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God and Politics: Lessons from America's Past

By John G. West, Jr.

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
202/546-4400
http://www.heritage.org

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Prologue

It was not the best of times as far as American Christians were concerned. Urban crime had exploded as young thugs took over the cities. Promiscuity and alcoholism were rampant. Ordinary people had stopped going to church. Many in the nation's universities seemed actively hostile to traditional religion, preferring to place their trust in reason alone rather than a God who operated in human affairs.

Even in politics, traditional religion and morality were flouted. One of the era's most influential Presidents was an avowed materialist, who scoffed in private at the miracles of the Bible and historic Christian doctrines. Another was the only President in our history to have murdered another person in a duel. Then there was the social reformer who was invited by Congress to give a special address to the nation's legislative body—the social reformer who elsewhere proposed a "Declaration of Mental Independence" that denounced private property, traditional religion, and marriage as "a trinity of the most monstrous evils that could be combined to inflict mental and physical evil upon his whole race."[1]

In many ways, America in the early 1800s—for that is when these events occurred—was remarkably like America today. Yet most historians would not describe 19th century America as godless and amoral. If anything, the period is often held up as the epitome of a Christian America, when Christianity—or at least the Protestant variety of Christianity—was all but the *de facto* religion of the state, and when Biblical ethics supplied the basis for social relations. Nor would criminologists describe the 19th century, at least the second half of it, as awash in crime. In fact, as James Q. Wilson writes, lawlessness went down in the latter half of the 19th century despite urbanization, industrialization, and other factors typically associated with increased crime rates.[2]

So what is going on here? Both depictions can't be true. Or can they?

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1 Robert Dale Owen, "Oration, Containing a Declaration of Mental Independence," in Oakley C. Johnson, ed., *Robert Owen in the United States* (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 70.

2 James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 434.

John G. West, Jr., is a Senior Fellow at the Discovery Institute and Assistant Professor of Political Science at Seattle Pacific University.

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The first part of the 19th century was a time of remarkable spiritual, moral, and civic instability. But out of that instability came a social and political revolution that ought to give us hope, as well as provide us with a warning on how to engage our culture at the dawn of a new century.

What happened in the early 19th century is commonly called the Second Great Awakening, referring to a series of evangelical revivals that started in the Northeast, but ultimately spread all the way to the western frontier. But these revivals are only part of the story. They were paralleled by a massive infusion of evangelical Christians into the public arena. Evangelicals across denominations organized associations in order to spread the gospel, end poverty, stop practices such as dueling, and reduce alcoholism. This reform movement became one of the leading controversies in America before the Civil War.[3]

We sometimes think that the conflict over religion in politics is a new thing in America. It is not. During the first decades of the 19th century, America was embroiled in a bitter debate about just how far religious people should go in promoting a social and cultural agenda. Christians involved in the politics of the era were accused of subverting republican government and trying to take over the state. Complained one group of citizens, the Christian political activists are "infusing a spirit of religious intolerance and persecution into the political institutions of the country, and which unless opposed, will result in a union of church and state."[4]

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

I recall this bit of our nation's history not for the sake of historical trivia, but because there is something we can learn from it. The 19th century Christian reformers were remarkably successful in bringing about social change, and I think their example holds lessons for how people of faith ought to engage the present culture today.

Lesson #1: Stop looking to the government for solutions to all of our problems.

The first lesson is that government may not be the solution to all of our problems. Prior to the Second Great Awakening, many politically active evangelicals had a tendency to look to government to promote religion. They thought that in order for religion to flourish, the government had to promote it through public days of fasting and thanksgiving, strict laws against Sabbath-breaking, and the use of tax dollars to pay the salaries of ministers. Piety had to be promoted by law. Congregationalist evangelicals in New England were the fiercest supporters of this view.

They almost seemed to think that vibrant religion depended on government.

Thomas Jefferson and his political party thought differently. They believed in a fairly strict separation between church and state, and they certainly did not favor tax dollars going to pay ministers. When the Jeffersonians began to triumph in state and local elections in New England, state support for churches began to end. Disestablishment—the ending of official government support for churches—finally came even to such Congregationalist bastions as Connecticut and New Hampshire in 1818 and 1819.

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3 See John G. West, Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), esp. Chapter 2.

4 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. ix.

Congregationalist evangelicals first thought disestablishment was the end of the world. Famed preacher Lyman Beecher recalled in his autobiography that the day state support of religion was voted down in Connecticut, he had "the worst attack [of depression] I ever met in my life. It was as dark a day as ever I saw. The injury done to the cause of Christ, as we then supposed, was irreparable."[5]

Or was it? Beecher continued: "For several days I suffered what no tongue can tell for the best thing that ever happened to the State of Connecticut."[6]

The best thing that ever happened? That's right. Disestablishment, said Beecher, "cut the churches loose from dependence on state support. It threw them wholly on their own resources and on God."[7]

State support had been a crutch that had kept the churches crippled. While Congregationalists in New England looked to government as their savior, they had little incentive to do much on their own. As a result, their churches dwindled and Unitarianism won the hearts and minds of the people. When state support was removed, however, New England evangelicals finally realized that they had to go out and hustle. They had to try to persuade people that their religious beliefs were right. They could no longer depend on government subsidies or government compulsion. When they recognized this, things started to change.

Of course, some evangelicals had known this truth all along, especially Baptists. That's why many of them supported Jefferson. But for Congregationalists and Presbyterians from New England, the free enterprise system in religion was a radical innovation. Once they accepted it, they prospered. And so did evangelicalism in general.

Lyman Beecher was one of the people who came to understand most clearly the possibilities of the new system of voluntary religion. He became the chief architect of what one historian has called America's "'voluntary establishment' of religion."[8] Beecher argued that it was vain to expect that orthodox religion could be guaranteed by religious tests for public office, Sabbath-breaking laws, and state subsidies. If irreligion and immorality dominated society, it was the responsibility of Christians themselves to form private reform associations to combat these evils—to convert people and to promote virtue.

And that is precisely what happened. Led by Beecher and others, evangelicals organized scores of voluntary associations for evangelism, missions, and for social and political reform. They formed groups to help end poverty, to teach reading and writing to the poor, and to prevent alcohol abuse. Still others promoted prison reform and voluntary observance of the Sabbath. This multitude of private associations transformed American society in a way that few government programs ever could.

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5 Lyman Beecher, in Barbara M. Cross, ed., *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, Vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1961), p. 252.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 252–253.

8 Elwyn A. Smith, "The Voluntary Establishment of Religion," in Elwyn A. Smith, ed., *The Religion of the Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 155.

"They say ministers have lost their influence," Beecher wrote years later. "The fact is, they have gained. By voluntary efforts, societies, missions, and revivals, they exert a deeper influence than ever they could" have by state support.[9]

He was right. If you doubt it, just compare America with European countries that still have state churches today. In the United States, as bad as we are, more than 40 percent of Americans attend religious services once a week or more, 65 percent believe there is a personal God, 67 percent believe in Hell, 85 percent believe in Heaven, and 86 percent believe that the Bible is the actual or inspired word of God.

Compare these figures to England, where only 14 percent of the people attend church once a week or more, only 57 percent believe in Heaven, only 30 percent believe in Hell, and only 31 percent believe in a personal God. Sweden is even worse: Only 5 percent of the people attend church once a week or more, only 10 percent believe in Hell, and only 19 percent believe in a personal God.[10]

For all of its faults, the free enterprise system in religion works. And that is something we might want to remember today as we face ever more problems and social decay. Private-sector solutions may be far more powerful than many government solutions. In fact, the best thing we might be able to do is get government to give us the freedom to pursue these private-sector solutions.

Lesson #2: Cultivate the common ground.

A second lesson that I think we can learn from the evangelical experience of the early 1800s is the importance of staking out the moral common ground.

When evangelicals turned to social reform in the early 1800s, they did not seek to enact the Bible into law. Nor did they claim that the Bible was the only repository of moral truth. True, they regarded the Bible as the clearest and most authoritative exposition of morality. But they also believed in God's general revelation—that God revealed his moral laws to all human beings by writing them on their hearts. This belief in general revelation can be seen most clearly at evangelical colleges, which regularly offered courses in moral philosophy. Indeed, the major American texts on the subject were written by Presbyterian Samuel Stanhope Smith, Baptist Francis Wayland, and Episcopalian Jasper Adams. Even diehard Congregationalists like Timothy Dwight and Nathaniel Emmons acknowledged that man had a natural capacity to understand the principles of morality.

Call this general revelation of morality what you will—common grace, common sense, light of nature, law of nature, or something else—the underlying point is the same: Christians do not need to feel guilty about offering secular arguments for their positions. It does not diminish the Bible or its authority to appeal to the natural moral law, because that law also comes from God.

The belief of 19th century evangelicals in general revelation meant that they had no problem in articulating their political objectives on secular grounds. Because of this, when they fought

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9 Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, p. 253.

10 Statistical information adapted from Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Unsecular America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), Appendix, pp. 115–143.

the practice of dueling, or objected to slavery, or promoted prison reform, they were able to join together with people from different theological traditions, including Unitarians.

The commonsense approach to morality of 19th century evangelicals is something we can learn from today. Instead of appealing to specifically religious standards that other citizens may not accept, people of faith have an obligation to try to articulate their positions in a way understandable to those who do not share their particular religious beliefs.

Lesson #3: Setting priorities is important.

A third lesson that can be learned from evangelicals in politics in the early 1800s is the importance of setting priorities.

Evangelicals during this period struggled with the question of how broad the religious community's political involvement ought to be. The best thinkers among them concluded that Christians, as Christians, ought to limit their political activities to those issues where a clear moral principle was at stake. Otherwise, they would be in danger of bringing disrepute on the gospel.

Lyman Beecher made this point explicitly in a sermon in 1824:

> Christians are not to attempt to control the administration of civil government, in things merely secular.
>
> This is what our Saviour refused to do, when he declined being a king, or ruler, or judge. It would secularize the church, as the same conduct secularized the church of Rome:—and bring upon her, and justly, a vindictive reaction of hatred and opposition. When great questions of national morality are about to be decided, such as the declaration of war; or, as in England, the abolition of the slave trade; or the permission to introduce Christianity into India by Missionaries; it becomes Christians to lift up their voice, and exert their united influence. But, with the annual detail of secular policy, it does not become Christians to intermeddle, beyond the unobtrusive influence of their silent suffrage. They are not to "strive, nor cry, nor lift up their voice in the streets." The injudicious association of religion with politics, in the time of Cromwell, brought upon evangelical doctrine and piety, in England, an odium which has not ceased to this day.[11]

Beecher saw with piercing clarity that if Christians became too avidly involved in ordinary political strife, their activities would damage not only the state but the church. "No sight is more grievous or humiliating," he wrote, "than to see Christians continually agitated, by all the great and little political disputes of the nation, the state, the city, and town, and village; toiling in the drudgery of ambition; and flowing hither and thither, like waves which have no rest, and cast-up only mire and dirt."[12] Beecher added that "there is no one particular in which it is more important that there should be a reformation."[13]

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11 Lyman Beecher, *The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Crocker and Brewster, 1824), p. 25.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

Lesson #4: Integrity is important.

A fourth lesson that can be drawn from evangelicals' in politics in the early 1800s is the importance of personal integrity.

During the 1790s and through the first years of the new century, many conservative Protestants had allied themselves with the Federalist Party against the Jeffersonians, who they thought were godless. During these years, some ministers virtually became party hacks, demonizing members of the other political party and using the pulpit to generate support for the political agenda of the Federalist Party. Eventually, there was a backlash against this harsh partisanship among Christians, and there was an increasing recognition among many religious leaders that Christians in politics had not lived up to the requirements of their faith and had to do better. They had to guard against the dangers of pride and hatred even while striving to stand up for the truth.

Timothy Dwight was one of the people who recognized this. President of Yale, Dwight himself had been one of the fiercest critics of Jefferson and a staunch supporter of the Federalist Party. But he came to realize the dangers of tying Christianity so closely to party politics, and he began trying to counteract it. In his commencement address of 1816, he told students that

> the prejudices, the fervour, and the bitterness, of party spirit are incapable of vindication. I may be permitted to think differently from my neighbour; but I am not permitted to hate him, nor to quarrel with him, merely because he thinks differently from me.
>
> Our countrymen have spent a sufficient time in hostilities against each other. We have entertained as many unkind thoughts, uttered as many bitter speeches, called each other by as many hard names, and indulged as much unkindness and malignity; as might satisfy our worst enemies, and as certainly ought to satisfy us. From all these efforts of ill-will we have not derived the least advantage. Friends and brothers have ceased to be friends and brothers; and professing Christians have dishonoured the religion which they professed.[14]

One of Dwight's students from a few years before was a young man named Jeremiah Evarts. Of all the politically active evangelicals during the early 1800s, perhaps Evarts was the one who displayed most clearly during this period a reconciliation between personal holiness and political action.

Evarts was a lawyer, a journalist, and missionary leader. He was active in taking a stand on such issues as slavery and alcohol abuse before those issues were popular. But his greatest legacy was his defense of the treaty rights of the Cherokee Indians in Georgia.

The Cherokees had become Christians and adopted a democratic form of government. They had been promised their treaty lands forever by the federal government. But in the late 1820s, a concerted effort was made to take away the Cherokees' land and compel them to move further west. The effort finally succeeded in a tragic episode of American history, but it took years to

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14 Timothy Dwight, "On Doing Good," *Sermons by Timothy Dwight* (New Haven, CT: Hezekiah Howe and Durrie and Peck, 1828), pp. 540–541.

actually force the Cherokees to move—and that was largely due to the gallant efforts of Jeremiah Evarts and his missionaries. Evarts' activities on behalf of the Cherokees literally drove him to exhaustion and death.

Even most opponents of Evarts respected him. An indication of why they did so can be seen from his daily prayer list, found among his papers after his death. Evarts prayed daily that he would "be preserved from rash and imprudent speeches in regard to the government" and pleaded for help with avoiding self-righteousness: "Whenever I hear of sinful actions, before I say a word by way of censure, [let me] remember how much I find to blame in myself, though under so great advantages."[15]

Evarts was a powerful example of how one can stand up strongly for what one believes to be right and still do it in a Christian manner. He was an example of what the Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 4:15, called "speaking the truth in love." Avoiding the twin wrongs of self-righteousness and cowardly compromise, Evarts showed what it truly means to be a person of faith in politics. We can all benefit from his example.

Lesson #5: Prudence is important.

To this point, I have been discussing the positive lessons that we can learn from evangelicals in politics during the early national period. But there is a final cautionary lesson to learn as well. It relates to the critical role of prudence in politics.

Idealism in politics—especially idealism born of religious convictions—is a two-edged sword. It can push us toward necessary reforms, such as abolition of the slave trade, policies to help the poor, and efforts to save people from substance abuse; but it can also lead to extremism. Idealists aim for the sky, and when they don't reach it, they can become disillusioned, bitter, and even radical. What happens when social progress does not occur as quickly as one would like? What happens when grave social evils seem intractable, either because of public indifference or because of government-imposed obstacles? The danger of religious idealism in politics is that when the idealists don't get their way, they will give up on the system, perhaps even work to undermine it.

Evangelicals faced this problem after the failure to save the Cherokee Indians. After every legal and political remedy to prevent Cherokee deportation had been exhausted, the evangelical missionaries were faced with the question of whether to counsel the Cherokees to continue to resist or to seek the most favorable removal agreement possible. Most evangelicals urged the Cherokees to conclude a new treaty with the federal government, realizing that outright resistance would now be futile. The only prudent course was to try to make the best of an admittedly bad situation. A few evangelicals, however, supported continued resistance by the Cherokees.

The debate over Cherokee resistance was minor, but it was also prophetic. It underscored the difficulties religious reformers can sometimes have in dealing with the hard realities of politics, and it foreshadowed a much larger debate that would take place several decades later about slavery. The question then was how far Christians should go to oppose slavery in a country where its existence was constitutionally protected. Some abolitionists attacked the

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15 E. C. Tracy, *Memoir of the Life of Jeremiah Evarts* (Boston, MA: Crocker and Brewster, 1845), p. 429.

Constitution itself as a corrupt document and advocated going beyond the law to dismantle slavery. Others sought to work within the system to stop the spread of slavery and place it, in Lincoln's words, on the ultimate course of extinction.

Now, extra-legal measures may sometimes be necessary; certainly civil disobedience has a long and honored pedigree in America, and anyone who accepts the idea of a higher law ought to accept at least a theoretical right to sometimes disobey unjust laws. Nevertheless, this is perilous territory, as Abraham Lincoln suggested in his justly famous Lyceum Address.[16] The danger of taking the law into your own hands is that, in the process, you may destroy the very foundations that make law possible. If you are seeking to establish a legal right for someone, it is problematic to undermine the legal system itself by going outside it.

Yet, unless religious idealists have a firm grasp of the idea of prudence, religious idealism in politics has the tendency to be overzealous and even politically destabilizing. What is needed to counteract this tendency is a heavy dose of realism.

As usual, Lyman Beecher was someone who understood this. In one of his earliest sermons on reform, he discussed the possibility that the reformers would not achieve all their goals, and he warned his listeners about adopting an all-or-nothing attitude toward reform. "We are not angels, but men," he declared. "If we can gradually improve ourselves, and improve the society in which we live, though in a small degree, it is an object not to be despised."[17] In other words, we must be realistic about what we can achieve in this life, and even small changes in the right direction are better than no changes at all.

Conclusion

So what does this all mean for us today? Those of us who proclaim faith in God have a high responsibility for how we conduct ourselves. We need to remember that the government is not our savior, and that many reforms might be accomplished better by private associations rather than the government. Of course, in order to empower private associations, we may have to remove the obstacles created by big government to private action.

We also need to stake out the moral common ground with our fellow citizens. We let the secularists off the hook too easily if we allow them to claim that our policy positions are grounded only in our personal religious beliefs. We must drive home the point that the policies we advocate are based on public principles.

We further ought to realize that not every political issue is a religious issue, and we should be wary of those who would claim otherwise. We devalue the prophetic voice of the churches if we try to make every public issue a religious one.

And we should hearken to the words and example of Jeremiah Evarts, remembering to treat our opponents with charity even while proclaiming the truth as we see it.

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16 Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," 1838, in Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832–1858* (New York, NY: Library of America, 1989), pp. 28–36.

17 Lyman Beecher, *The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies Instituted for that Purpose* (New London, CT: Samuel Green, 1804), p. 17.

Finally, we should remember that politics is the realm of the possible, not the perfect. We must remember that prudence is a virtue just like justice and mercy, and we should decline to abandon politics for something else simply because it seems so difficult to achieve what we want.

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