

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND POLITICAL PREACHING: TWO CASE STUDIES  
OF FREE RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE AMERICAN PULPIT

By

McKinley S. Lundy, Jr.

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Religion

December, 2005

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Professor Lisa Bressman

Professor Kathleen Flake

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. A FAST DAY, A POLITICIAN, AND A PREACHER.....	13
Approving highly the political conduct of the Reverend.....	19
The Sacred Cause of Liberty, Which is the Cause of God.....	28
II. THE UNSEEN RETORT.....	39
I have believed, therefore have I spoken.....	42
<u>In the Pulpit</u> .....	51
CONCLUSION.....	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	62

## INTRODUCTION

On January 8, 2003, Congressman Walter B. Jones of North Carolina introduced House Resolution 235 on the floor of the United States House of Representatives, at which time the bill was referred to the House Ways and Means Committee where it currently awaits further consideration. The title of the resolution is “A Bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to protect the religious free exercise and free speech of churches and other houses of worship,” or for short, the “Houses of Worship Free Speech Act.” The text of the bill is simple and concise, containing less than three hundred fifty words in total, of which only eighty-two comprise the proposed addendum to Section 501 of the federal tax code:

(p) An organization described in section 508(c)(1)(A) (relating to churches) shall not fail to be treated as organized and operated exclusively for a religious purpose, or to have participated in, or intervened in any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office, for the purposes of subsection (c)(3), or section 170(c)(2) (relating to charitable contributions), because of the content, preparation, or presentation of any homily, sermon, teaching, dialectic, or other presentation made during religious services or gatherings.<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 2004 Congressman Jones took the floor of the House four times in the course of one month to explain the necessity of HR 235:

I am here . . . to talk about what I consider a real threat to the morality of America, and that is that the spiritual leaders of this great Nation are prohibited from expressing their first amendment rights to speak out on the moral and political issues of the day.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> H.R. 235, Houses of Worship Free Speech Act, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:H.R.235>: (cited 7/20/2005). See [www.hr235.org](http://www.hr235.org) for Rep. Jones' personal website created for the legislation.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Jones, June 15, 2004, Introductory remarks on HR 235, *Congressional Record*, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong., <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/R?r108:FLD001:H54144> (cited 7/21/2005).

He argues that an amendment to a 1954 tax bill authored by then Senator Lyndon Johnson, which effectively restricts all non-profit organizations from participating in political campaigns, discourages the free speech and free religious exercise of tax-exempt religious organizations. Jones cites a complaint recently filed at the IRS by the executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State against a Catholic Bishop as evidence that reform is needed. He asserts that the complaint was directed at a pastoral letter written by a Colorado Bishop to his parishioners in which certain partisan “code words” were used, such as “pro-life” and “same-sex marriage.” He also notes that other similar organizations had sent letters to churches around the nation reminding them of the rules for tax-exempt bodies concerning political rhetoric during elections. Arguing that religious speech is inherently socio-political, he claims that ministers cannot be expected to be able to “uphold the teachings in the Bible” if they are not permitted to address the moral dimensions of public or political affairs.<sup>3</sup> By the time Jones was making his case on the House floor, over 160 Representatives, most of whom are Republican, had joined him as cosponsors of the legislation.

The phenomenon of political preaching in the United States is certainly not new, nor is the controversy over its moral veracity and constitutionality. The practice traces its roots back to the very beginning of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early seventeenth century. In New England society the minister was the conduit through which people received divine wisdom and guidance. The historical significance of ecclesiastical life was defined in covenantal and typological terms explicated in, and ultimately provided by the minister’s religious discourse. Their society was constantly reevaluating

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and reinterpreting its place in divine history, a process carried out through a religious rhetorical idiom in the context of an ever-changing political and social atmosphere. The role of religious discourse in New England during the Revolution was foreshadowed by the community's shifting patterns of self-understanding in times of turmoil and uncertainty. Through wars, natural disasters, religious revivals, colonial conflicts with England, and eventual total rebellion, one thing remained constant in the shifting lives of the colonials: "Sermons were authority incarnate."<sup>4</sup>

Historian Harry Stout proposes in his extensive study of colonial sermonic discourse, *The New England Soul*, that it was the development of the occasional and regular sermons that effectuated the pervasive influence of the New England sermon. The occasional/regular distinction was made by the founders as a method of extending the scope of the sermons' power across all of colonial life. Regular Sunday preaching aimed to effect salvation and worked to explicate the covenant of grace based on biblical authority, while occasional weekday sermons—those preached on elections, fast days, days of thanksgiving, as a part of a lecture series, etc.—were used by the ministers to apply the same authority to utterances on the civil covenant of New England, with all its social and political trappings. Though initially viewed as subservient in purpose to regular soteriologically minded sermons, occasionals steadily grew more significant over time, eventually reaching near equality with regular exhortations by the Revolutionary era.

The importance of occasional preaching, and the shifts in the content and meaning thereof, was highlighted in times of conflict or uncertainty. Beginning with the

---

<sup>4</sup> Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 23.

completion of England's Civil War in 1660, a key development occurred in the typological model employed in occasional sermons. England's return to monarchy after a brief Puritanical reign forced New England ministers to reinterpret their colony's relationship with the mother country for which they had originally hoped to provide a spiritual example. The rhetoric of the occasional sermon over the latter quarter of the seventeenth century continued to develop as it effectively responded to the trials of King Philip's War, the revocation of the Massachusetts Bay Charter in 1684, and Queen Anne's War. In King Philip's War, as well as the later Queen Anne's War, Stout argues that the fulfillment of the preachers' admonishment-laden jeremiads reinforced ministerial and sermonic prophetic authority. New England's clergy were able to solemnly interpret violence in light of the community's relationship with the divine. Artillery and militia muster sermons also proved effective during this conflict as a means of mobilizing the people for war and bloodshed by instilling confidence and "righteous anger" in the hearts of colonial martial forces.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the argument is made, did New Englanders become soldiers for Christ in the battlefield just as they were already the Lord's spiritual soldiers.

During the Great Awakening of the 1730s, a divergence in ministerial opinion on oratorical style—and the correspondent theological implications thereof—started to, and eventually did indeed create a divisive authoritative environment in which autonomy and personal choice flourished. Some ministers emphasized appeals to the "heart," while

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 83.

others focused on rhetoric that aimed to stir the “head.”<sup>6</sup> The ministers who aimed their prose at the “head” tended to be preferred in more genteel, urban settings, while in the more rural backcountry, preachers who spoke to the “heart” were more common. As itinerants, the revivalists, who had no prior relationship with the establishment or local authorities wherever they preached, were given a “power to speak [that] was dispensed from beneath.”<sup>7</sup> Stout notes also the dramatic shift in the meaning of the jeremiad, a form of harsh sermonic reproof aimed at spurring mass repentance in congregations by pointing out the social iniquities of the times. Now, it was not the fault of the people that society was in decline; their transgressions paled in comparison to the sins of the “unconverted” ministerial community. It is indeed this strain of anti-authoritarianism that is directly linked with revolutionary rhetoric aimed at political authority using idioms of tyranny and liberty.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 187. Stout claims that one major reason for the appearance of this distinction among clergy has to do with educational backgrounds, and the divergent intellectual sources depended upon in each rival school of thought.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this emerging “political idiom” in evangelical discourse, see Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Donald Weber, *Rhetoric and History in Revolutionary New England*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Bonomi presents more of a macrocosmic look at the pervasively voluntaristic nature of religious life in the colonies than does Stout. She argues that the breadth and strength of the relationship that develops between politics and religion in the colonies prior to the war served to create a politically viable and efficacious religious discourse by the time of the Revolution. Relying on the extant notes of particular ministers’ sermons as the primary sources of his evidence, Weber bases his assertions about religious rhetoric and the Revolution on assumptions of linguistic associations with the psychological—“modes of communication are linked to religious stance” (Weber 11). Clark constructs an appraisal of the language of the ideological movements that lead up to and culminate in the American Revolution in which his central contention is that the idiom of the ideology of the Revolution was dually legal and religious. All Revolutionary language and ideology for Clark is couched in the denominational strife and dissenting impulses of colonial America, so much so that he claims that “the American Revolution (among its other aspects) [was] the last great war of religion in the western world” (Clark 305).

The secular and spiritual meanings of these libertarian terms often were conflated in popular discourse, which definitely included occasional preaching. Stout directly addresses this phenomenon by asserting that the regular/occasional distinction in preaching served as a means by which the minister retained the dual efficacy of a word's meanings:

By explaining their terms carefully and distinguishing regular sermons from occasional, ministers could praise both spiritual and political liberty. Depending on the subject matter and occasion, the same text could be made to elicit political or spiritual meaning in the same way earlier generations distinguished federal and personal covenants. Rather than substitute political for spiritual meanings, they retained both.<sup>9</sup>

The double meanings of these terms were interrelated, but remained—at least in the sermonic context—separate, with the civil meaning subordinated to the spiritual. Ministerial influence thus rhetorically tied republican and religious idioms together in such a way that libertarian language functioned to order and bind spiritual and political discourse. The significance of this politicized sermonic language among the people is difficult to discount considering that “more sermons were preached in 1776 than in any previous year in New England’s history.”<sup>10</sup>

The ministerial use of sacralized political language did not diminish in 1783 with the Revolutionary conflict, nor would the trend ever disappear from the American

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 303. Stout goes out of his way to claim no necessary corollary between the development of sermonic discourse in New England and that of the rest of the colonies. Far fewer sermons were published in the Southern colonies during this period, and very few studies have been made examining the political rhetorical content of sermons from this region particularly, though indeed a very limited attempt to do so is made below in this paper. See also Alice Baldwin, “Sowers of Sedition: The Political Theories of Some of the New Light Presbyterian Clergy of Virginia and North Carolina” (*The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ser. 5:1, January 1948, 52-76).

political landscape, though its propriety became increasingly under question as the centuries passed. In fact, not two decades after the war, politico-religious rhetoric played a monumental and highly controversial role on the national stage in the Presidential election of 1800. Called the “first modern election in American political history,” the 1800 election, which pitted the Republican Thomas Jefferson against Federalist John Adams, was marred on both sides by personal attacks and mudslinging.<sup>11</sup> Character and morality became issues of public debate, and neither Jefferson nor Adams escaped unscathed. The former, however, was the focus of more spiritual condemnation among the American clergy than perhaps any person since King George III.

Though many accusations were made against Jefferson during his 1800 campaign—including sexual impropriety, disrespect for a near-deified George Washington, and now taboo pro-French sentiments—among the most heated came from members of the clergy, particularly New England Congregationalists.<sup>12</sup> These ministers publicly vilified Thomas Jefferson as an anti-religious atheist who was unfit to hold the highest office in the land. Sermon upon sermon was published by layperson and cleric alike that sought to prove beyond doubt Jefferson’s infidelity. Two of the most popular of these works published in 1800 were the Rev. William Linn’s “Serious Considerations on the Election of a President,” and the New York minister John Mitchell Mason’s “Voice of Warning to Christians,” both of which were anonymously published.

Linn, a Pennsylvania Presbyterian, had been an outspoken advocate for the right of preachers to discuss politics from the pulpit for years prior to the 1800 Presidential

---

<sup>11</sup> Charles O. Lerche, Jr., “Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear,” (*The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 5:4, Oct. 1948), 468.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

campaigns, and had served as a chaplain both in the army during the Revolution and in the United States House of Representatives in 1789.<sup>13</sup> Rev. Mason, founder of what would become Union Theological Seminary in New York, was too young to have served during the war but had already garnered a reputation among Reformed congregations as a persuasive orator.<sup>14</sup> Both authors condemn Jefferson solely on the ground of his religious opinions. Linn articulates his purpose this way to his audience:

My objection to his being promoted to the Presidency is founded singly upon his disbelief of the Holy Scriptures; or, in other words, his rejection of the Christian Religion and open profession of Deism.<sup>15</sup>

Linn and Mason provide similar arguments to prove Jefferson's infidelity, focusing chiefly on the remarks about religion made in his *Notes on Virginia* and his 1779 *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, along with certain bits of anecdotal evidence. Among those suspect remarks in the former text is his rejection of the Biblical story of the flood upon rational grounds, and his denial of one common human ancestry (based on his understanding of the existence of different races of people). These comments are interpreted by the two ministers as anti-Biblical, and as an affront to the authority of God's word. They remonstrate him further for the comments he makes in his

---

<sup>13</sup> Rutgers University Libraries, "Leadership on the Banks: Rutgers Presidents, 1766-2004," [http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/university\\_archives/linn.shtml](http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/university_archives/linn.shtml) (cited 7/19/2005); Office of the Chaplain, United States House of Representatives, <http://chaplain.house.gov/histInfo.html> (cited 7/19/2005). The official site of the U.S. House spells Linn's name "Lynn," but all other sources, including online and encyclopedic texts, along with his published sermons cite his name as "Linn." For some of his arguments on the right of political preaching, see William Linn, *Discourses on the Signs of the Times*, (1794), *Early American Imprints, 1st series*, no. 27224, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com> (cited 7/19/2005).

<sup>14</sup>Ellis Sandoz, ed. *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, vol. 2. [http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/LFBooks/Sandoz0385/0018-02\\_Bk.html](http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/LFBooks/Sandoz0385/0018-02_Bk.html) (cited 7/19/05—Hereafter this text will be referred to as *Political Sermons*). Sandoz asserts in his editorial notes accompanying "Voice of Warning" that Mason is thought also to be a co-author of Linn's "Serious Considerations."

<sup>15</sup> William Linn, "Serious Considerations on the Election of A President," (1800), 4. *Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800*, no. 37835, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com> (cited 7/19/2005).

bill indicating the harmlessness of atheism or polytheism in social terms. This admission is tantamount to a denial of faith or at the very least a sign of disrespect for the meaning and importance of Christianity. Taken together with unsubstantiated stories of Sabbath breaking and blasphemy, these heresies are more than enough to convince the ministers of Jefferson's infidelity. The orators also provide numerous reasons as to why the election of such an infidel would be detrimental to society and the church, but perhaps the most adequate representation of the summation of their argument, as well as the type of rhetoric used to convey it, comes from the closing pages of Mason's sermon:

Giving your support to Mr. Jefferson . . . amounts to nothing less than a deliberate surrender of the cause of Jesus Christ into the hands of his enemies. By this single act—my flesh trembles, my blood chills at the thought! By this simple act you will do more to destroy a regard for the gospel of Jesus, than the whole fraternity of infidels with all their arts, their industry and their injuries. You will stamp credit upon principles, the native tendency of which is to ruin your children in this world, and damn them in the world to come.<sup>16</sup>

Neither the style nor content of this type of preaching was universally accepted among either Jefferson's supporters or his opponents. Both Linn and Mason include numerous passages in their sermons in which they justify political preaching on religious and constitutional grounds, indicating the existence of at least some reticence to allow such discourse among even their own congregations and political allies. Their oratories, and those similar that ran in newspapers and were printed as broadsides, certainly

---

<sup>16</sup> John Mitchell Mason, "The Voice of Warning to Christians" (1800), *Political Sermons* (cited 7/19/05). Though it seems difficult to believe that the clergy would imbue a Presidential election with such cosmic significance, their congregants often expected nothing less. Connecticut Congregationalist minister Stanley Griswold, a known Republican sympathizer, openly applauded Jefferson's election in an 1801 sermon delivered at Willingford, Connecticut. Soon after this incident, Griswold, a Revolutionary war veteran, Yale graduate, and eventual Secretary of the Michigan Territory, was forced out of his pulpit at New Milford, and eventually left the state—and the ministry—all together. See Sandoz' editorial preface to Griswold's sermon, "Overcoming Evil With Good," (March 11, 1801), *Political Sermons* (cited 7/19/05); also, entry for Stanley Griswold in the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=G000489> (cited 7/20/2005).

generated a number robust responses from Jefferson's Republican followers, within and without ministerial circles. One such response, "A Solemn Address to Christians and Patriots," serves as a detailed, point-by-point rebuttal of Linn's "Serious Considerations," and also as a condemnation of political preaching in general. The author of this work, Republican lawyer Tunis Wortman, also goes to great lengths to prove the absence of political concerns from true Christianity: "Disavowing all concerns with the affairs of state, [Jesus] evidently considered an active agency in politics to be inconsistent with that purity and sanctity of character . . . of the gospel." Appalled by the hypocrisy and corruption of ministers who debase religion with party politics, he accused them of using their authority as a coercive tool of electioneering: "I allow you the rights of opinion as a man, but cannot permit you, with impunity, to abuse the influence you possess with your congregation."<sup>17</sup>

Through all this partisan conflict, as he was lambasted by Federalists about every aspect of his character and piety, Jefferson remained almost entirely silent. On only two occasions in the autumn of 1800 did he actually record his thoughts about his critics, and both are private works of correspondence, one to Uriah McGregor, the other to Dr. Benjamin Rush. In his letter to McGregor, Jefferson describes this massive wave of criticism that had been released upon him since his decision to run for President as the opening of "floodgates of calumny," and characterizes every bit of information spread about him as slanderous and false. He also explains why he had not publicly responded to these accusations:

---

<sup>17</sup> Tunis Wortman, "A Solemn Address to Christians and Patriots" (1800), *Political Sermons* (cited 7/19/05).

I know that I might have filled the courts of the United States with actions for these slanders, and have ruined perhaps many persons who are not innocent. But this would be no equivalent to the loss of character. I leave them, therefore, to their own consciences. If these do not condemn them, there will yet come a day when the false witness will meet a judge who has not slept over his slanders.<sup>18</sup>

Jefferson in this letter also responds to a specific allegation of fraud and theft made by Rev. Cotton Mather Smith. He denies these charges entirely and also takes the opportunity to question the minister's propriety:

If Mr. Smith, therefore, thinks the precepts of the gospel [are] intended for those who preach them as well as for others, he will doubtless some day feel the duties of repentance, and of acknowledgment in such forms as to correct the wrong he has done.<sup>19</sup>

Jefferson, in his letter to Dr. Rush, also generally addresses, though with more brevity, the accusations of the Federalist clergy, asserting that their primary objection to him stems from his belief in disestablishment. What he does not address, however, in these sparse letters or any other from the period, is his understanding of the mode of his opponents' attack. He quietly argued that the content of their rhetoric was false, but says nothing about the brand of rhetoric itself. While ministers like Mason and Linn staunchly defended their right to deliver politically charged religious diatribes in the very discourses in which such rhetoric was used, and public figures like Tunis Wortman sought to sway the public not only to disbelieve Jefferson's detractors, but disapprove of their rhetorical method, Jefferson himself recorded no thoughts on the subject during the campaign.

---

<sup>18</sup> Jefferson to Uriah McGregory, August 13, 1800, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Elery Bergh. (The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905) 10:171. <http://www.constitution.org/tj/jeff.htm> (cited 6/29/05—Hereafter, this source will be referred to as *Writings of Jefferson*).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

The evidence of Jefferson's understanding of the phenomenon of political preaching exists scattered among bits of correspondence and miscellaneous documents spanning some five decades, much of which has never been studied or even mentioned in previous works that focus on his religious or political ideologies. Many of the accusations made by the Federalist clergy remained synonymous with Jefferson's name even after his death, yet only once did he explicitly address the issue of a minister's right to discuss politics, and this was in a letter that he never actually sent. What did this champion of religious freedom have to say about this right? What change, if any, occurred to his understanding of this right after the Presidential election of 1800? How does he fit political preaching into a framework of freedom of conscience, or does it fit at all? Despite the evidentiary deficiencies noted here, an attempt is made below to answer these questions by looking at two particular cases: Jefferson's relationship with Rev. Charles Clay, and his unsent letter containing a rebuttal of Rev. Alexander McLeod's sermon on ministerial rights.

## CHAPTER I

### A FAST DAY, A POLITICIAN, AND A PREACHER

In the spring of 1774, Thomas Jefferson was entering his fifth year as a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. During his first year with the legislative body he took part in the passing of a resolution that supported a boycott of all products imported from Britain in response to the Townsend Duties, an act that levied a tax on all objects of colonial trade. In early 1773 he helped his fellow representatives form a “committee of correspondence,” a group that would serve as a conduit through which news and information of further British actions in the colonies could be disseminated among the members of the General Assembly in Virginia.<sup>20</sup> The most recent event to spark controversy among the burgesses was the Boston Port Bill, which was passed by the British government in response to the destruction of over £10,000 worth of East India Company tea in Boston the previous December by colonists disguised as Mohawk Indians. The bill, which would go into effect June 1, 1774, closed Boston harbor until the company was compensated for the tea in full; it was also accompanied by three other retaliatory government acts aimed at keeping the Massachusetts colony in check, which

---

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson” (1821), 7-8, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1972). The first such committee was formed in Massachusetts in late 1772 by Samuel Adams as a means of communicating local grievances with the British primarily to outlying Massachusetts communities, though inter-colonial dialogue was soon taken up by these committees as well. The committee formed in Virginia in 1773 here noted was created chiefly as a response to the 1772 decision by the British government that Americans could be sent to face trial in Britain for crimes alleged in the colonies (a decision the British made as a direct response to the burning of the *Gaspee* revenue ship in Rhode Island).

together with the Port Bill came to be known among the colonists as the Intolerable Acts.<sup>21</sup>

Jefferson, with several other members of the House, decided that they had to “boldly take an unequivocal stand” on the tyrannical actions of the royal government toward Massachusetts. Upon meeting, they mutually agreed that something must be done that would provoke the greatest reaction from their constituents:

We were under conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy in to which they had fallen, as to passing events; and thought that the appointment of a day of general fasting and prayer would be most likely to call up and alarm their attention.

So here Jefferson recalls how the representatives collectively understood socially conscious religious devotion as the best means of corralling popular support or, at the very least, widespread public interest in a particular issue. As he continues, he describes the means by which his group of House members sought to capture public sentiment in the form of a written resolution:

With the help, therefore, of Rushworth, whom we rummaged over for the revolutionary precedents and forms of the Puritans of that day . . . we cooked up a resolution, somewhat modernizing their phrases, for appointing the 1<sup>st</sup> day of June, on which the portbill was to commence, for a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, to implore Heaven to avert from us the evils of civil war, to inspire us with firmness in support of our rights, and to turn the hearts of the King and Parliament to moderation and justice.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. The other three acts were the Justice Act, the Quartering Act and the Government Act. The first allowed for the deportation of British officials under prosecution in Massachusetts to Britain, the second required colonials to quarter British troops on demand, and the third revoked the Massachusetts charter.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 9. “Rushworth” here refers to John Rushworth, a well-known seventeenth century English historian who wrote extensively about the civil wars in Britain during his lifetime. See “Myers Literary Guide to North-East England,” <http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/faculties/art/humanities/cns/m-rushworth.html>, (Centre for Northern Studies, Northumbria University, 2004).

Though the Puritan tradition, especially that of New England, is later condemned by Jefferson as priestly and oppressive for its perpetuation of religious establishments, it is here cited as a wellspring for “revolutionary precedents” that aided in the development of a resolution aimed at arousing people to the defense of their natural rights.<sup>23</sup> To further ensure that the fast day resolution they “cooked up” was passed expediently, they recruited a “more grave and religious” member of the Assembly to deliver it to the House for approval. Upon its unanimous passage, they then decided to instruct the committee of correspondence to propose a general meeting of representatives from all the colonies at a central location to be determined at a later date. The burgesses also resolved to ask their respective home counties to elect delegates for a colony wide meeting to be held in Williamsburg two months after the fast day on August 1, in which representatives would be appointed to attend what would become the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

The proposed day of fasting and humiliation according to the Assembly’s plan was to occur specifically on June 1, 1774, the day the Port Bill went into affect. Jefferson notes this date particularly in his autobiography, and duly recalls that he returned to his native Albemarle County and asked the local clergy to “address to [the people] discourses suited to the occasion” on said date. In describing the events of the fast day of June 1, which he evidently found quite satisfactory, he states that though his constituents met in anxious anticipation of the day’s events, “the effect of the day, through the whole colony, was like a shock of electricity, arousing every man, and placing him erect and solidly on

---

<sup>23</sup> For examples of Jefferson’s problems specifically with the established Puritan tradition in New England, see letters to Dr. Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800, and John Adams, May 5, 1817.

his center.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to describe how the people who took part in the fast day across the colony chose delegates to attend the meeting at Williamsburg in August, and that he was selected to represent his county at this assembly.

Though the date of June 1, 1774, was indeed the date that the British threatened to close Boston harbor, it seems highly questionable whether Jefferson’s constituents actually participated in the fast day he proposed that was approved by the Virginia House of Burgesses.<sup>25</sup> In a notice written by Jefferson with fellow Albemarle delegate John Walker “To the Inhabitants of the parish of St. Anne,” the people are notified of the recommendation by the House of Burgesses to hold a fast day. The purpose of the day was described to the people of St. Anne’s parish as such:

Fasting, humiliation and prayer to implore the divine interposition in behalf of an injured and oppressed people; and that the minds of his majesty, his ministers, and parliament, might be inspired with wisdom from above, to avert from us the dangers which threaten our civil rights, and all the evils of civil war. We do therefore recommend to the inhabitants of the parish of Saint Anne that Saturday the 23<sup>rd</sup> instant be by them set apart for the purpose aforesaid.<sup>26</sup>

Here the Port Bill is not mentioned, nor is the date of June 1, but the notice does appeal to the authority of the House of Burgesses, and also strongly echoes the language Jefferson uses in his autobiography when he describes the “Puritan phrases” that the burgesses “modernized” when writing the original resolution for June 1.<sup>27</sup> The date that is cited in

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>25</sup> The actual date of the proposed port closing can be confirmed in the text of the Port Bill itself. The Independence Hall Association, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/bpb.htm>, (cited 5/26/05).

<sup>26</sup> Jefferson, “To the Inhabitants of the Parish of St. Anne,” *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:116. Hereafter, the Boyd collection will be referred to as *Papers of Jefferson*.

<sup>27</sup> See extended quote on fast day resolution from “Autobiography” above, p. 2.

the notice, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, is ambiguous as no month is indicated along with the date. It is likely, however, to refer to July 23, 1774, because three days later on July 26, an election was held in Albemarle County in which the people thereof chose Thomas Jefferson and John Walker to represent them as their delegates to the Williamsburg Convention to be held in August, an event Jefferson himself associates in his autobiography with the fast day.<sup>28</sup>

Further evidence that the June 1 fast day referred to in Jefferson's autobiography actually occurred on July 23 are a series of resolutions passed by the constituents of Albemarle County on the election of July 26. In these resolutions, the people of Albemarle vehemently condemn the "unlawful assumptions of power" by Great Britain in the form of the Boston Port Bill, and adamantly assert rights of self-governance as established by natural law, legal constitutions and royal charter.<sup>29</sup> The people also agree in their resolutions to unite with the citizens of Massachusetts in their struggle for freedom, and boycott all British-taxed goods until the Port Bill is rescinded. They further resolved to have their resolutions formally submitted to the convention in Williamsburg, and to the future inter-colonial congress, if one were indeed to be held. The focus of the July 23 fast day, then, judging from the content of the resolutions passed in the election

---

<sup>28</sup> *Papers of Jefferson*, 1:116, see Boyd's editorial note. Another version of the notice to St. Anne's parish exists in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2, ed. Paul L. Ford (Federal Edition) (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-05). [http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Jefferson0136/Works/0054-02\\_Bk.html#hd\\_lf054.2.head.210](http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Jefferson0136/Works/0054-02_Bk.html#hd_lf054.2.head.210) (cited 5/30/05). In this version the origination date of the document is given as June 1774, but no note is given regarding the month in which the fast day of the 23<sup>rd</sup> occurred.

<sup>29</sup> Jefferson, "Resolution of Albemarle County," *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2. Ford argues in an editorial note that these resolutions are so similar in tone and content to Jefferson's "Summary View of the Rights of British America" written later in 1774, that it can easily be assumed that Jefferson wrote the former document as well.

three days later, was chiefly the closing of Boston Port and the grievances addressed in Jefferson's autobiography pertaining to the proclamation for June 1.

The reason there exists this discrepancy in the date of the fast day is unclear. The date of the port closing is not in question, nor is the fact that at least some Virginians participated in the fast on the proposed date of June 1, 1774.<sup>30</sup> In his editorial notes for Jefferson's notice "To the inhabitants of the Parish of St. Anne," Julian Boyd argues that the July 23 fast day was held on that date because of its proximity to the county election that was held on July 26, implying that the scheduling was meant to take advantage of the effect that the fast day festivities would have on the Albemarle voters.<sup>31</sup> There is, however, no concrete evidence that suggests a June 1 fast did not take place in Albemarle County in addition to that of July 23, nor that Jefferson purposely delayed the fast resolution to those of his parish solely because of the July 26 election.

What is clear about the fast day is its effect on Jefferson's constituents. If any of the people had been lulled into complacency over British affairs in the colonies, the staunch resolutions they passed on to the Williamsburg assembly provide clear evidence that they had been successfully stimulated. Jefferson well knew how to reach the people and stir them to action, and evidently did not hesitate in employing every means necessary to do so. Politically charged religious speech worked just as he and his fellow representatives thought it would.

The nature of the rhetoric required to excite citizens from a state of political "lethargy" to one of revolutionary fervor, the likes of which effected an assertion of the

---

<sup>30</sup> In a diary entry for June 1, 1774, George Washington noted that he "went to church and fasted all day." "George Washington Papers: Series 1," [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(D OCID+@lit\(wd03T000\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(D OCID+@lit(wd03T000))). (cited 7/21/2005).

<sup>31</sup> *Papers of Jefferson*, 1:117. Boyd however does not raise the issue of the proposed June 1 fast.

natural right of self-governance in the face of British tyranny outside of Virginia itself, is nothing short of extraordinary. Amazing as the power of this speech was, perhaps even more unusual is the fact that Jefferson so strongly associated himself with government sponsored religious devotion and politicized religious rhetoric. There is no apologetic tone or regret found in his autobiography as he recalls these pre-war events, nor caveat made in reference to the efficacy of the religious import given to the Boston port bill situation as compared to other matters of public or political concern. Rather, religion is casually treated in retrospect as a means to an end, a medium to which the public would likely respond. Thus in considering his understanding of this key catalyst in the people's ideological awakening, one must look at the individual forces behind such rhetoric and the relationship Jefferson shared with them. And though the exact content of the religious speech that occurred on July 23, 1774, before Jefferson and his constituents remains unknown, the means through which this devotion conveyed revolutionary sentiment left a permanent imprint upon his life both during and well after the Revolution. Luckily, a single phrase in the last line of Jefferson's fast day notice provides an unlikely opportunity for a glimpse into the political and rhetorical worlds of Jefferson's religious life at both the personal and ideological levels:

On which day will be prayers and a sermon suited to the occasion by the reverend Mr. Clay.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Jefferson, "To the Inhabitants of the Parish of St. Anne," *Papers of Jefferson*, 1:116.

### **Approving highly the political conduct of the Reverend**

Charles Clay was ordained by the Bishop of London in 1769, and made the rector of St. Anne's Parish on October 22 of the same year. He was an Anglican convert who had joined the church during the latter stages of the Great Awakening. His formal ministerial training was somewhat of an anomaly—instead of studying divinity at a university such as William and Mary, as was customary for the Anglican clergy in Virginia at the time, the evangelical ex-Presbyterian Rev. Devereaux Jarratt educated him privately. Jarratt was widely known in central and southern Virginia as a prominent revivalist, and apparently his theological influence upon Clay was pervasive; Episcopal Bishop William Meade in a nineteenth century history of the Virginia clergy commented that Clay's sermons were "sound, energetic, and evangelical beyond the character of the times."<sup>33</sup> That this evangelical message was widely disseminated to his parishioners is evidenced by the fact that he regularly preached in two Albemarle churches, the county courthouse and on occasion in various private residences.<sup>34</sup> His first formal participation in politics also occurred early in his ministry, as he began serving as a magistrate on the Albemarle County court in 1771.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1857). 2:48-50. For Clay's relationship with Jarratt, see Mark Beliles, "The Christian Communities, Religious Revivals, and Political Culture of the Central Virginia Piedmont, 1737-1813," in *Religion and Political Culture in Jefferson's Virginia*, 3-40, ed. Garrett Ward Sheldon and Daniel Dreisbach (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). Hereafter to be referred to as "Christian Communities." Beliles further notes that Clay's placement in St. Anne's Parish was unusually expedient as it forewent the normal gubernatorial recommendation that accompanied ministerial placements. He goes on to argue that Clay's evangelicalism was well known to the Albemarle community and his popularity there evidences the strong evangelical leanings of Clay's parishioners, including perhaps even, by implication, Thomas Jefferson (Beliles, 9-11).

<sup>34</sup> Meade, *Old Churches* 2:49.

<sup>35</sup> Beliles, "Christian Communities," 18.

It was during this period before the Revolution that Jefferson became a vestryman in St. Anne's Parish. His first known correspondence with Rev. Clay, and only known written reference to the minister before the fast day of 1774, is a letter he wrote to Clay on May 21, 1773, requesting that he deliver a funeral sermon for his close friend and brother-in-law Dabney Carr.<sup>36</sup> Jefferson's fast day notice to the St. Anne parishioners of the next year is his only recorded reference to Clay before the war, and the comments from his autobiography cited above are the only extant specific references to Clay's 1774 fast day preaching. The other instance of a pre-war connection between the two men was in fact another funeral service Clay officiated, that for Jefferson's mother in the spring of 1776.<sup>37</sup>

After he penned the "Declaration of Independence" and during the first half of the war, however, Jefferson would author two significant documents that describe in fairly specific, though brief terms his understanding of Rev. Clay's pastoral duties, political persuasion and rhetorical skills. The first of these is a notice of subscription written in 1777, aimed at declaring the parish's intention to formally hire, and voluntarily pay Rev. Clay as minister, a document which was a necessity in the wake of the disassociation of the Anglican Church in the colonies from the mother Church in England after the "Declaration" was issued. Jefferson, who had recently been elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, actually begins the subscription notice with an affirmation of religious disestablishment and voluntarism. He states that according to "a late act of the

---

<sup>36</sup> Jefferson, letter to Charles Clay, May 21, 1773, *Papers of Jefferson* 15:571. Carr served in the Virginia House of Burgesses alongside Jefferson, and helped establish the colony's first committee of correspondence in 1773 (Jefferson, "Autobiography," 7). Mr. Carr was the first to be buried in the Jefferson family graveyard at Monticello (<http://www.monticello.org/jefferson/timeline.html>, cited 7/26/2005).

<sup>37</sup> Boyd, *Papers of Jefferson* 3:67. Boyd mentions the funeral sermon briefly in a footnote.

General Assembly, freedom of religious opinion and worship is restored to all,” and that it is the duty of a congregation to hire a religious instructor of their liking “for their own spiritual comfort and instruction and to maintain the same by their free and voluntary contributions.”<sup>38</sup>

Jefferson duly describes the qualities that his parish requires from a minister, along with what they hope to learn from their religious instructor, and then in turn why they think Clay fulfills these requisites. Desiring to learn “the benefits of Gospel knolege [sic] and religious improvement,” they want someone who has an appropriate “regular education for explaining the holy scriptures,” along with a desirable record of service to the church and its congregants.<sup>39</sup> Finding Clay satisfactory in these capacities, Jefferson notes specifically one aspect of the minister’s previous work with the church that he and his fellow parishioners find especially important:

And moreover approving highly the political conduct of the Revd. Charles Clay, who, early rejecting the tyrant and tyranny of Britain, proved his religion genuine by its harmony with the liberties of mankind, and, conforming his public prayers to the spirit and the injured rights of his country, ever addressed the God of battle for victory to our arms, while others piously prayed that our enemies might vanquish and overcome us.<sup>40</sup>

Having thus affirmed Clay as minister, Jefferson declares in closing that Rev. Clay will be required to preach in the parish at least a month, and that he will be paid annually on December 25.

---

<sup>38</sup> Jefferson, “Subscription to Support a Clergyman in Charlottesville,” February 1777, *Papers of Jefferson* 2:6-7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. No comment is found in any of Jefferson’s correspondence to, or references of Clay regarding his informal evangelical education. Whether or not the nature of his training was known to many of his parishioners, or to Jefferson himself is unknown, but regardless, they seem to be more than satisfied with his education as it pertained to his ministerial instruction.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

The second wartime document in which Jefferson reveals the import with which he and his fellow parishioners viewed Clay's active patriotism and specific political doctrines as a key element of his ministry is a testimonial written on the reverend's behalf in August 1779. During the latter years of the 1770s, Clay became embroiled in a salary dispute with many members of his parish vestry that ended in lawsuit. He was reportedly unsatisfied with the result of the suit, and refused to accept the amount he was offered in lieu of one year's salary.<sup>41</sup> As a result of this conflict, Clay threatened to leave the parish or ask for a transfer. Jefferson, still a member of the vestry and newly elected governor of Virginia, was evidently not involved in this conflict, for in response to Clay's thoughts about leaving, Jefferson wrote him a testimonial to serve as a letter of reference just in case one was needed.<sup>42</sup> Jefferson commended Clay for his service to the parish, and for the high quality of the religious instruction he regularly provided his congregants. Again, however, it is the minister's political ideology and patriotic sermonizing that garners most of the Virginia governor's praise:

While the clergy of the established church in general took the adverse side [in the present war], or kept aloof from the cause of their country, he took a decided and active part with his countrymen, and has continued to prove

---

<sup>41</sup> Meade, *Old Churches*, 2:49-50. Meade notes that while he is unsure of how this salary issue was resolved, he is certain that Clay remained with St. Anne's parish no later than 1785. On October 14, 1779, Clay wrote a letter to the General Assembly of Virginia requesting a governmental intervention into his dispute with the vestry. He explains that because of the resolutions made at the colonial convention held in August 1774, which suspended all trade with Great Britain, thus severely damaged the local economy, he agreed to take a salary twenty shillings below what he was due. Despite this arrangement, which also postponed his payment until 1775, he claims to never have been paid the agreed upon salary for 1774. He also describes the manner in which glebe lands had been divided after the beginning of the war because of the sudden loss of clergy members (due to death, desertion, and the inability to ordinate new clerics). He complains to the Assembly that he had been "deprived of his tenancy" of his land, and asks them to reconsider whether this action continued to be necessary. Again, whether or not the General Assembly intervened with the St. Anne's vestry on his behalf is unknown. See Charles Clay to the General Assembly of Virginia, October 14, 1779, *Early Virginia Religious Petitions*, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?relpet:4:./temp/~ammem\\_r123::](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?relpet:4:./temp/~ammem_r123::) (cited 7/18/2005).

<sup>42</sup> Jefferson, "Testimonial for Charles Clay," August 15, 1779. *Papers of Jefferson*, 3:67.

his whiggism unequivocal, and his attachment to the American cause to be sincere and zealous.<sup>43</sup>

Taken together, the subscription notice and testimonial on behalf of Rev. Clay provide a profound look at the place of ministerial politics in the ecclesiastical affairs of this particular central Virginia parish. In the very letter drafted for the purpose of hiring a minister, Jefferson expresses the vestry's endorsement of a cleric by asserting that they approve "highly his political conduct." Clay's religiosity is beyond reproach not because of the orthodoxy of his Christology, but because it is in "harmony with the liberties of mankind." Valid religious sentiment is in these documents equated with specific political doctrines.<sup>44</sup>

The "aloof" responses of the majority of the Anglican clergy to the revolutionary conflict in fact may have caused Clay to briefly switch denominations near the beginning of the war, around the time of his official subscription in Albemarle County. Clay requested that in his subscription letter he not be referred to as "Protestant Episcopalian," but instead as "Calvinistical Reformed." Thus, while his "unequivocal whiggism" and zealous patriotism were never in doubt by his parishioners, his religious association with

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Here it is important to note that the date on which the testimonial was written, August 15, 1779, is roughly two months after Jefferson first submitted his "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" to the General Assembly of Virginia, which occurred on June 13, 1779. In the bill, he decries religious establishments and the tyranny they command over the freedom of conscience. He also condemns ecclesiastical bodies that act coercively to shape religious opinions, asserting that they instead should do so solely through appeals to reason, akin to the manner God sways individuals to faith. That he was so adamantly opposed to priestly coercion and spiritual tyranny, and at the same time so laudatory of Clay's political religious rhetoric, and the dramatic social effects thereof, implies that he does not negatively view the fervent "whiggism" espoused by his rector, from the pulpit, as spiritually coercive or manipulative. Jefferson only had positive things to say about Clay's rhetorical style and seemingly felt that his public discourse aided in the cause of "genuine" religion, and did nothing to hinder religious freedom or the cause of disestablishment. For the full text of the bill, see "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," August 15, 1779, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol.2.

those of dissimilar political views became so tenuous and undesirable that he wished to be hired as a patriotic Calvinist, not a politically “aloof” Episcopalian.<sup>45</sup>

Clay’s whiggish ideology proved to be one of his strongest assets as a member of the clergy, and his political opinions endeared him a great deal to the people of central Virginia throughout the course of the war, and long thereafter. On the heels of his salary dispute with the St. Anne’s vestry, he gave up his ministry and moved to Bedford County to take up farming and family life.<sup>46</sup> In the summer of 1788 he served as a Bedford delegate in Virginia’s convention for ratifying the federal constitution, one of three ministers in the state to represent his respective county in such capacity. In his extensive two-volume account of the convention, nineteenth century historian Hugh Blair Grigsby recalls the late minister’s presence among the delegates:

The political principles of Clay were as fixed as his religious. The right of taxation he regarded as the greatest of all rights; and he thought that a people who assented to a surrender of that right without limitations clearly and unequivocally expressed, might possibly retain their freedom, but that freedom would no longer be a privilege, but an accident or a concession. Taxation, he said, could only be exercised judiciously and safely by agents responsible to those who paid the taxes.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Jefferson, “Subscription to Support a Clergyman in Charlottesville” February 1777, *Papers of Jefferson* 2:6-8. In his editorial notes, Boyd conjectures that Clay “proposed to (or temporarily did) withdraw from the Anglican faith” so that he could preach under the auspices of the Presbyterian or German Reformed church (Boyd, 2:7-8).

<sup>46</sup> Meade, *Old Churches* 2:50. Meade notes that in 1785 Clay represented Chesterfield County in a church convention in Richmond, but that was his last official association with the Episcopal Church in Virginia (though he reportedly officiated over the occasional funeral or marriage). He thus assumes that Clay remained at St. Anne’s Parish until 1784. Beliles asserts the date of Clay’s departure from Albemarle County to be December 1780 based on a reference in the vestry book to the “late” Rev. Clay, and also on Jefferson’s 1779 testimonial (Beliles, “Christian Communities,” 11).

<sup>47</sup> Hugh Blair Grigsby, *The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788: With Some Account of Eminent Virginians of that Era Who Were Members of the Body*, 1:256 (Richmond, Va.: Virginia Historical Society, 1890-1891; Electronic reproduction. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale, 2004). [http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/servlet/MOML?vrsn=1.0&dd=0&af=RN&locID=tel\\_a\\_vanderbilt&srchtp=a&d1=19002720701&c=1&an=19002720701&ste=11&d4=0.5&stp=Author&dc=flc&docNum=F101810000&ae=F101810000&tiPG=1](http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/servlet/MOML?vrsn=1.0&dd=0&af=RN&locID=tel_a_vanderbilt&srchtp=a&d1=19002720701&c=1&an=19002720701&ste=11&d4=0.5&stp=Author&dc=flc&docNum=F101810000&ae=F101810000&tiPG=1) (cited 5/10/05).

Grigsby compares Clay at length to Samuel Davies, the most prolific and well-known patriot clergyman from Virginia of the generation prior to Clay. He notes Davies' sermonic rhetoric supporting the mid-eighteenth century conflicts with the French and their Native American allies helped prompt "his countrymen to take the field against the public enemies," and analogizes his efforts to Clay's. Grigsby makes a great distinction between the two ministers, however, insofar as their denominational allegiances tempered the risk inherent in their patriotism. Whereas Davies officially belonged to a disestablished Protestant tradition, Clay vowed his loyalty to the royal Anglican Church and "was thus bound to the king . . . by those no less formidable ties which bound a priest to his ecclesiastical superior." Despite this ecclesial commitment, he steadfastly supported the revolutionary cause, and "did not hesitate for an instant to sunder all political and religious connection with a king who sought to enslave Virginia."<sup>48</sup>

With his political reputation well established after the 1788 constitutional convention, Clay decided in 1790 to run for public office at the national level. He chose to run as a candidate for the House of Representatives in a district representing several central Virginia counties. Jefferson, the newly appointed Secretary of State, learned of his plans and wrote him a letter congratulating him and wishing him luck in his candidacy. The letter is fairly brief, but he does compliment Clay as being "too honest a patriot not to wish to see our country prosper by any means," and mentions that he would be "contented with such a representative," regardless of the competing candidates. He also includes a few friendly cautions about the nature of public service, warning him "the

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1:258. Grigsby, referring to Meade's *Old Churches*, notes that of the ninety-one Anglican clergymen living in Virginia prior to the war, only twenty-eight remained at the war's end.

ground of liberty is to be gained by inches [and] it takes time to persuade men to do even what is good for them.”<sup>49</sup>

Though this letter perhaps falls short of a robust or overly enthusiastic endorsement, it meant a great deal to Clay at the time. He freely used the piece of correspondence and his friendship with Jefferson as a campaign tool throughout his district, assuming Jefferson’s local popularity would spur support at the polls. The result of this strategy, though, was far different than what the minister had envisioned. He notes that the letter “was of very essential service in the upper counties,” and that he duly won a strong majority of the votes in that part of the district.<sup>50</sup> In the lower counties, however, the letter actually caused one of his more notable supporters, Patrick Henry, to withdraw his endorsement and support another candidate, Abraham Venable. Clay’s only explanation for this is that upon hearing of his relationship with Jefferson, Henry “wrote to a considerable number of gentlemen in his favor,” and influenced the majority of voters in the lower counties to vote against him, effectively causing him to lose the election.<sup>51</sup>

Still, Clay was very appreciative of Jefferson’s supportive letter. In fact, he requested more such letters to be sent to “particular gentlemen in each county” so that if he were to again run for the House of Representatives in the next election, he would be

---

<sup>49</sup> Jefferson, letter to the Rev. Charles Clay, January 27, 1790, *Works of Jefferson*, 6:29. It is also very evident from content and tone of the letter that by this time, Clay and Jefferson were fairly close friends—for instance, Jefferson opens the letter wishing that they had gone hiking together at a particular rock formation in Rockbridge County during his recent stay in Virginia.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 8, 1792, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Manuscript Collection, [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers) (cited 6/28/05--hereafter referred to as *Thomas Jefferson Papers*). Clay records the election results in these “upper” counties as such: he received 809 votes out of 1,413, while neither of the other two candidates received more than 400.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

helped even more by their friendship.<sup>52</sup> Jefferson, however, was not comfortable obliging this request, and in fact refused to do so. Explaining in a brief but cordial letter that he had already done more to influence the results of the campaign than he had for any other person in the past, he felt that he had already interfered too much. He proposes that the people should be left to their own devices when making decisions about public officials, and should not be confronted with external voices claiming to know what candidate is best and would most adequately serve their interests. He even implies that Clay should not have used the first letter he sent him in such manner as he did, reminding the minister that the letter was written for him personally, not for the masses. “From a very early period of my life,” he recalls, “I determined never to intermeddle with elections of the people. . . . In my own county, where there have been so many elections in which my inclinations were enlisted, yet I never interfered.”<sup>53</sup>

### **The Sacred Cause of Liberty, Which is the Cause of God**

In his history of the Virginia clergy, William Meade notes one particular sermon Clay delivered in 1777 on a day of public fasting to a company of Minutemen in Charlottesville. He quotes a few passages from the sermon as evidence of Clay’s staunch patriotism, and then moves on to discuss the minister’s relationship with Jefferson.<sup>54</sup> He

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. The district was to be redrawn, and apparently the upper counties in which he had previously done so well were to become a separate district from the lower. Clay thus believed Jefferson’s support would be sufficient to win him the campaign.

<sup>53</sup> Jefferson to Charles Clay, September 11, 1792, *Writings of Jefferson*, 8:410-411 (cited 6/29/05). For more on Jefferson and his role in “elections of the people,” see 3-6 above.

<sup>54</sup> Meade, *Old Churches*, 2:49. He here actually asserts that this particular act of sermonizing was the circumstance under which Clay and Jefferson became acquainted. Though Meade makes no mention of the

quotes from no other sermons, though he mentions having come into possession of a number of them in the course of his research. Drawing largely on Meade's history for information about Rev. Clay, Hugh Blair Grigsby quotes some of the same sermonic passages as does Meade, and likewise recognizes the sermon as one given in 1777 on a fast day in Charlottesville. Grigsby also cites the passages as a means to displaying Clay's patriotism and stirring rhetorical skill, qualities that he likens to those of Samuel Davies. Like Meade, Grigsby does not refer to the text of any other of Clay's sermons, nor does he for that matter quote sections from the 1777 fast day oratory not found in Meade's work.<sup>55</sup> These two nineteenth century histories are the only extant texts written before the year 2000 that contain specific references to any of Clay's sermonic material. None of his sermons have ever been published, in part or in whole, as of the present day.

In 1992, however, a collection of approximately fifty of Clay's original handwritten sermons was donated to the Virginia Historical Society by his descendants, and is presently housed in the Society's archives in Richmond, Virginia. Since then, the only scholarly work published in which the manuscripts are mentioned is an essay by Rev. Mark Beliles on the confluence of religious life and political culture in eighteenth century central Virginia. Beliles deals with Clay in somewhat more detail than either Meade or Grigsby, though he similarly emphasizes both the evangelical and patriotic tones of his sermons. He cites the 1777 fast day sermon along with a few others preached both before and during the war that evidence the influence that the orators of the Great

---

family funeral Clay performed for Jefferson, nor of the 1774 fast day, he perhaps makes this assumption because Jefferson's subscription notice for Clay was written near the time of this sermon's delivery.

<sup>55</sup> Grigsby, *History of the Virginia Federal Convention* 1:255.

Awakening had on Clay's style.<sup>56</sup> But since Clay is simply one figure among many in his portrayal of Jefferson's religious culture, Belilies' task is not particularly exegetical; he offers little in the way of extended analysis of the rhetoric, nor does he quote from any one sermon at length. For him, Charles Clay represents an oft-overlooked evangelical side of Jefferson's religious background and serves as a reminder of the centrality of religious devotion in the political and social lives of Virginians on the cusp of war.<sup>57</sup> The present task, however, does necessitate a more extensive review of sermonic text, especially of any discourse that may be similar to that which was delivered to a complacent Albemarle electorate in July of 1774. For though the exact sermon Clay delivered on that day may yet remain unknown, the fact is that the sermon was delivered as a fast day oration, and one of the only extant sermons whose occasion is well documented is another fast day sermon, that of 1777.

The sermon Clay preached to local soldiers on a fast day in 1777 flows from and centers around the strong proclamation of God's infinite providence found in Psalms 22:28, which is quoted in full at the beginning of the discourse: "For the Kingdom is the

---

<sup>56</sup> Though acknowledging that this particular fast day sermon was preached to soldiers in Charlottesville in 1777 (he specifically gives the date February 28, 1777), Belilies asserts that based on a detached fragment among the sermons, it was first delivered before the war began on June 5, 1776. Belilies, "Christian Communities," 19, cf. 35. For more on the date of this sermon in relation to the war, see footnote 69 below.

<sup>57</sup> Belilies, "Christian Communities," 9-12, 18-19, 27. It should here be noted that Belilies attempted to construct a system of organizing Clay's sermons according to the dates on which they were preached, and includes a chart in his essay displaying the results of this attempt. Unfortunately, the method by which he organized the documents is highly suspect to error, and frankly serves little purpose for subsequent research. As he describes in the essay, he assigned each sermon a number, from one through fifty, according merely to the order in which each particular manuscript appears in the folders in which they are stored. He labels neither the folders themselves, nor the boxes that contain them. Needless to say, this system is far from infallible. He then arranges the sermon numbers on a chart in chronological order, beginning in the year 1769 and ending in 1789. So while he does assign dates to almost all the sermons in the archive, the almost arbitrary numbers he uses to label the documents renders any attempt to find a particular sermon from a particular year using his system almost impossible.

lord's; and he is the Governor among the Nations.” The boundless power of God over everything in existence is affirmed outright, as Clay proclaims “the whole Creation” to be gloriously under the direction of the divine will. The primary subject of the oration as a whole is then laid out in similar terms, though more specifically geared toward the human condition. He asserts that this “Providential government . . . extends both to communities and to particular persons, to the hearts and thoughts of all men, and to the Events which befall them.” Thus God’s activity in the world is not limited to creative influence or the maintenance of natural law, but subsumes within it the governance of human society and even individual lives. With their independence from Britain less than one year passed, as war descended upon their homes, these Virginia soldiers were reminded that all that befell them was ordered under God’s divine will.<sup>58</sup>

The first topic Clay broaches is that of providence and society. At its most fundamental level, providence concerns earthly governments and communities of people. For the minister, society itself, as a collection organization of individuals is “the work and appointment of Divine Providence,” a creation with a predetermined function and purpose.<sup>59</sup> Even the love and mutual consideration that is necessary to sustain a government or well functioning society comes from God. Genuine “love of country,” the most sublime form of patriotism, is a gift from the divine. Human beings are endowed with the capacity for this gift by their Creator, and as such are specifically designed to function fruitfully in society by nature.

---

<sup>58</sup> Charles Clay, Fast Day Sermon of 1777, Clay Family Papers—location # Mss1 C5795a 20-21, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter referred to as “Governor Among the Nations”). The pages of the manuscript are unnumbered, but for reference purposes, I assigned each page of the sermon a number, from one to forty. Also, I should here acknowledge that I was only able to locate this sermon with the help of Assistant Librarian Toni Carter of the Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

The primary social body instituted by God was the family, both immediate and extended, which was accompanied also by small groups of families or primitive communities. The constitution of these bodies grew by necessity, as God saw it was important to provide for the “security and benefit” of the people. Clay here acknowledges also the creation of government for a similar purpose, to “preserve order” within the new ever expanding communities. Obedience is necessary to maintain authoritative relationships within a system of government, but this necessity is not established unconditionally for Clay. Although God gives the power that rulers command over their subjects, it is given under the condition that such authority is conferred upon the ruler only through the “choice, consent or submission of the people.” So by definition, societies and governments are established by God for the prosperity and protection of humankind, and do ultimately require submission to the rule of law as it is kept and maintained by temporal rulers. However, the preacher sets out from the beginning reminding his congregants of the social contract between the ruler and the ruled upon which the authority of the ruler is based.<sup>60</sup>

Clay next speaks about the different qualities God endows upon individuals that all work together in harmony to create and govern society. He notes scientists, politicians, clerics, and so on, and acknowledges that they all have their places in government and in society. Certainly speaking to the makeup of his audience in Charlottesville, he lauds patriotism as one of the most significant qualities divinely given, while condemning the passivity and cowardice of those who do not battle against the enemies of his nation:

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

Some are for obeying the calls of honour, despising Danger, sallies forth in Defense of his country to oppose her foes and tread them beneath his feet and disdain to turn aside the battle or to shun the encounter of an Enemy; another, influenced by cowardice and obedient to the dictates of fear is desirous of keeping as far as possible out of the reach of harm; and is better pleased in a humble situation to dig and till the ground and with the sweat of his brow to purchase Defense or peace and security of the Warlike Chieftain.<sup>61</sup>

So for the clergyman and his audience, appeasement or compromise in the face of the present situation is not an option for a true patriot. Those who seek such a resolution to the conflict with Great Britain and choose not to fight are victims of cowardice, fear, and selfishness. The correct choice of action is clear, and Clay unambiguously compels his congregation to understand the stakes of the conflict in terms of liberty and providence. For to “purchase” a false peace from a tyrant rather than fight for the nation’s freedom is spoken of not only as dishonorable, but also as going against the divine will:

There perhaps may be some here who would rather bow down their necks to the most abject Slavery Rather than face a man in Arms; yet there are numbers I doubt not to whom the Lord has given a Spirit of intrepidity, and a heart to defend your country, and the Sacred Cause of Liberty which is the Cause of God.<sup>62</sup>

Thus there are two discrete, well-differentiated options from which the people may choose—the cowardly acceptance of oppression and “abject Slavery,” or the courageous, dutiful and Christian defense of nation and of the “Cause of God.” As an unequivocal assertion, the Revolutionary cause is identified fundamentally with the will of God. Political or ideological beliefs are imbued with ultimate concern, and thus social acts become outward indications of spiritual orthodoxy. So despite the existence of the

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 5. In all quotes from this sermon I preserve the original spelling and punctuation of the author, with the exception of certain instances of shorthand which I have transcribed here as complete words.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

pacifists and the loyalists, God's providence is still active through the actions of the properly Christian (and consequently whiggish) patriots. Those who love God, country, and freedom enough to fight and die for them are the tools of providential wisdom at work in the world.

Clay further seeks to incite revolutionary fervor among his congregants by rhetorically asking what they would do if faced with the oppressive reality that many of their fellow Americans had already been confronted with:

Are not the . . . depredations Committed upon Our Brothers to the North sufficient to Rouse you up to Revenge before they Come home to your Own Houses and Families[?] <sup>63</sup>

Though further details of these “depredations” are not given in the text, the minister's message is fairly clear. Considering that during late 1776 and early 1777 most of the British attacks occurred in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the fast day congregants are made to fear the possibility of British invasion into their homeland, and at the same time vengefully loathe those who attacked their countrymen. Any who did not respond to this situation with patriotic zeal had to answer directly to God, “the avenger of the oppressed and the punisher of the oppressor,” for the lives of their brethren lost to the British aggressors. To those who hesitate in the face of a violent revolution, who out of fear and cowardice “bow down” to tyranny and oppression, Clay offers God's warning from the book of Jeremiah to the ancient Hebrews:

Cursed is he that keepeth back his Sword from blood and Cursed is he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully! <sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. The actual passage in Jeremiah (48:10) reads in reverse order, with the “deceit” clause preceding the “sword.” This section of the sermon strongly echoes a 1758 militia muster sermon delivered by Samuel Davies in Hanover County, Virginia, entitled “The Curse of Cowardice.” Davies' sermon begins with this passage from Jeremiah and is generally aimed at those who refused to participate in violence as a means of

Clay finishes his remarks about the divinely ordered nature of community by briefly summarizing his view on the potentiality of a harmonious social construct, and moves on next to discuss further God's providence in terms of political and governmental affairs. He observes that all events, good or calamitous, that happen to a nation, including "revolutions of kingdoms and states," are subsumed under the pervasive influence of divine providence. His congregants are told that God has a particular stake in "Public Revolutions," and that scripture is filled with evidence supporting the notion of divine interaction with both righteous and unrighteous kingdoms. Every good nation enjoys peace, liberty, justice and knowledge according to the will of God, affected through whatever agency the divine sees fit.

God's actions, "not excluding secondary causes, but overruling and directing them," are directly or indirectly behind every good thing experienced in a virtuous country. So the patriot heroes, "persons of extraordinary abilities and rare qualification" who are instrumental in "delivering oppressed nations, and Restoring the disordered state of things," are blessed tools of the divine will. Though they may achieve great things,

---

national defense, or who were complacent about the threat posed by Indian aggression. Here, as in Clay's rhetoric, war is sanctified and ideology is identified with God's will:

Then the sword is, as it were, consecrated to God; and the art of war becomes a part of our religion. Then happy is he that shall reward our enemies, as they have served us. Blessed is the brave soldier; blessed is the defender of his country and the destroyer of its enemies. . . . Is not cowardice and security, or an unwillingness to engage with all our might in the defense of our country, in such a situation an enormous wickedness in the sight of God and worthy of His curse, as well as a scandalous, dastardly meanness in the sight of men, and worthy of public shame and indignation?

Davies also warns his parishioners that the current distance of the conflict from their homes provides no security for the future, and refers to the violence of their enemies as a means of inciting the public support. Whether or not Clay was familiar with this text is uncertain, though Grigsby, in his detailed comparison of Clay and Davies, asserts that Clay was likely born in Hanover and in childhood easily could have heard him preach. For Davies' sermon, see *Early American Imprint, Series I: 1639-1800*, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com> (cited 7/12/2005).

glory should be reserved for God.<sup>65</sup> With the blessings, however, one must attribute also disastrous tragedy to providential wisdom. Even if a nation is “given up to domestic *tyrants* and oppressors,” this is the will of God.<sup>66</sup> Clay thus assures his audience that even in the difficult and brutal times now faced by Americans, God’s eternal plan is at work.

Continuing with his discussion on the nature of providence, Clay attempts next to explicate the possible motivations behind particular occurrences within the divine plan. He posits that everything willed by God occurs for a reason, and that no event takes place arbitrarily. Here he makes a distinction between the results of personal actions and those of communal/governmental actions. People are generally punished or rewarded in the afterlife, or at the very least, they participate in an afterlife in which they are able to endure the results of their actions. Nations, governments or communities, however, must usually be dealt with in this world because they do not exist as such in a future otherworldly state. As an illustrative point, Clay uses the examples of the ancient Hebrews and Persians. Any tragedies they experienced were justly deserved consequences doled out by God as “just punishment for their national iniquities.” These acts of judgment could, and often did include military defeats and oppressive or tyrannical governance. Once the essential virtues of the nations were lost, they were “torn asunder by bloody . . . wars; and afterwards deprived of their boasted liberties by

---

<sup>65</sup> Clay, “Governor Among the Nations,” 7, 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. The emphasis on “tyrants” is Clay’s.

Domestic tyrants.” Likewise, when the people reformed their government and repented of their unrighteousness, God removed his reprimanding hand of justice.<sup>67</sup>

Clay notes that the people of Israel and Persia were not unique in this regard, but that all nations are subject to providence. When a nation displays respect for religion, morality and liberty, and is righteous in its actions, God blesses it with his love, and the people are provided with the opportunity to continue on their sanctified social path. If this “national virtue” is somehow lost, however, along with it goes God’s favor. Though an evil society may seem to prosper in the short term, if the injustice continues, God’s wrath will eventually be felt. Outward indications of prosperity, when coupled with immorality and corruption, are often a nation’s last gasp of existence. Even if righteous nations suffer under the oppression or tyranny of external government, God will avenge the loss of the pious country. An assurance is also made to the fast day crowd that, despite the appearance of evil overcoming good, unrighteous nations that are used as instruments of God to punish more righteous nations are not reaping any kind of reward for unwittingly doing the work of providence.

At this point Clay brings his audience back specifically to the present situation in America. Using the same providential interpretation of history he applies to Biblical texts, he examines the current state of the revolution. He asserts that many times the nation was rewarded as well as punished for its actions; and though no person knows what God is doing in the war, one must admit that, considering the corruption and “declining state of practical godliness” among the people, divine judgment is at work. He exhorts people that they must be aware of the blessings they have already been granted in the course of the war, and they must also make a concerted effort to “rectify and reform

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 14, 21.

whatsoever is amiss in [their] temper and conduct.”<sup>68</sup> The vain profanity and widespread vice that tainted the nation’s relationship with God had to be repented of immediately. Freedom and liberty should be cherished but mindfully so, in order to prevent their impious abuse. For the Albemarle minister, the most effective safeguard of national freedom is the maintenance of the highest possible moral integrity.<sup>69</sup>

Rev. Clay closes his oration with an address aimed particularly at the military officers in his congregation. The local militiamen had likely seen little in the way of combat as the war raged in the northern states, and those in command had to prepare them for the defense of the “sacred cause of liberty.” He encourages these officers to be examples of piety and justice, so that the men in their charge will follow them dutifully into battle as they perform the work of God. This is no small task, and it as such should not be taken lightly. As Clay articulates in one of his final remarks, it is these brave men “who are entrusted with [their] country’s cause who go forth into the field there to plead it before the Lord with [their] blood.”<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 36, 37.

<sup>69</sup>It is in this section of the sermon that Clay makes two revisions in the text that indicate that the discourse was written and delivered originally before the beginning of the war. On p. 35, as he is talking about the arrogance of “guilty nations,” he makes a comparison between the past kingdoms in question and America. His original phrase reads: “To apply this to the Case of the Nations to which we belong,” clearly denoting the American people as colonists. His revision, which is written in small letters over the crossed-out original line, reads simply: “To apply this to our own case.” The other example of revised text is on p. 38, during his closing remarks on the future of America. Praying for a peaceful and beneficent end to the present conflict, Clay writes originally: “God grant that this may be the Case of these Nations and Colonies to the latest Posterity. Circling the words “Nations and Colonies,” he revises the passage to read “of these states to the latest Posterity.” The possibility that these are careless errors corrected after the fact is of course plausible, but not in my estimation as likely as pre- and postwar revisions. For instance, there are multiple incidences in the text of blotted out or crossed-through words or phrases that lack any revisions made after the completion of the original sentence, and in these cases the original text is not preserved (i.e. no revision exists in the margins or in between lines, as is the case with the two occurrences noted above, and thus any revisions to the text were more than likely made at the time of the original writing).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 39.

## CHAPTER II

### THE UNSEEN RETORT

On January 30, 1815, two weeks following the Battle of New Orleans, a recently elected New York Congressman named Peter Hercules Wendover decided to send a new collection of sermons to two of the most important men in the young American republic, President James Madison and former President Thomas Jefferson. Wendover, a lifelong public servant from New York who would serve six years in the United States House of Representatives, had the previous fall regularly attended services at the Reformed Presbyterian Church in New York City where he heard the Rev. Alexander McLeod preach a series of sermons in defense of the current conflict with Great Britain, a series which had recently been published as a collection called *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War*.<sup>71</sup> McLeod was no stranger to such politically charged topics, having published a sermon in 1802 entitled “Negro Slavery Unjustifiable,” and his orations indeed struck a nerve in the Congressman. In the brief letter to Madison, he explains that he heard the sermons preached “from the pulpit . . . when this part of our beloved Country was menaced with danger from the Common foe.” He believed them to “produce good” at the nation’s time of crisis, and duly thought that

---

<sup>71</sup>*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000293> (cited 7/9/2005); P.H. Wendover to James Madison, January 30, 1815, The James Madison Papers, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000293> (cited 7/9/2005). The only legislative legacy for which Wendover is known is his work on establishing a permanent standard according to which the United States flag would change as new states joined the nation. Incidentally, the standard he finally established in 1818 is the same that is in effect today. His legislation specified the permanency of the thirteen stripes and allowed for the continued inclusion of one star per state as new territories gained statehood.

they would be of interest to Madison. He then closes his letter to the President with a glowing description of the minister's character, an endorsement not unlike that given to Charles Clay by Jefferson in the 1777 subscription notice and 1779 recommendation letter:

I esteem the Author one of the best friends to the rights of our Common Country, and the liberties of mankind; and by all to whom he is known he is acknowledged to be a man of a clear mind, and great abilities joined with fervent piety.<sup>72</sup>

What Madison thought of the sermons, or even if he read them must be a matter left for speculation. He neither replied to Wendover's letter, nor spoke of McLeod's discourses in any other extant correspondence from the period.<sup>73</sup>

While the Congressmen may never have heard what the current President thought of McLeod's discourses, he was obliged with a response from Madison's predecessor. In a short letter—not quite one half page long—that was most likely written by someone else on his behalf, Jefferson kindly thanks Wendover for the book, and expresses his fondness for McLeod's sermonic material.<sup>74</sup> He applauds the minister's ability to “eloquently” construct “able proofs . . . from Scriptural sources in justification of a war so palpably supported by reason,” and recognizes the great “piety and patriotism” contained within the pages of the volume. In further praising the Presbyterian cleric, he

---

<sup>72</sup> Wendover to Madison, 1/30/1815.

<sup>73</sup> Neither a reply letter nor mention of McLeod exists in the Paper of James Madison collection at the Library of Congress.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Peter H. Wendover, March 13, 1815, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*. Though the letter does contain Jefferson's signature, and is penned in a hand somewhat similar to his own, it is written in the third person. It begins with the phrase, “Mr. Jefferson presents his compliments to Mr. Wendover . . .,” and continues in a like manner throughout the letter, without any first person references.

also seems to decry those members of the clergy who did not similarly support the war, asserting that they “have not deserved well either of their religion or their country.”<sup>75</sup>

Jefferson’s genial, if impersonal letter is fairly unremarkable, save perhaps for the criticism he levels against members of the clergy who opposed the war, insofar as it strongly echoes his similar condemnation of politically “aloof” Anglican priests before the Revolutionary war. Little more than a thank you note, the letter elicited no reply from Wendover, and no record of further correspondence between the two exists. What is remarkable about this brief bit of dictation, however, is the original letter it was intended to replace. Jefferson himself indeed wrote an in-depth response to the New York Congressman that totaled nearly three full pages in length. In it, he strongly expressed his disagreement with an argument Rev. McLeod puts forth in one of his sermons, and in some detail laid out a case against him. He was by no means rude or ungrateful, for he still expressed his appreciation for the gift, praising the bulk of McLeod’s work, and he did not convey any ill feelings toward Wendover. At the bottom of the last page of the letter, though, he notes that, “on further consideration, this letter was not sent,” due to “Mr. Wendover’s character and calling being unknown.”<sup>76</sup> So because he did not personally know the man to whom he was writing, and being accustomed to his enemies using his religious beliefs against him in public, he no doubt felt uncomfortable engaging in such a debate. The subject of this dispute, that which caused Jefferson to write something so potentially controversial that it could not even be sent to the person for

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Jefferson to Wendover, March 13, 1815, unsent draft, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*.

whom it was written, is the first discourse contained in McLeod's collection, a sermon entitled "The Right of Discussing Public Affairs."

### **I have believed, therefore have I spoken**

In the preface of his *Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War*, Alexander McLeod posits the right of the people to examine their rulers and critically judge the acts of their government. Freedom of the press and the freedom of speech are "universal, [and] no man has a right to complain of [their] enjoyment or exercise by another."<sup>77</sup> From the very beginning, then, specific constitutional rights are within the purview of his religious understanding of freedom and liberty. He points out that the sermons were "addressed to Christians, from the pulpit," largely as an attempt to rebut many of his fellow clergymen who were vocally against the war with Britain, lest his parishioners were led to believe that their clerics were "upon the side of the enemy."<sup>78</sup> In closing this introduction, he pleads the case that peace and war are topics that should always be considered as of the utmost significance to humanity, and should openly be discussed alongside matters of ultimate concern. He asserts that his purpose is solely to "promote the best interests of true religion and of civil liberty," a duty he gladly undertakes out of his love for God—"I have believed, therefore have I spoken."<sup>79</sup>

"The Right of Discussing Public Affairs" begins with an extended quote taken from the Hebrew text Amos about the responsibility entailed in the act of prophesy. As

---

<sup>77</sup>Alexander McLeod, *Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War* (New York: Eastburn, Kirk, and Co., 1815), iii.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, v.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, vi. The italics are here McLeod's, as are any other instances thereof that appear in future quotations of his work below.

he openly recognizes the taboo nature of preaching about “public affairs,” McLeod cautions his congregants that the series of sermons he is about to begin is going to be largely dealing with this taboo subject, and he explains the need to prepare them for his later sermons with an introductory oration. After duly justifying himself, his right to discuss politics from the pulpit will in no way be suspect. This is why he chose to open his sermon with the particular passage from Amos. Amos was a man of God, backed by divine authority to address governmental concerns as matters of religious significance, as were numerous other prophets in ancient Israel. The present situation, i.e. the War of 1812, is likewise explained to the audience to be of great religious import. McLeod asks why Christians should not treat the war as a “practical” issue to be dealt with as any other: “Is it possible that it should not affect the conscience of every disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ?”<sup>80</sup>

In the first part of his sermon the reverend attempts to lay out, point by point, an argument to unequivocally prove that “*ministers have the right of discussing from the pulpit those political questions which affect Christian morals.*”<sup>81</sup> His first point is that when Jesus told all of his disciples to go out and teach to every nation of the world, he did not go out of his way to exclude matters of politics from the purview of what was taught. The word of God speaks to all people at all times in all places, and is applicable to any given situation, so it is unreasonable to deny ministers the right to address these moral issues that affect people and nations around the world. For McLeod, “any subject

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 15.

whatever, that has respect to sin and duty, or that affects the moral conduct of men and of nations” is fair game for religious discussion.<sup>82</sup>

The next piece of evidence he uses to support his argument is historical. He posits that ministers, prophets and writers of scripture have always dealt with civil affairs, and to deny this now would not only nullify much of what has previously been said, but also restrict a great deal of what can now be spoken of concerning God’s providence in the world. The political concerns of a nation are also intimately linked to the well being of the church, so these must be addressed with solemnity and as ultimately significant.

McLeod then brings up specifically the matter of prophecy, asserting that, “the prophecies of scripture can never be explained without political discussion.”<sup>83</sup> The Bible cannot speak to humanity as the Word of God if the political and civil contexts in which the sacred history takes places are removed, or if ministers who teach from the scriptures are denied the right to expound upon and exegete those portions of the text. The revelation of God also cannot be divorced from this social history, for God is revealed in the temporal world, and the discussion of the “collective character and capacity of humanity” is essential to any understanding of this divine revelation.<sup>84</sup>

The last reason he proposes in support of political preaching is that some of the commandments in scripture specifically pertain to the political sphere of society. He argues simply that in order to adequately teach these particular doctrines to the church, the clergy must be allowed to address them from the pulpit. Taking it upon himself to teach his congregation by example, he begins to list some of the more significant of these

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

political commands, starting with what scripture requires of civil leaders. They must be mentally capable, properly pious, honest, principled and unselfish. No matter how free a constitution makes a nation, those who order these laws must be of impeccable character.

Related to the necessity of just leadership, McLeod rails against monarchical systems of government, claiming that they only serve to perpetuate oppression. The lifelong rule of one monarch should be legally restricted, and he posits that scripture endorses a system that allows the people to remove their rulers if they fail to live up to God's criteria. Thus it is argued that democracy is approved of and sanctioned by God, because it is a form of government that derives its power from amongst the people. Interestingly, this idea is also closely tied with that of quasi-establishment. The people in power should likewise make "official recognition of the Christian religion" in their capacity as government agents.

As for the duties Christians owe to those who govern them, McLeod refers to passages from the thirteenth chapter of Romans calling for submission to state laws and compliance with government taxes. He reasons that since civil rulers are appointed by the people, and serve only God and their constituents, the public should support and submit to their leaders out of respect for the will of the community, as well as for God. Acknowledging also God's providential concern for the manner in which people govern themselves, he affirms the people's right and duty to rebel against an unjust government. Preaching now from the Hebrew text Hosea, he warns that "the sin of creating and maintaining an immoral system of civil polity is connected with that of an abuse of religion."<sup>85</sup> Hence government is sacralized. Though God will hold unjust rulers

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 25-26. The passages he cites are from Hosea 8:3, 4, 13, and read: "Israel hath cast off the thing that is good; the enemy shall pursue him. They have set up kings, but not by me; they have made princes,

responsible for their actions, any suffering experienced under a corrupt system of governance is justly deserved if a repentant act of reconstitution or rebellion is not realized.

These are but a few of the things ministers have an obligation to talk about with their flocks, McLeod argues, that would not ever be brought up if political speech was restricted from religious discourse. The pastoral responsibility of discussing “public affairs” from the pulpit was something not taken lightly for him, nor did he allow those in his church to think of the practice as something left up to ecclesiastical preference:

I claim the privilege of explaining the law of my God. I claim it, too, not *merely* a privilege, which I am at liberty to use. It is not even optional to the ministers of religion whether to use it or not: they are bound by their public instructions, as ambassadors of Christ, to raise a voice which shall reach to both cottage and the throne, and teach their several occupants their respective duties.<sup>86</sup>

Failing to fulfill this requirement of the ministry is like violating a contract with God, a pastor’s “exalted employer.” The duties of the minister, being prescribed by God, are nonnegotiable, and that of preaching politics is certainly no exception.<sup>87</sup>

Aware of the fact that some may take issue with this, even perhaps among his congregation, McLeod goes on to address specific objections in some detail. To those who object to political preaching on the grounds that the only proper subject of sermonic

---

and I knew it not. Now will he remember their iniquities, and visit their sins.” Democratic readings of Biblical history had been prevalent in sermonic rhetoric since colonial New England at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and were certainly utilized heavily during the Revolutionary era. Harry Stout argues that this “Anglicization” of Israel’s past developed out of colonial ministers’ need to reinterpret their covenantal bonds with God in light of their shifting relationship with Great Britain. See Stout, *The New England Soul*, particularly chapters seven and nine. For more on this phenomenon during the Revolutionary period, see Mark Noll, *America’s God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially chapter five, “Republican Christianity.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

exposition is the message and life of Christ, he asserts that in explicating Jesus' ministry one must acknowledge the political and social dimensions of the gospel message. "Let us recommend in the same breath," he exhorts, "religious and civil duty." Again, he conflates the civil and the spiritual, imparting a pious social responsibility upon his flock again and again as he prepares them for a religious consideration of the current war raging all around them.<sup>88</sup>

The "law of God" is not just a code meant to guarantee otherworldly satisfaction, but a source of wisdom that conveys ultimate meaning upon every situation in this world. Some object to opinions on public affairs streaming from a seat that is supposed to only broach subjects pertaining to the kingdom of God, a kingdom that McLeod admits is not of this world. Events in the here-and-now are, however, inherently related to the development of righteousness in the individual in preparation for the hereafter, and God, the "Governor Among the Nations," is not indifferent to the state and order of His Creation.

The church of Christ is *in* this world. Christians are concerned in the kingdoms *of* this world, as rulers and ruled. The kingdom of Christ is not *of*, but *over* this world. The ministers of Christ have therefore a right to treat of all the moral concerns of human society.<sup>89</sup>

Christ's power is assuredly derived from God, an otherworldly source; but Christ existed incarnate in this temporal world, and established a living body of believers in it.

Closely related to notions of otherworldliness is the idea that ministers' proper realm of expertise is the spiritual, not the physical. McLeod responds first by arguing that bodily things do not fall outside the scope of a minister's concern by definition, for

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 33.

the soul and body coexist. Both are subject to salvation, Christ being resurrected in the body as well as the spirit, and matter was, after all, among the first of things created. God can thus be glorified in and through the material along with the spiritual. As for political matters in particular, McLeod contends that they do not affect bodies only (or even primarily), but also intimately concern souls. Ministers do not need to talk about many political things, “but in order to aid the Christian in maintaining a conscience void of offense toward God and man” clergymen should talk about politics as it affects the public welfare.<sup>90</sup> Like any other topic within the scope of religious discussion, public affairs should not be spoken of idly or for self-aggrandizement, but for the service of God.

McLeod supposes that some may think politics taboo because congregations are almost always divided over political subjects, or because the contemplation of such issues is bad for devotional life. The reverend assures his congregants that he would never expect them to agree wholly on anything, politics or otherwise, and notes that the same should be said of any group of people gathered together under any pretense. However, the usual topics of discourse in a church, such as those of doctrinal significance for instance, are extremely contentious also, yet it would be ludicrous to suggest that a member of the clergy should steer clear of discussing them from the pulpit:

Men of different religious sentiments hear without passion the same sermon. Are they, then, more concerned about political than religious truth, and disposed to resent a difference of opinion on that subject more than on subjects relative to their eternal interests?<sup>91</sup>

And as for the effect this phenomenon then has on devotional life, he urges people to stop and consider the religious import of politics; if they do, he believes they will never again

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 37.

act as though public affairs are meaningless. Though in the end he concedes that issues of doctrine are generally more important than political events, he remains firm in his conviction that “political morality is essential to Christianity.”<sup>92</sup>

Finally, there are those who think that due to the authoritative relationship between pastor and congregant, ministerial talk of politics is coercive. First McLeod argues that the oratorical position of the minister is little different from that of the politician or lawyer, and that any “man of mind, convinced himself of the truth of his assertions, will, in any situation, speak with an air of confidence.” Even if many ministers were of the sort that promoted ecclesiastical oppression or “despotism,” this cannot be blamed on political religious discourse. Simply because there may be those who abuse their position of authority in a given profession, that is no reason to wholly discount the intentions and abilities of every member of said profession.<sup>93</sup>

That being said, McLeod believes it necessary to add a brief rejoinder on behalf of those preachers who may be associated with coercion and despotism, but are so categorized unfairly. There indeed are some ministers who perhaps are persuaded by personal ambition who impiously taint their words with ungodly influences. Others, who would align themselves totally against civil liberty in the name of Christian temperance, he characterizes as misguided—having seen the barbarism of the French Revolution, they wrongly associate freedom with violence and licentiousness. An officially established church also produces de facto corruption, since clergymen are formally part of any civil oppression that exists. However, many politicians and secularists who are intensely

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 42.

democratic and discourage ministers from political preaching push many pastors to support more anti-democratic public officials (or at least those who do not oppose their speech as such). Thus, ministers are often associated publicly with those more likely to be considered enemies of liberty. This, he tells his audience, is an unfortunate political side-effect, for “real religion is the best friend of rational liberty.”<sup>94</sup>

McLeod ends his sermon with the argument that throughout history, true Christian ministers have been among the staunchest opponents of civil and spiritual oppression. He cites first prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures, and moves on to Luther and the rest of the reformers as individuals who in effect freed humanity from centuries of religious tyranny. He notes the Glorious Revolution in seventeenth century Britain, and the development of Puritanism in Scotland, a place to which he refers as the “original country of the Whiggs.” His congregation is then reminded of the great sacrifices made by their patriotic predecessors during the Revolution, not the least of which was made by the American clergy “in the pulpit, in the congress and on the field.” Their efforts on behalf of freedom, their call to defend what Charles Clay called “the Sacred Cause of Liberty,” fixed upon the clergy of the American people a grave responsibility to uphold this legacy, a legacy that this Reformed Presbyterian minister from New York refused to give up:

If the rights and liberties of this great and growing empire are doomed to perish, their last abode will be found along the side of the pulpits of the ministers of religion.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

## In The Pulpit

Jefferson's unsent response to Representative Wendover begins much like the letter the Congressman would eventually receive, as he thanks him for the volume of McLeod's sermons, telling him that he found the collection very interesting. Beyond these preliminaries, however, the two letters bear little resemblance to one another. Here Jefferson begins to address the specifics of some of McLeod's discourses, starting first with those things he found agreeable. He commends the minister for his arguments in favor of the war as a just defensive conflict, and also for "his estimate of the character of the belligerents," i.e. the United States and Great Britain.<sup>96</sup> McLeod's providential interpretation of the war is also a point with which Jefferson agrees, though conditionally so, in largely patriotic and republican terms. He sees the recent conflict as an act of

---

<sup>96</sup> Jefferson to Wendover, 3/15/1815 (unsent draft), *Writings of Jefferson*, 279. There are two entire sermons in *The Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War* on the topics Jefferson brings up, one entitled "The Moral Character of the Two Belligerents," the other "The Lawfulness of Defensive War." Jefferson's remark about agreeing with McLeod's "estimate" of the belligerents involved is interesting in light of what this estimate actually entails. In "The Moral Character of the Two Belligerents," one of McLeod's first arguments is in effect an admonishment of the American constitution for its lack of an explicit acknowledgement of God:

The general government is erected for the general good of the United States, and especially for the management of their foreign concerns: but no association of men for moral purposes can be justified in an entire neglect of the Sovereign of the world. . . . No consideration will justify the framers of the federal constitution, and the administration of the government, in withholding a recognition of *the Lord and his Anointed* from the general charter of the nation (McLeod, 54-55).

McLeod notes that writers like John Locke and Algernon Sydney, themselves generally negligent of religion due to the situations they faced in Europe, were extremely influential on the founding fathers during the time when the constitution was written, and that this influence is largely to blame for the lack of reference to God in document. Still, this the minister considers one of the United States' great national sins that demands repentance or will inevitably lead to providential retribution (incidentally, the nation's other great national sin for McLeod is slavery). That Jefferson does not address or rebut this assertion, but rather in fact implies that he agrees with it, I find odd to say the least. As will be described below, Jefferson explicitly states that he disagrees with only one of McLeod's arguments, and this "moral character" argument is mentioned nowhere in his letter. Perhaps he felt that the subject was not worth arguing about considering the main purpose of his letter was to respond solely to the contents of the sermon on public affairs. Or maybe he did not actually read the sermon on the war's belligerents, and was merely attempting to display his fondness for McLeod's work in general. Assuming that he did read it, however, it seems highly peculiar for him to specifically mention approving of a topic that he actually wanted to avoid.

providence insofar as the nature of war breeds cohesion among the people of the nation, and enables America's democratic institutions to shine in the midst of violence and adversity. The people's understanding of freedom and liberty was shaped by the war as well, as the evils of monarchy and the advantages of democracy were further illuminated for all to see. "All this," Jefferson concedes, "Mr. McLeod has well proved, and from these sources of argument particularly which belong to his profession."<sup>97</sup>

"On one question only" does he disagree with the minister, and it is on that of "the right of discussing public affairs in the pulpit."<sup>98</sup> The underlined portion of the statement is essentially the key to Jefferson's entire argument that follows. He takes no issue with the right of members of the clergy to talk about politics "in general conversation" or "in writing, [as was] exercised in the valuable book" in question. So a marked distinction is made between speech from the pulpit and written or casual discourse. The act of delivering a politically charged religious message from the ministerial platform in a church is qualitatively very different for Jefferson than that of delivering the same message outside of a devotional setting, either in verbal or written form. It is then not the content of the speech that matters, but rather the means by which the particular speech is communicated. The acts of a minister as a citizen are not in question, but the official acts of a minister qua minister are the subject of Jefferson's concern. The moment of sermonic delivery, as it is employed as a religious act, is what

---

<sup>97</sup> Jefferson to Wendover, 3/15/1815 (unsent), 279.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. Jefferson underlines the phrase "in the pulpit" in his original manuscript of the letter as found in the L.O.C. collection the *Thomas Jefferson Papers*.

transforms inviolable speech, the brand enjoyed by every citizen, into a different category of communication.<sup>99</sup>

The first part of the argument Jefferson lays out against political preaching is his assertion no person can master the entire body of human knowledge, and duly no individual can claim the authority to teach others about all these various subjects subsumed therein. Due to the breadth of topics analyzed by the human mind, knowledge is compartmentalized into specific fields and is then studied individually. Often the study of a single field of knowledge is more than enough to occupy the entire intellectual efforts of one person for an entire lifetime without allowing any substantial specialization outside of this field. Thus there are teachers for all the different subjects, including the sciences, the humanities, the study of government, and so forth. “Religion, too, is a separate department.”<sup>100</sup>

Though he categorizes religion alongside all other subjects of human inquiry, he notes that it is the only one the study of which “is deemed requisite for all men, however high or low.” So unlike any other subject, all people need to know about religion, or are supposed at least to try to learn as much about it as they can. Because of this universal facet of religion, people form associations and collectively employ a religious teacher of their liking, presumably one who they believe will instruct them most adequately according to their desire to learn. Congregations hire ministers “of the particular sect of opinions” that they themselves subscribe to, and duly decide voluntarily upon the method and amount of compensation they choose to pay their instructors. People who likewise

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. Jefferson never addresses the fact that the contents of McLeod’s book were indeed “addressed to Christians, from the pulpit.”

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 280.

wish to have instruction in other areas, like mathematics, chemistry, philosophy or government, would seek the services of teachers in those particular fields. Jefferson then makes the assumption that religious congregations do not hire ministers to instruct them in multiple subjects, or in non-spiritual subjects, but rather in “Religion exclusively.”<sup>101</sup>

So Jefferson understands the ministerial vocation in a tripartite manner: 1) They are masters in one area only, as any other teachers, and their distinct area of expertise is “religion”; 2) Their area of expertise happens to be the only field or body of knowledge the comprehension of which is desired of all people; and 3) They are hired, again as any ordinary teacher, to instruct only in their area of specialty. Thus, if a minister stands in the pulpit and delivers, instead of a sermon (the word “lesson” is used) on religion, “a discourse on the Copernican system, on chemical affinities, on the construction of government, or the characters or conduct of those administering it, it is a breach of contract.”<sup>102</sup> The minister in this situation would fail to perform his duty as prescribed by his vocational agreement with the congregation, for, as an instructor of religion, he is paid exclusively to sermonize on religious matters. To instruct the congregation on non-religious subjects is to deprive them of that for which they pay. The minister would also be claiming an expertise in a subject unrelated to religion, in which, according to Jefferson’s understanding of the categories of human knowledge, he cannot possibly

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. That Jefferson frames this part of his argument in terms of contract and an employee/employer relationship is interesting in comparison to the similar language used by McLeod in arguing for the opposite, described on p. 34 above. While Jefferson understands a minister’s first duty to be to the congregation, McLeod argues that it is to God, the “exalted employer” of the clergy. Perhaps this disparity in perception has as much to do with each man’s respective occupation as with his ideology. Congregants—especially members of a parish vestry, like Jefferson, who were in charge of finding, keeping and paying ministers—may have had more of a practical understanding of ministerial employment than did some clergymen.

display any knowledge adequate enough for teaching. If the congregants wanted to hear about science, or art, or politics, they would ask the counsel of an expert in the appropriate area, not a clergyman.

In this section about ministerial duty and the scope of pastoral knowledge, Jefferson makes what is perhaps one of the more interesting statements in this letter to P. H. Wendover. He implants himself into his argument as a member of the collective body politic, the “we” who regularly engage in the process of forming a church and picking a minister:

In choosing our pastor we look to his religious qualifications, without inquiring into his physical or political dogmas, with which we mean to have nothing to do.<sup>103</sup>

Seemingly not out of place with the rest of his argument here, this statement discounting the political persuasion of members of the clergy is clearly at odds with much of what he wrote publicly about Charles Clay during the Revolutionary war. In the subscription notice of 1777 Jefferson cites Clay’s “political conduct” specifically as a noteworthy characteristic of his ministry, and even identifies his political beliefs as evidence of valid religiosity. He further saw fit to include mention of his “unequivocal Whiggism” in the letter of recommendation he wrote in 1779, a letter intended for other vestries as potential employers of Rev. Clay. Clay was also quite well known for his political beliefs, beliefs that also seemed to endear him a great deal to the local people and to the colony in general. And it seems unlikely that Jefferson would have chosen him to preach a fast day sermon at such a crucial time in 1774 had he been a notorious loyalist or staunch Tory. So certainly his minister’s “political dogmas” played a fairly large role in the

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

ecclesiastical affairs of his home parish during the important years of the war for independence.

Of course Jefferson makes no mention of Clay here, nor does he pause to further elucidate in any detail the meaning of his remarks. He instead begins an argument against any conflation of the religious with the political “which may twist a thread of politics into the cord of religious duties,” asserting that a person could relate religion to any “branch of human art or science” in the same manner that some do erroneously with politics.<sup>104</sup> Jefferson rhetorically ponders the religious nature of the duty to obey laws, care for the sick and stay healthy. If indeed these are all religious duties—as he himself believes—then under the framework that allows the clergy to preach about politics as a religious matter, it must also be the minister’s duty to teach a congregation about law, medicine and healthful cooking. He claims that this kind of amalgamation results in the overgeneralization of knowledge. If religion is that closely linked to medicine and law, then perhaps it is appropriate for doctors to sermonize to their patients.

This blurring of the line between disciplines is for Jefferson an affront to common sense. Any person is able to distinguish between a math lesson and a sermon, just as they could between medical prescription and a recipe. The only way he believes that ministers should be allowed to talk about matters other than religion from the pulpit is if a congregation hires a pastor with the explicit purpose of hiring an instructor of multiple subjects. If indeed this is the case, and a minister is hired as both a lawyer and a preacher, for example, then the individual has a duty to perform according to the desires of the congregants. Jefferson adds a caveat to this statement, however—if a congregation hires such a person, all members of said congregation must be in agreement upon the

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

duties to be assigned thereto. Because a church is voluntary, reasons Jefferson, “the mere majority has no right to apply the contributions of the minority to purposes unspecified in the agreement of the congregation.”<sup>105</sup>

Jefferson next addresses the rights of the minister outside of the pulpit. He concludes that a pastor has the right to say or write anything on any subject, for “his leisure time [is] his own,” and his congregants are “not obliged” to pay attention to anything said outside the context of the religious institution. This right is inviolable, as well as infinitely important; for example, its exercise led to the present discussion about the “true limits of the right.”<sup>106</sup> The fact then that a minister’s congregants *are* “obliged” to listen to discourse espoused from the pulpit is what distinguishes this speech from the leisurely sort enjoyed by ministers on their days off. Jefferson here acknowledges no inherent degree of influence that a minister has outside of the pastoral office. So again there is a perception expressed of some form of a coercive relationship between the preacher and the audience. It is not simply that the people supposedly pay for one particular brand of instruction, which they duly expect to receive, that binds a minister’s pulpit rhetoric to religious topics. Nor is it only that an individual’s capacity for knowledge extends to cover one subject alone that restricts topics of discourse from arising in sermonic exhortations. But it is also that, in the pulpit, acting as the minister of a church, the preacher commands every congregant’s attention, if not coercively, then at

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 282. The restriction Jefferson here places upon churches seems perhaps slightly antithetical to the nature of voluntary organizations. He appears to imply that, in a voluntary association, collective assent is required for any determination made about the use of organizational funds. What necessitates unanimity on this particular type of ecclesiastical decision? Must all matters concerning the employment of a minister in a church be decided unanimously for the sake of Jefferson’s voluntarism? Seemingly a voluntary association of any size will have people who disagree about things, making majoritarian decisions necessary at least on occasion.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

the very least with a great deal of force. As a private citizen, acting outside of the ecclesiastical setting, his influence is for Jefferson a variable that cannot be considered alongside the paid actions of a cleric in the pulpit.

After these considerations, the former President continues with more praise for Rev. McLeod as a champion of rational religion and the ideals of democracy. He humbly posits that because he has disagreed with the minister on the question of political preaching, he feels all the more doubtful of the soundness of his arguments. Also, as he closes the letter, noting the openness of the discourse he has just shared, he makes an interesting request of Representative Wendover:

Although I have not the honor of your acquaintance, this mark of attention, and still more the sentiments of esteem so kindly expressed in your letter, are entitled to a confidence that observations not intended for the public will not be ushered to their notice, as has happened sometimes.

Jefferson then on second consideration had no intention of treating this letter as another like his now famous correspondence to the Danbury Baptists, a letter that he is said to have written largely for the purpose of public distribution.<sup>107</sup> He actively sought for the contents of this letter to remain private, particularly from his enemies among the New England clergy. At this point in his career, it is evident that he longed for a more peaceful, less trying existence: “Tranquility, at my age, is the balm of life.”<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> James Hutson, “Thomas Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists: A Controversy Rejoined” (*William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. LVI, no. 4, October 1999), 775. Hutson, who also acknowledges the effect that the 1800 election had on Jefferson’s subsequent dealings with religion, argues that the Danbury Baptist letter was written primarily as a means of political retribution, particularly with New England federalists and Congregationalists in mind.

<sup>108</sup> Jefferson to Wendover, March 3/15/1815 (unsent draft).

## CONCLUSION

Charles Clay and Thomas Jefferson remained friends well after Clay's failed attempt at national politics in 1790, into and beyond the years of Jefferson's Presidency. The vast majority of their correspondence in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries strictly concerned local affairs and personal matters. They often discussed farming, food and real estate, and even took to sending care packages to one another from time to time.<sup>109</sup> Jefferson, for instance, excitedly wrote Clay in the fall of 1799 to pass along a particularly good recipe for making Parmesan cheese. They had not seen much of each other since Clay's recent marriage, and yet they tried to maintain contact with one another as best they could.<sup>110</sup> One of the last letters he wrote to the retired minister, however, deals directly with the relationship the two shared in matters of religion, and reveals, as he does in the closing of the unsent letter to Representative Wendover, an aged man's emerging passivity.

In December of 1814, Clay wrote to Jefferson suggesting that he consider publishing a book on religion, perhaps making reference to Jefferson's cut-and-paste Gospel of Jesus.<sup>111</sup> In a letter written the very day before Peter Wendover sent him the collection of McLeod's sermons, Jefferson responds to Clay that he has no desire to publish his homemade gospel, nor any other book relating to religion, a subject about

---

<sup>109</sup> See all correspondence between the two in the years 1801, 1807, 1809, 1811-1813, and 1816, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*.

<sup>110</sup> Jefferson to Clay, October 14, 1799, *Papers of Jefferson* 31:208-209

<sup>111</sup> Jefferson to Charles Clay, January 29, 1815, *Writings of Jefferson*, 14:232-234. It is unclear whether Clay had ever actually seen the book, for Jefferson, in trying to rationalize the impetus of Clay's request, notes, "Probably you have heard me say I had taken the four Evangelists, had cut out from them every text they had recorded of the moral precepts of Jesus."

which he claims to have nothing to say. He claims here that he “not only write[s] nothing on religion, but rarely permit[s] [himself] to speak on it, and never but in reasonable society.”<sup>112</sup> These are hardly the words of the man that had devoted much of his life to fighting tyrannical religious establishments, and who once proudly wrote to the Danbury Baptists declaring the first amendment to have effectively built a “wall of separation” between church and state.

In the letter he goes on to acknowledge that Clay is perhaps his closest confidant on religion, noting that he has probably said “more to [him] than to any other person” on the subject. Looking back on their past discussions, he recognizes that he often has found it necessary to “abuse the priests.” He believes, however, that the tyranny of the organized religion they concocted merits nothing less, for their teachings conflict fundamentally with true Christianity, a sentiment that strongly echoes his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom.” He feels that the “loathsome combination of church and state” these corrupt clerics created must be destroyed, a task at which he indeed had spent a considerable amount of time. But Jefferson finally admits, in an almost exasperated tone, that the task is better left to “more enthusiastic minds.”<sup>113</sup>

A question was posed above regarding what Thomas Jefferson thought about political preaching. If the evidence presented above proves nothing else, perhaps it is that

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. The letter however does not end on this discouraging, and somewhat lackadaisical, note. Jefferson says that he recently received a long-awaited pair of glasses from Philadelphia, and that he was promptly sending them to Clay, along with a life’s worth of replacement lenses to accommodate all levels of sight he may encounter in the future. He closes the letter with a telling acknowledgement of the depth of their friendship: “You must do me the favor to accept them as a token of my friendship, and with them the assurance of my great esteem and respect.”

any answer to such a question must undoubtedly be preceded by this caveat: “It depends on when you would have asked him.” Whether or to what extent the 1800 Presidential campaign directly influenced Jefferson to negatively view the right of ministers to discuss politics in the pulpit is difficult to know due to the lack of extant evidence. Certainly, however, the young Virginia politician who threw himself into the rhetorical and ideological war that raged between Britain and the colonies, who penned a Declaration of Independence grounded in the fundamental belief of the transcendence of liberty would have very likely given a far different response to the question than an American elder statesman who had endured so much criticism and denigration from the clergy for his religious beliefs that he was afraid to engage even in a private debate about a sermon on politics. The latter gentleman, who wanted “to have nothing to do” with his minister’s political beliefs, seemed to have forgotten a time when those pastors who “kept aloof from the cause of their country” were shunned in favor of others whose true piety was evidenced by their faith that was “in harmony with the liberties of mankind.” The war was over; independence had been won, a constitution written and democracy established. He wanted nothing more than “tranquility . . . the balm of life.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albanese, Catherine. *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976.
- Baldwin, Alice. "Sowers of Sedition: The Political Theories of Some of the New Light Presbyterian Clergy of Virginia and North Carolina." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ser. 5:1, January 1948, 52-76.
- Beliles, Mark A. "The Christian Communities, Religious Revivals, and Political Culture of the Central Virginia Piedmont, 1737-1813." In *Religion and Political Culture in Jefferson's Virginia*, edited by Garrett Ward Sheldon and Daniel L. Dreisbach, 3-40. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000.
- Bergh, Albert Elery, ed. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association: 1905. Hosted by The Constitution Society, <http://www.constitution.org/tj/jeff.htm>.
- Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>.
- Bloch, Ruth H. *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Bonomi, Patricia. *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Boyd, Julian P., ed. *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950.
- Clark, J.C.D. *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Clay, Charles. "Governor Among the Nations," Fast Day Sermon of 1777. Clay Family Papers, Location # Mss1 C5795a 20-21. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.
- Curry, Thomas J. *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800*, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>. (Last accessed 7/21/2005).

- Early Virginia Religious Petitions*, The Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/repehtml/repehome.html>. (Last accessed 7/21/2005).
- Ford, Paul L., ed. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in 12 Volumes* (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905. The Online Library of Liberty, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/ToC/0054.php>. (Last accessed 7/21/2005).
- Hugh Blair Grigsby, *The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788: With Some Account of Eminent Virginians of that Era Who Were Members of the Body*, Vol. 1. Richmond, Va.: Virginia Historical Society, 1890-1891. Electronic reproduction, Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale, 2004. *The Making of Modern Law: Legal Treatises 1800-1926*, online database, [http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/servlet/MOML?vrsn=1.0&dd=0&af=RN&locID=tel\\_a\\_vanderbilt&srchtp=a&d1=19002720701&c=1&an=19002720701&ste=11&d4=0.5&stp=Author&dc=flc&docNum=F101810000&ae=F101810000&tiPG=1](http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/servlet/MOML?vrsn=1.0&dd=0&af=RN&locID=tel_a_vanderbilt&srchtp=a&d1=19002720701&c=1&an=19002720701&ste=11&d4=0.5&stp=Author&dc=flc&docNum=F101810000&ae=F101810000&tiPG=1). (Last accessed 7/21/2005).
- Hutson, James. "Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists: A Controversy Rejoined." *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. LVI, no. 4, October 1999.
- Jackson, Donald, ed. *The Diaries of George Washington*. Vol. 3. Dorothy Twohig, assoc. ed. *The Papers of George Washington*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978. Library of Congress, "The George Washington Papers," [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(wd03T000\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(wd03T000))). (Last accessed 7/21/2005).
- Koch, Adrienne and William Peden, eds. *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: The Modern Library, 1972.
- Lambert, Frank. *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Lerche, Charles O., "Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ser., 5:4, Oct. 1948.
- Meade, William. *Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia*, 2 vols. Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1857.
- McLeod, Alexander. *Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War*. New York: Eastburn, Kirk, and Co., 1815.
- Noll, Mark. *America's God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Sandoz, Ellis, ed. *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, 2 vols. The Online Library of Liberty, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/Intros/PoliticalSermons.php>. (Last accessed 7/21/2005).

Stokes, Anson Phelps. *Church and State In the United States, Volume 1*. New York: Harper And Brothers, 1950.

Stout, Harry. *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

*The James Madison Papers*, Library of Congress Manuscript Collection, [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/madison\\_papers](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/madison_papers). (Last accessed 7/21/2005).

*The Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress Manuscript Collection, [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers). (Last accessed 7/21/2005).

Thornton, John Wingate, ed. *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Political Sermons of the Period of 1776*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1970 (Unabridged reproduction of original edition published in Boston, 1860).

Weber, Donald. *Rhetoric and History in Revolutionary New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.