

Charles Grandison Finney and Democracy

All states of society, all forms of government, all inveterate habits and prejudices, from the iron Roman, the polite and philosophic Greek, to the most debased Sandwich Islanders, have been overcome and subdued alike by the Gospel, and always in the form of revivals of religion, and substantially by the use of the same instrumentalities which . . . have been so long, so widely, and so successfully used in the United States.

—Charles Grandison Finney

Charles Grandison Finney was no modest man. Reflecting on the revivals of his early ministry in upstate New York in the 1820s and 1830s, he remarked, “I have never seen, read, or heard of, revivals in any age of the church, more pure, powerful, and in every way desirable, than those of that period.”¹ For Finney, a big revival was a good revival. Evangelists sought to save as many souls as possible. However, Finney’s emphasis on counting souls revealed an underlying tension between social and individual aspects of conversion. On one hand, sinners were individuals with free will. As he explained, “They are free moral agents, of course; rational, accountable.”² On the other hand, a revival used social pressure to produce as many Christians as possible. If sinners were free to make their own choices, what was social pressure doing exactly?

Finney’s ideas about revivalism call us to consider the relationship between social pressure and individual freedom. While he argued for a greater role for human free will in Protestant revivalism than did his Calvinist predecessors, Finney was not interested in freedom for freedom’s sake. He wanted to understand how human volition worked in order to help individuals conform to social norms and theological truth.

People were most free when they made the same choices as their Christian neighbors. This was not a simple matter of social control. External coercion was incapable of producing genuine conversions. Instead, the task of the revivalist was to affect the interior life of sinners so that they willingly chose Christ. Finney studied the psychology of will to consider how social norms and discipline governed choices. By producing free individuals within a population of free people, Finney's revivals drew on distinctly democratic techniques of surveillance. The revivalist observed popular behavior in order to shape it.

The Language of the Common People

Finney was celebrated and denounced for his use of “new measures” to promote revivals. His measures included an anxious bench on which potential converts would sit in full view of the congregation, protracted meetings that lasted for hours and even days, extemporaneous preaching with plain language, an increased role for women, personalized addresses that refused to let those in the pews remain anonymous spectators, and a heightened emotional appeal that challenged a more reserved sense of Christian propriety.³ Taken together, these methods placed sinners under intense public scrutiny. The technique of anxious bench, for example, encouraged people to sit in a row reserved for sinners concerned over the state of their souls, thereby inviting additional pressure from the preacher and other congregants. Many, particularly in Finney's own Presbyterian and later Congregationalist denominations, questioned whether such means were worth the ends. As biographer Charles Hambrick Stowe described the attitude of Finney's opponents, “[They] did not differ from him so much on theological grounds. It was the style and tone—the bad manners—of the revivals to which they objected. ‘Doing the thing,’ as H. H. Kellogg in Clinton called it, seemed to them religious vulgarity.”⁴ Finney's critics felt he damaged the dignity of the ministerial profession and undermined the decorum of church services. He offered no apologies: “Dignity indeed! Just the language of the devil. He rejoices in it. Why, the object of an illustration is to make people *see the truth*, not to bolster up pulpit dignity.”⁵

Finney responded to calls for pulpit dignity by asking how many Christians had been converted by ministers who maintained this devil-

ish decorum. Scholars have viewed his rejection of propriety as evidence for a democratization of American Christianity in the nineteenth century. According to this interpretation, those who denounced Finney's "vulgar" style were motivated by a class-based anxiety over the erosion of traditional authority. Ministers trained at Harvard and Yale resisted increasingly popular forms of religious expression. As historian Nathan Hatch explains, "This shift [to democratization] involved new faith in public opinion as the arbiter of truth."⁶ Revivalists flourished because they met the demands of the masses. An assertive version of the democratization thesis is proposed by rational choice sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, who celebrate an American free market of religion that rewarded preachers who embraced their roles as religious entrepreneurs and adapted to consumer demands.⁷ Unlike Finke and Stark, Hatch has mixed feelings about the religious marketplace. According to Hatch, the revivalist style simplified theology and encouraged anti-intellectualism in American life.⁸ As he laments, "These new ground rules measured theology by its acceptance in the marketplace. It flattened out uncomfortable complexity and often resolved issues by simple choice of alternatives."⁹ While Hatch has reservations about the actual choices of religious consumers, he does agree with Finke and Stark that the choices of Americans were free. Revivalism was popular because it met the demands of American Christians.

Finney proudly adapted his preaching to his audience. As he stated, "Among farmers and mechanics, and other classes of men, I borrowed my illustrations from their various occupations. I tried also to use such language as they would understand. I addressed them in the language of the common people."¹⁰ But Finney's attack on the preaching style of his contemporaries did not always make him so popular. Recounting his reception in one town, he noted, "I learned in the course of the day that the people were threatening me—to ride me on a rail, to tar and feather me, and to give me a walking paper, as they said."¹¹ This reception adds a wrinkle to the portrayal of Finney as the preacher who gave the people what they wanted. He did not care if the masses liked him. Finney was confrontational and stressed the importance of "melting down" or "breaking down" sinners: "This committed *state* is moral depravity, the fountain of sin within them, from which flow by a natural law all their sinful ways. This committed voluntary state is their 'wicked heart.' This

it is that needs a *radical change*.¹² Left alone, sinners would not choose what was good for them.

In representing revivalists like Finney as democratizing figures who gave the people what they wanted, historians like Hatch and sociologists like Finke and Stark portray revivalism as the natural extension of the people's will. In doing this, they deflect attention from the work required to produce the will of the people. By depicting Finney's revivals as protests of the masses against the classes, democratization theories elevate religious freedom in ways that divert attention from other forms of social and political power such as pressure and shame. According to historian Amanda Porterfield, Hatch ignores an authoritarian strand within American evangelicalism. As she argues, "Misrepresenting evangelicalism as antiauthoritarian and disregarding the connection between the growth of evangelicalism and the growth of slavery and the invasion of Indian lands, Hatch did as much to mask the developing relationship between religion and politics as to reveal it."¹³

Porterfield's analysis brings a welcome attention to social power. However, Hatch's depiction of Finney's antiauthoritarianism might not be a misrepresentation. I agree with Hatch that revivalism was a force for democratization in the sense that revivalists hoped to produce populations of self-governing people. Finney's ministry mounted a popular challenge to existing institutional authority and social norms. This is not to say, however, that institutional authority and social norms vanished. Revivalism is best understood not as one side of a binary between authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism, or between social control and popular sovereignty. Rather, the popularity of revivals depends upon institutional arrangements and distributions of power that make democracy possible. Instead of a process in which individuals became free, democratization might be better understood as a shift toward democratic forms of governance. A revivalist used social forces to gain the people's consent to be governed.

As social events designed to produce individual conversions, revivals are a resource for thinking about the relationship between public opinion and private decisions in a democracy. This is especially true if revivals are illustrations of both democratization and market forces. Democracy does not just give people what they want; democracy requires institutions that measure, regulate, and implement democratic choices.

There is a great deal at stake in making the marketplace the arbiter of democratic sovereignty. After all, markets do not just respond to consumer demands; they create consumer demands. Part of why market forces are effective is they conceal this work of creation. When portrayed as the vehicle for expanding religious freedom, the marketplace appears to be driven by the choices of religious actors acting upon internal desires that were otherwise constrained by external forces. By celebrating the agency of religious consumers, the equation of free markets with democratization naturalizes capitalist freedom. Instead of examining institutional conditions that produced a Protestant hegemony in public life, democratization theories present revivalism as the fulfillment of the popular will. Following this logic, if free markets meet innate consumer demands, and popular evangelicalism flourishes under free markets, then one can presume that the kind of evangelicalism that thrived in the nineteenth century was what people wanted.

Scholarship that equates freedom with evangelical salvation supports Catherine L. Albanese's observation that American "public Protestantism" has functioned in tandem with a celebration of pluralism and multiplicity.¹⁴ Religious freedom goes hand in hand with the commonsensical equation of Protestantism, voluntarism, and religious freedom in the United States. According to historian David Sehat, celebrations of religious freedom serve as a civic myth that conceals the practical exercise of power through what he calls a "moral establishment." As he states, "The invocation of religious liberty should not be confused with the actual distribution of power and the formation of political institutions."¹⁵ John Lardas Modern describes how evangelical forms of agency became part of American common sense. According to Modern, evangelicals cited their particular genius for adapting to a secular political order that liberated Americans from institutional control. Evangelical freedom coincided with democratic freedom in that both deflected attention from institutional power by attributing authority to the unmediated will of the people. In this secular milieu, "the 'State' was an energy that operated within human history, a non-mediating medium that would allow individuals to act voluntarily, on their own terms, as a people. As a control variable for both 'religion' and the organization of the population, this energy made the evolution of evangelicalism and social order part of the same horizon of possibility. Moreover, this energy secured the

meaning of evangelicalism as emancipation from the fetters of artificial, and therefore unreasonable, authority.”¹⁶

To understand how the rhetoric of emancipation worked in tandem with the organization of the population, Modern draws on the critical theories of Michel Foucault, who tried to understand how individual choices in the modern liberal state are produced. According to Foucault, social power did not repress individual subjects but constituted individuals within networks of power so that individuals more effectively reproduced the conditions that make the modern state possible. As he stated,

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe one of its prime effects.¹⁷

Examining the individual as an effect of power can explain how Finney’s new measures worked to produce liberal subjects. Revivals did not depend upon external institutional coercion. Rather, a revival was a social event that produced free individuals.

In Foucault’s later work, his focus on the discipline of an individual subject was supplemented by attention to what he called “security.” Security measured and normalized individual behavior in the context of some population. A certain amount of variation, or multiplicity, was permissible as long as it was possible to maintain public norms. In other words, it was not necessary to discipline each person in the same way within a democratic polity; what mattered was measurable, quantifiable behavior.¹⁸ This tension between discipline and security can help to explain the relationship between the social event of a revival and the project of individual conversion. Finney’s revivals did not simply gather a collection of consumers; they produced environments in which social norms and public standards prescribed a limited variety of acceptable forms of individual discipline.

A social norm does not require that everyone’s behavior be the same. Democratic governments are not like totalitarian states that seek to

control people's behavior. Rather, liberal democracies survey and manage people within a population. For this to work, individuals choose whether to conform to social norms. What matters is not that all private behavior is identical, but that some norm maintains public influence. Rather than rely on top-down control of all people, democratic security surveys and measures a range of behavior in territory inhabited by free subjects. As Foucault explains, "Freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of the apparatuses of security. An apparatus of security, in any case the one I have spoken about, cannot operate well except on the condition that it is given freedom in the modern sense [the word] acquires in the eighteenth century: no longer the exemptions and privileges attached to a person, but the possibility of movement, change of place, and processes of circulation of both people and things."¹⁹ The work of security accounts for natural desires and behaviors across a population to allow for effective government.

Foucault's ideas about security can help to clarify the production of religious freedom in the early republic. In the same way that democratic citizens were members of a population, sinners were members of an audience. To reach the greatest number of people within his prospective audience, Finney developed a science of revivals that studied how people made choices. He was especially interested in developing techniques of measurement and regulation to observe how social pressures could impact individual decisions. Before breaking down individual resistance, he needed to understand how human nature worked in order to develop measures appropriate to his audience of "common people." He wanted to know how to shape a social environment that would influence free people to make decisions for Christ. Individual religious freedom, then, was not in a private space removed from public life but was the focus of surveillance, discipline, and security.

Finney knew that not every sinner would accept Christ. When looked at from the perspective of a population, this was not necessarily a problem. A revival's success was measured by its ability to convert the greatest number of people. For such measurement to be possible, conversions needed to be standardized, countable events. If producing the greatest number of converts was the purpose of a revival, conversions should be widely accessible. This market logic repulsed Finney's critics who saw something vulgar about his willingness to discard any norms of public

behavior that seemed to get in the way of his single-minded focus on the quantity of converts. As Presbyterian critic Albert B. Dod lamented, “How is the temple of God dishonored by this alleged necessity for a continual shifting of its services, like the scenes of some raree-show, to attract the vulgar gaze! How is the Gospel degraded by being thus made dependent for its effect upon a kind of jugglery which shall be studiously adapted to surprise and startle beholders, and thus ‘attract their attention!’”²⁰ Opponents of Finney’s ministry were working with a religious economy that included qualitative measures like theological sophistication and pulpit dignity. In the eyes of these elite critics, a religious marketplace lacked any sense of propriety. Finney’s impact was felt not only in the number of people he converted, but in his ability to make it obvious that the success of Christian ministry was measured quantitatively and that anything else was the work of the devil. The market logic of revivalism meant that conversion became a standardized product that measured its success by the quantity of souls brought to Christ. When democratization theories use quantitative measures of religion, they take Finney’s side by equating popularity with democratic freedom.

Freedom of the Will

Another feature of Foucault’s concept of security that is relevant to revivalism is its attention to human nature. Modern liberal freedom is conventionally understood as the liberation of natural desire from artificial constraints. Finney thought a lot about nature. He insisted that his new measures employed natural means: “A revival is not a miracle according to another definition of the term ‘miracle’—something above the powers of nature. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the *right exercise* of the powers of nature.”²¹ Finney’s faith in the right exercise of natural powers departed from theology that held that revivals could only be a surprising work of a sovereign God. His study of human nature was motivated by his confidence that he could change human beings once he understood how their choices worked. This is consistent with Foucault’s observation that naturalness is accessible to techniques of transformation: “The naturalness identified in the fact of population is constantly accessible to agents and techniques of transformation, on condition that these agents

and techniques are at once enlightened, reflected, analytical, calculated, and calculating.”²² Importantly, measurable norms make it possible to describe human nature even while such norms might not describe everyone’s behavior. Instead of equating nature with universal features in every person, security requires only that certain behaviors are statistically probable.

Finney’s new measures depended upon understanding how human nature worked in order to free people from sin. Confidence in human agency distinguished Finney from earlier proponents of revivalism. Freedom was the revival’s means as well as its ends. As Mark Noll observes, “In 1740 ‘freedom’ was something about which to reason, a quality of human life as a whole to be considered in relation to other aspects of the self, and a positive value that nevertheless needed to be fenced in by other weightier considerations. In 1840 it had become axiomatic, the fundamental defining trait of human morality, and a value than which nothing was greater.”²³ One measure of the difference between 1740 and 1840 was the looming figure of Jonathan Edwards.²⁴ Edwards, a Calvinist proponent of the First Great Awakening, insisted that revivals were the surprising work of God and could not be controlled by the minister. However, Finney saw himself in continuity with Edwards and almost always spoke of his predecessor with respect. Finney explained their different theories about election and human agency as only a matter of emphasis due to changing historical circumstances. For example, although he claimed that the doctrine of election had harmed revivalism in his day, the revivalists of the previous century faced a different set of challenges:

It was not so in the days when President Edwards and Whitefield labored. Then, the Churches in New England had enjoyed little else than Arminian preaching, and were all resting in themselves and their own strength. These bold and devoted servants of God came out and declared those particular doctrines of grace, Divine Sovereignty and Election, and they were greatly blessed. They did not dwell on these doctrines exclusively, but they preached them very fully. The consequence was that because *in those circumstances* revivals followed from such preaching, the ministers who followed *continued to preach these doctrines almost exclusively*.²⁵

Finney was hesitant to criticize any revivalist who got results. Despite Finney's deference to his predecessors, there were some differences between his and Edwards's views of free will and human agency. Finney was correct, however, in the sense that the theological differences were relatively slight and that, on most questions, the revivalists were in substantial agreement. First, Edwards technically accepted that persons were free in the sense that their actions were not determined by external forces.²⁶ The question for Edwards was not whether individuals were free to make moral choices. They were. The question was how the will was formed. Second, although Finney placed greater emphasis on individual choices, he did not see sinners as likely to make correct decisions to ensure their salvation. It was on the formation of the will that Edwards and Finney were in subtle disagreement, although the subtlety of the disagreement had not-so-subtle effects.

Edwards, like Finney, argued that it made no sense to contend that people believed one thing and did another. According to Edwards, people always acted as they chose: "For 'tis absurd, to suppose the same individual will to oppose itself, in its present act; or the present choice to be opposite to, and resisting present choice: as absurd as it is to talk of two contrary motions, in the same moving body, at the same time."²⁷ If people willed one thing and did another, this begged the question of what agency chose to take the action.

There were some limits to what individuals could choose to do. Natural necessity placed limits on human agency. One could not jump fifty feet in the air just because one chose to do so. However, there were no such external limits placed on moral necessity. Natural forces did not prohibit people from making moral choices. But while people were free to do as they willed, this still left the epistemological question of how they came to will the things they willed in the first place. The assertion that people were free to do good or evil did not answer the question of what compelled some people to choose to do good while others chose evil. Identifying the will as free did not explain where it came from. On this point Edwards and Finney proved to be in significant disagreement. According to Edwards, while the will was free, individuals were not free to determine the nature of the will itself. Edwards characterizes the Arminian embrace of free will as self-contradictory: "Which brings us directly to a contradiction: for it supposes an act of the will preceding the

first act in the whole train, directing and determining the rest; or a free act of the will, before the first free act of the will.”²⁸ The basic problem was that one could not will the will as any act of will would presuppose that there was already a will in place. The will, whether regenerate or unregenerate, had to be determined by God.

The will was still free because God did not instruct people to make good or bad choices. Rather, God endowed humans with the perceptual apparatus to understand the difference between good and evil as simple ideas. Drawing on the philosophy of John Locke, Edwards described a simple idea as elemental and therefore not reducible to constituent logical parts. A simple idea was irrational in the technical sense that it was indivisible. Simple ideas were accepted whole. They were either grasped or not. Something like the sweetness of honey could not be explained; it had to be experienced. Good was like the taste of honey. It could not be communicated but could be experienced only through taste. If one lacked the sense of taste, one could never understand what honey tasted like. In the same way, good people made good choices because they perceived them to be good. Furthermore, because human beings were innately depraved, they would lack the sense of the good unless they were saved by grace. God’s election regenerated the human senses.

Whereas Edwards tied free will to perception, Finney argued for a tripartite conception of moral agency divided into intellect, sensibility, and free will. According to Finney, “Intellect includes . . . reason, conscience, and self-consciousness.”²⁹ Intellect contained the capacity to reason, as in the ability to develop a rational understanding of the doctrine of Hell. Finney defined sensibility as the emotional, sensual aspects of the human self: “This is the faculty or susceptibility of feeling. All sensation, desire, emotion, passion, pain, pleasure, and, in short, every kind of degree of feeling, as the term feeling is commonly used, is a phenomenon of this faculty.”³⁰ In other words, sensibility enabled one to feel and experience what Hell would be like. Apart from intellect and sensibility, free will had the status of an entirely different faculty: “Free-will implies the power of originating and deciding our own choices—of deciding or choosing in conformity with duty or otherwise in all cases of moral obligation. . . . Man’s causality, his whole power of causality to perform or do anything, lies in the will.”³¹ Finney’s tripartite understanding of moral agency uncoupled sensibility from volition. While volition was

still closely intertwined with sense perception, it was not the same thing. For example, it was possible to imagine a revival's impacting sinners in such a way as to drive them to conviction, but the ultimate decision to renounce their sins and become Christians was still theirs to make.

One effect of the uncoupling of will and sensibility was that it allowed Finney to make sensibility a natural as opposed to supernatural category. For Edwards, Christian sensibility was a gracious gift of God. For Finney, entirely natural measures could be expected to impress upon sinners as well as Christians the truth of the Christian message. Thus, natural measures could work with the Holy Spirit to convert Christians: "The Spirit of God, by the truth, influences the sinner to change, and in this sense is the efficient Cause of the change. But the sinner actually changes, and is therefore himself, in the most proper sense, the author of the change."³²

Yet the problem of how to influence the sinner remained. After all, if sinners could choose to sin or not, how did the minister convince them to change the way they made decisions? Finney's answer lay in the different ways in which volition interacted with intellect and sensibility. While there was sometimes a passive quality to intellect (as when conversations or events in one's environment compelled one to have certain thoughts), one could often choose how one reasons. However, it was much more difficult to control one's sensibility. On a limited level, one could choose to feel things, but emotions and affections were largely states of the body that were outside of one's direct control. As Finney explained, "No man can make himself feel in this way, merely by *trying* to feel. The feelings of the mind are not *directly* under our control. We cannot by willing, or by direct volition, call forth religious feelings. . . . They are purely involuntary states of mind. They naturally and necessarily exist in the mind under certain circumstances calculated to excite them. But they can be controlled *indirectly*."³³ While the faculty of the free will was at liberty to make whatever choices it wanted, it still relied on the intellect and sensibility to know what to choose. But because there was an involuntary urgency and intensity to the feelings that impacted sensibility, it was more likely to have an impact on the actions of the will. In other words, people chose to react to fear however they wanted, but they were more likely to react to the feeling of fear than to the idea of fear. Thus, sensibility was useful to the minister as it could indirectly influence the will.

You, and You, and You

A successful revivalist sought to understand the will of the sinner in order to exert public pressure on private choices. Emotion was a better resource than intellectual persuasion because the existing agency of sinners was part of the problem. Thus, the profession of belief as a matter of rational choice was insufficient to meet the criteria for authentic conversion. Intellectual commitments often convinced people that they were already Christian. As Finney explained, “Nothing is more common, than for a sinner, when told to believe the Gospel, to say: ‘I do believe it.’ The fact is, he has been brought up to admit the fact that the Gospel is true, but he does not *believe* it: he knows nothing about the evidence of it, and all his faith is a mere admission without evidence. . . . Yet it is often quite difficult to convince them that they do not believe.”³⁴ Finney, therefore, was less concerned about introducing and explaining novel beliefs than he was about disrupting sinners’ senses of what they thought they believed. Intellectual belief might be a product of the socially respectable habits that often prevented conversion.

There was more at stake in Finney’s use of heightened states of emotion than a popular appeal to the lower classes. Finney challenged social propriety because he wanted his auditors to *feel* uncomfortable. To do this, he needed to challenge and unsettle existing social norms. Christian preaching could not allow sinners to be comfortable: “[The minister], on his part, is expected to preach good, sound, *comfortable* doctrine, to bolster them up, and make them feel comfortable. So, they expect to go to heaven. I tell you **THEY WILL GO TO HELL** if this is their religion!”³⁵ Finney wanted to break down the social habits that allow for Christian hypocrisy. One set of social habits he hoped to transform were the familiar ways in which people went to church, especially the manner in which churchgoers passively listened to sermons. Directing his preaching to individual auditors, Finney refused to let anyone hide. As he explained, “What *is* personal preaching? No individual is ever benefited by preaching until he is made to feel that it benefits *him*. Such preaching is always personal. It often appears so personal to wicked men that they feel as if they were just going to be called out by name before the congregation.”³⁶ One tactic for personalizing sermons was the repeated use of the second person to address those who attended revivals. Finney wanted those in

the pews to understand that they were themselves going to Hell if they did not convert: “Do you believe the things I have been preaching are true, or are they the ravings of a disturbed mind? If they are true, do you recognize that they have reference to YOU? You say, perhaps: ‘I wish some of the rich Churches could hear it!’ But I am not preaching to them; I am preaching to you.”³⁷

Addressing a sinner directly in front of the other members of the sinner’s community was intended to cause discomfort. While Finney spoke directly to individuals, he did not do so as if he were addressing rational agents who would patiently examine his ideas. Social pressure calculated to effect individual conversions was best manufactured by personal address, but preachers failed at this when they worried about offending their congregants: “They preach about the Gospel instead of preaching the Gospel. They often preach about sinners instead of preaching to them. They studiously avoid being personal, in the sense of making the impression on any one present that he is the man. Now I have thought it my duty to pursue a different course; and I always have pursued a different course. I have often said, ‘Do not think I am talking about anybody else; but I mean you, and you, and you.’”³⁸ Although Finney addressed people in the second person, he did not give them what they wanted. Public scrutiny forced people to make choices they might otherwise avoid. This is what was so improper about this manner of address. For Finney’s contemporary critics, public shaming was another example of revivalism’s vulgarity: “However strange it must seem to Mr. Finney, there can be no doubt that there is such a thing as diffidence, which has its origin in modesty rather than pride. There are those, and they form a much larger class than he supposes, whose minds shrink from everything like a parade, or public display of feeling.”³⁹ Impropriety involved a kind of exposure, one that placed private emotions and sentiments in plain public view. As critical theorist Michael Warner points out, this was scandalous because it forced people to confess in front of strangers.⁴⁰ Through thunderous indictments of “you,” however, Finney addressed strangers intimately. He talked to strangers as if he knew their intimate thoughts and feelings, as if he understood their souls better than they did. This mode of address blurred familiar and habitual boundaries between public and private, unsettling the sense that things have their proper place. In his study of revivalism, Paul Johnson

remarks that Finney's revivals fed on humiliation: "Conversion had always ended in prayer and humiliation before God. But ministers had explained the terms of salvation and left terrified sinners to wrestle with it alone. Prayer was transacted in private between a man and his God, and most middle-class Protestants were uncomfortable with public displays of humiliation. . . . More than their theological implications, Finney's revival techniques aroused controversy because they transformed a conversion from a private to a public and intensely social event."⁴¹ Finney embraced this social event as the best way to melt down sinners. Making individual behavior the object of public observation, new measures broke down norms of public and private propriety and replaced them with an unrelenting emphasis on addressing the individual as a potential convert within a population of saved and unsaved souls.

As Finney saw it, privacy was a mark of shame, a refusal by Christians to acknowledge their religious convictions. Narrating his own conversion, for example, Finney discussed his early reluctance to display his Christian sentiments:

When I prayed I would only whisper my prayer, after having stopped the key-hold to the door, lest some one should discover that I was engaged in prayer. Before that time I had my Bible lying on the table with the law-books; and it never had occurred to me to be ashamed of being found reading it, any more than I should be ashamed of being found reading any of my other books. But after I had addressed myself in earnest to the subject of my own salvation, I kept my Bible, as much as I could, out of sight. If I was reading it when anybody came in, I would throw my law-books upon it, to create the impression that I had not had it in my hand.⁴²

While this sense of shame was an obstacle for conversion, it could be useful as well. Shame was an obstacle when it prevented public expression of convictions but could be useful because people kept their emotions private. Breaking down this sense of privacy granted access to a raw emotional state that allowed the skilled minister to indirectly influence the sinner. If sinners did not publicly repent, Finney could use their own sense of propriety against them. When one early revival was met with silence, for example, Finney lambasted his audience's lack of Christian fervor: "After looking around upon them for a few moments, I said,

“Then you are committed. You have taken your stand. You have rejected Christ and his Gospel; and ye are witnesses one against the other, and God is witness against you all. This I make explicit, and you may remember as long as you live, that you have thus publicly committed yourselves against the Saviour.”⁴³ By forcing private sentiments into the public, Finney attempted to uncover and expose any refuge of comfort.

Endless Diversity

Finney taught preachers to diagnose and address the particular problems of sinners. Thus, the revivalist had to study the habits of sinners before commencing the work of conversion: “To do this with effect requires great skill. It requires a thorough knowledge of the human heart, a clear understanding of the plan of salvation, and a precise and definite idea of the very thing that a sinner *MUST DO* in order to be saved.”⁴⁴ Even though Finney could prescribe what sinners must do to be saved, he rejected external force as a mechanism to achieve this goal. He sought to break down unchristian behavior in such a way that enlisted the sinner’s own will. Because he was attempting to convert the greatest number of souls within a population, Finney had to account for a variety of sinful behaviors. A revivalist appealing to free subjects contended with a diverse population. As Finney explained, “The characters of individuals afford an endless diversity. What is to be done with each one, and how he is to be converted, depends on his particular errors. It is necessary to ascertain his errors; to find out what he understands, and what he needs to be taught more perfectly; to see what points the Spirit of God is pressing upon his conscience, and to press the same things, and thus bring him to Christ.”⁴⁵ Freedom meant that sin took diverse forms. Variety was a fact of life in free societies. By recognizing the tie between freedom and diversity, Finney was not celebrating American pluralism as an end in itself. Diversity posed a problem to be solved. The revivalist had to account for diverse patterns of sinful behavior in order to make the greatest number of converts. The genius of liberty was that, with the minister’s guidance, individuals could understand and hopefully correct their own errors.

Even after the revival, a diversity of opinion would persist in public life. This was not necessarily a sign of failure. What mattered was the

number of people who did convert. Therefore, Finney took great pride in the sheer quantity of the numbers converted by his revivals. Recalling the year 1831, Finney spoke in grandiose terms about the extent of the Christian fervor: “It has been estimated that in one year, since the revival commenced, ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND SOULS were converted to God in the United States. This is undoubtedly the greatest number that were ever converted in one year, since the world began.”⁴⁶ By measuring the revival’s success by its quantifiable effects on a population, diversity was contained by the statistical triumph of Christianity. To this end, the science of revivals needed data to first understand the population that existed and then to document the work of social transformation. As Modern notes, the focus on data collection was a pervasive feature of evangelical organization in the nineteenth century: “The use of information—compiling data, processing information, charting aggregate patterns, and acting on those perceived patterns—secured the validity of that information not in essence but as semiotic leverage for advancing their cause at the level of the population.”⁴⁷

Another way to put this is that democratization was spread through techniques designed to govern a diverse population. To be clear, govern was not the same as control because government depended upon free individuals who willingly adapted to social norms. As a technique of government, a democratic economy of religious freedom shaped the way in which Finney imagined politics. Much like the work of promoting a revival, political reform responded to social sin through the management of voluntary decisions. While politicians, like ministers, could not directly control individuals, they could take steps to influence them. Effective democracy depended on the proper governance of individual choices. The voluntary quality of these choices was necessary for productive politics. When Finney attacked corrupt institutions like the Freemasons, for example, he saved his most vigorous denunciations for the secretive nature of Masonic oaths for the same reasons that he attacked attempts to conceal sin from public view. Private concealment was antithetical to democracy. As he explained, “All governmental proceedings, all institutions of learning, all benevolent societies, and indeed everything else in the world may be discussed, and criticized, and held up for public examination; but Masonry, forsooth, must not be touched. It must work in the dark.”⁴⁸

Discussion, criticism, and examination are familiar ideals of public discourse in democratic societies. This is another reason why it makes sense to see Finney as representative of democratizing forces. But it is also important to our understanding of democracy to note that Finney emphasized public discussion not because he wanted to allow people to express themselves. He wanted to expose diverse views to public criticism because sin hid in private. It was necessary to bring social evils into public view for the same reason Finney addressed sinners in the second person. All forms of sin must be brought out into the open. For this reason, ministers had a public responsibility to criticize social evil in the same way that they melted down sinners. As Finney warned, “If Satan rules in our halls of legislation, the pulpit is responsible for it. If our politics become so corrupt that the very foundations of our government are ready to fall away, the pulpit is responsible for it. Let us not ignore this fact, my dear brethren; but let us lay it to heart, and be thoroughly awake to our responsibility in respect to the morals of this nation.”⁴⁹ Because political reform was moral reform, ministers had a responsibility to be actively involved in democratic governance.

According to Finney, American democracy needed virtuous people to perfect society: “And what shall we do, to live up the standard, to move this entire nation and turn all these great people to the Lord? We must DO RIGHT. We must all have a better spirit, we must get down in the dust, we must act unitedly, we must take hold of this great work with all our hearts, and then God will bless us, and the work will go on.”⁵⁰ Finney’s call to move the entire nation confirms Sehat’s observation that evangelicalism sought more than conversions. Rather, evangelicals used their public influence to shape a Christian polity: “Many have claimed that evangelical religion was individualist and apolitical—concerned primarily with saving souls. But here was actually widespread agreement among evangelicals that God had given them a mandate for societal transformation.”⁵¹ Finney’s later involvement in social reform, particularly in the abolition of slavery, reflected his conviction that social transformation would follow the model of the individual transformation that took place in conversion.

In Finney’s model of religious freedom, the church served as a moral conscience in the affairs of state. He did not understand religious activism in political affairs as coercive, however, for the same reason he did

not understand his ministry as coercive. He could advocate for public Christian norms while insisting that he was not advocating for a Christian party in politics:

The Church must take the right ground in regard to politics. Do not suppose that I am going to preach a political sermon, or that I wish to have you join in getting up a *Christian party* in politics. . . . But the time has come that Christians must vote for honest men, and take consistent ground in politics. They must let the world see that the Church will uphold no man in office who is known to be a knave, or an adulterer, or a Sabbath-breaker, or a gambler, or a drunkard. . . . Politics are a part of a religion in such a country as this, and Christians must do their duty to the country as a part of their duty to God.⁵²

Finney imagined democratic reform as an accumulation of voluntary decisions, but this did not preclude attempts to perfect political institutions as part of a Christian's duty to God. Practically speaking, this meant that while politicians, like ministers, could not control individuals, they could take steps to influence them: "What do politicians do? They get up meetings, circulate handbills and pamphlets, blaze away in the newspapers, send ships about the streets on wheels with flags and sailors, send conveyances all over the town, with handbills, to bring people up to the polls—all to gain attention to their cause, and elect their candidate. All these are their 'measures' and for their *end* they are wisely calculated. The object is to get up an excitement and bring the people out."⁵³ If politicians or ministers wanted to mobilize people to support a political or religious agenda, they had to understand how individuals made choices. Like the revivalist, the politician could hope to influence the people through techniques of transformation that employed emotion and excitement to shape the decisions of democratic subjects.

As with Finney's insistence that freedom played an essential role in revivalism, free will was necessary for political reform. He warned of the dangers posed by deterministic theories of human nature like phrenology:

The error that lies at the foundation of this decay of individual and public conscience originates, no doubt, in the pulpit. The proper guardians of

the public conscience, have, I fear, very much neglected to expound and insist upon obedience to the moral law. It is plain that some of our most popular preachers are phrenologists. Phrenology has no organ of free will. Hence, it has no moral agency, no moral law and moral obligation in any proper sense of these terms. A consistent phrenologist can have no proper ideas of moral obligation, of moral guilt, blameworthiness, and retribution.⁵⁴

As with conversion, political action depended upon moral obligation. Citizens had to feel guilty, to be ashamed about their sinful actions and their lack of concern for the public welfare. Without the ability to challenge the political sin of the citizenry, political reform would be impossible. Democracy did not give citizens what they wanted. It made moral demands that made them uncomfortable.

Revivalists like Finney did not cater to the previously existing desires of individual consumers. Rather, revivals helped to produce a social environment designed to convert individuals as members of a population. On one hand, social norms were tied to habits of respectability that inhibited Christian conversion. On the other hand, those same norms could be manipulated to exert social pressure on individual choices. All of this is consistent with democracy. It is important not to underestimate the role that democratic political and religious institutions played in the formation of a social environment that disciplined the sensibility of citizens. Anticipating the emphasis on sentiment in Louisa May Alcott and William Jennings Bryan, Finney's liberalism produced freedom in social environments where people were bound by a shared sensibility.

Democratic institutions do not simply expand individual freedom but seek to govern a population. To this end, revivals produced social norms that served as models of religious conversion and political citizenship. Finney's new measures represented a new economy of religious freedom, a way of accounting for Christian conversion in the context of free movement, circulation, and multiplicity within a population. Finney was confident in his abilities to influence the choices of his audience not because he sought to exert coercive institutional control but because he understood how emotional and social pressures acted on the individual will to produce conversions. Revivals produced persons not through coercion but by freeing people from themselves.