

# Liberty and Religion: The End of U.S. Exceptionalism?

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by J. C. D. Clark

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**H**istorians reinterpret the past in the light of the present. This result of ever-shifting perspectives is inevitable, as the outcomes of situations or problems throw new light, or new shadow, on their origins. So it is with the American Revolution, interpretations of which have changed over time and continue to develop, albeit slowly. In this ongoing development, the decisive episode of recent years will be the Iraq War of 2003, for that crisis has done more than any other to change the understanding of the "great experiment" of the United States held by substantial sectors of European as well as world opinion. From being in a general sense the Answer, the United States appears to increasing numbers of people to be the Problem; from being the great exception, America often now appears to be a state like other states. The question "Why has this change of perspective occurred in recent years?" is a complex one. The intention here is to propose an answer to an antecedent question, "How can the reinterpretation of the American Revolution help us to throw light on the long-term characteristics of U.S. culture, reemphasized in the present?"

The American Revolution was a conflict about liberty. We are familiar with this interpretation, and we are familiar with it for the good reason that it is, essentially, correct. But over-familiarity with the explanation can lead us to assume that we understand the phenomenon, and so encourage us to neglect to explain it. It would be helpful to focus more clearly on what people meant by liberty in the English-speaking world of the late eighteenth century, what role religion played in their definitions, and how people came to be divided by an ideal that they claimed to share, so that, in 1776 as in 2003, subscribers to a revolutionary ideal came to conceive of liberty as a "sacred cause."

The development of the language of rights offers a suggestive analogy. Natural rights doctrine has a long and complex history.<sup>1</sup> In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the nature of “rights” was keenly debated in philosophy and jurisprudence. Over time, however, more and more claims came to be expressed as “rights,” and more and more people came to make such claims. After World War II, the “rights of man” (implicitly, the claims made by certain white male Europeans) were metamorphosed into “human rights.”<sup>2</sup> A language that is universally invoked and applied loses its precise meaning: it helps little that one’s own claims can be expressed as “rights” if all opposing claims can be similarly expressed. Equally, most nations currently term themselves “democracies,” and the most sanguinary dictatorships most loudly claim to be “people’s republics.” A process of intellectual devaluation is at work that we might call “category extension.”

Something similar happened in the eighteenth century to the idea of “liberty,” or, as it earlier began, “liberties” in the plural. Previously, “liberties” were understood as specific privileges or entitlements, and “liberty” as a summation of them. This notion of “liberties” was embodied in England in the Declaration of Rights, later the basis for a statute of 1689 colloquially known as the “Bill of Rights” but titled “An act for declaring the rights and liberties of the subject and settling the succession of the crown.” It contained thirteen clauses listing and reasserting rights or liberties that James II had allegedly violated.<sup>3</sup> “Liberties” were specific, defined in preexisting law or custom. The Act did not claim to defend “liberty” as such; it was drafted in a mental world, as the legal historian Maitland described it, not of abstract rights but of writs.<sup>4</sup> The noun “liberty” was familiar in the singular, but not in a meaning conflicting with “liberties;” in one usage, “a liberty” was a geographical area, a jurisdiction, within which these privileges were enjoyed.

This usage was familiar in the American colonies, but there it changed most. America’s Declaration of Independence did not assert that “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” were self-evidently human privileges or immunities; what was self-evident was that “their Creator” had endowed men with these things, as means to right ends. This made the Declaration at its core a claim about God’s actions and intentions. True, it went on to list a series of

<sup>1</sup> Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Doctrines: Their Origins and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Sir Geoffrey R. Elton, “Human Rights and the Liberties of Englishmen,” *University of Illinois Law Review*, Summer 1990. Elton adjudged the thirty articles of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) a “mixture of innocent good will and hopefulness” reflecting “particular quirks and convictions peculiar to the liberal academics and social scientists of the day—especially Anglo-American ones” (pp. 330–1).

<sup>3</sup> Lois G. Schwoerer, *The Declaration of Rights, 1689* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> F. W. Maitland, *The Forms of Action at Common Law* [1909], A. H. Chaytor and W. J. Whittaker, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

grievances, “liberties” that had allegedly been violated. But the singular “liberty” at its outset was a more elevated idea, finally dependent on colonial American religion. It was not a wholly theological statement, since it included one alleged right—“the pursuit of happiness”—that none of colonial America’s religious denominations would have recognized as a divinely granted entitlement. But the document depended on the religious commitments of its audience for the plausibility of a singular “liberty.”

### Positive and Negative Liberty

It is critical how this American revolutionary image of “liberty” is located within the familiar categorization of positive and negative liberty propounded by Isaiah Berlin. It was he who first drew a clear distinction between “negative liberty”—the absence of interference or coercion from without—and “positive liberty”—participation in government towards the realization of certain good ends: as he summed them up, “freedom from” and “freedom to.”<sup>5</sup> Yet despite his acclaimed attachment to liberty in the first sense, Berlin may have promoted a confusion, since his two concepts cannot be as distinct as he wished to present them (just as the political task of safeguarding the first often tends to elide into a crusade to achieve the second). A demand for “freedom from” must be a necessary (if not a sufficient) condition for the exercise of “freedom to”; a “freedom from” would hardly be demanded except to secure the exercise of a “freedom to.” Negative liberty is in some ways only the mirror image of positive liberty. One person’s “freedom to” is another’s “subjection to”; one man’s right to bear arms is another’s death by gunfire.<sup>6</sup> “Liberties” in the plural echo an attachment to “freedom from”; “liberty” in the singular looks to “freedom to.” Historically, these different emphases have existed in tension.

The foundations of “liberties” on ideas of “freedom from” were not as strong as is often assumed. John Locke, for example, advocated toleration only of those of whom he approved (specifically excluding atheists and Roman Catholics). His later reputation notwithstanding, he did not recognize the existence of a private sphere of conscience within which the state had no competence to intervene: “No opinions contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society, are to be tolerated by the magistrate,” he urged. Disagreement with his teachings, “though but even in thought,” was not acceptable.<sup>7</sup> Locke has a reputation as a defender of “freedom from,” but he actually upheld “freedom to” do the

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> Berlin was partly aware of this objection but failed adequately to answer it: *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> *A Letter Concerning Toleration in The Works of John Locke* (10 vols., London: Thomas Tegg et al., 1822), VI, pp. 45–7.

right thing, “freedom to” hold only correct religious beliefs, and “freedom to” choose any correct form of state (excluding incorrect forms such as absolute monarchy). As he excused his position, “[That] ill deserves the name of confinement which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices. So that, however it may be mistaken, the end of law is, not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.”<sup>8</sup> A “freedom” or a “liberty” was inflated from being an immunity from ends to become synonymous with a conception of ends to be promoted.

Even the Whig regime that held power after 1714 professed a different view. Lord Hervey implicitly argued against Locke’s usage, insisting that “all peace, all order in society is maintained by some restrictions on natural liberty . . . the anarchy of natural liberty wholly unrestrained would be as great an evil as the slavery of no liberty at all allowed.” By “liberties” Hervey meant “privileges and immunities.”<sup>9</sup> Edmund Burke, that Whig reformer, would later use the term in the same sense: “It has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* . . . We have a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.”<sup>10</sup> Everyone believed in liberty; the problem was that they came to mean different things by that term.

In colonial America, neither “freedom from” nor “freedom to” was exclusively associated with rebels or loyalists. In 1763, one author in the *Boston Evening Post* identified Montesquieu with “freedom from,” citing his definition of liberty as “a tranquility of mind arising from the opinion each man has of his own safety.” But an opponent in the same paper continued the Frenchman’s quotation: “Political liberty does not consist in an unrestrained freedom. . . . Liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will.”<sup>11</sup>

Eighteenth-century England, with its common-law culture, largely adhered to a plural understanding of liberties, but this understanding coexisted with another, often held by low churchmen and Dissenters. To them, “liberty” was the opposite of “slavery,” which was defined as living in subjection to “arbitrary power”—that is, under the Stuart monarchy (and by extension, the Pope). The positive content of this “liberty” was Protestantism. Yet in the American colonies, the Church was heavily outnumbered by the

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), II, s. 57.

<sup>9</sup> John, Lord Hervey, *Ancient and Modern Liberty Stated and Compar’d* (London, 1734), pp. 3, 9, 27, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 174, 183–4, 412.

<sup>11</sup> In Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing during the Founding Era 1760–1805* (2 vols., Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), I, pp. 19–32, at 19, 23. Montesquieu’s definition was repeated in the Continental Congress’s *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Quebec* (Philadelphia, 1774), *ibid.*, pp. 231–9, at 235.

sects, and a perception of a loss of liberty to the “tyranny” of the Church was lasting.

### Four Types of Liberty?

From social-anthropological evidence, David Hackett Fischer has characterized four different colonial usages of “liberty” corresponding to the four distinct “folkways” that he traced back from colonial America to what he saw as their origins in the British Isles: “ordered liberty” in New England, originating in migration from Puritan East Anglia; “hegemonic liberty” in Virginia, drawn from migration from the south of England; “reciprocal liberty” in the Delaware region, traced to the Quakers and migration from England’s North Midlands; and “natural liberty” in the backcountry, identified with migration from England’s northern borderlands, lowland Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In each case, one might add, the new opportunities presented by life in America allowed these folkways to become more like themselves, where within the British Isles their differences diminished over time.

Fischer’s “ordered liberty” was a variant of “freedom to,” a purposive conception of a form of social life promoted by the community and expressed within its religious goals. The “Christian liberty” to live in a particular way was summed up by John Winthrop in 1645 as “the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free;” it produced a coercive community. The collective and territorial idea of public liberty, as in “the liberty of Boston” or “the liberty of America,” was “thought to be consistent with close restraints upon individuals.” These ideas of liberty were combined in obedience to the Covenantal idea of fundamental laws. It had little to do with toleration in the present-day sense.<sup>12</sup>

“Hegemonic liberty” was an extensive “freedom to” for the social elite: it neglected any positive claims to “freedom to” on the part of social inferiors or slaves. Indeed, the fewer the people entitled to claim liberty, the more insistently they did so, and the more generalized their singular “liberty” had to be. As Burke observed in his *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies* of 1775, it was slavery in the southern colonies that made the spirit of liberty “still more high and haughty than in those to the northward”; among slave-owners, continued Burke, freedom was “not only an enjoyment, but a kind of rank and privilege.”<sup>13</sup>

“Reciprocal liberty,” captured by William Penn’s injunction “to do as one would be done unto,” seems closer to “freedom from” but was not synonymous with it. It was presented as God’s promise to all, not just to New

<sup>12</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 189, 199–205.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 385, 398, 410–18.

England's elect or Virginia's elite, subgroups that might claim immunities. In Penn's usage in 1670, "liberty" meant the "great privileges" secured by documents like Magna Carta; he added to it liberty of conscience, something different, argues Fischer, from "the conventional Protestant idea of liberty to do only that which is right." Yet this negative concept entailed its own positive vision. Order was conceived as a revolutionary doctrine "in which everyone did not have to believe the same creed or to fit into a single hierarchy," a positive Quaker vision of the good life.<sup>14</sup>

"Natural liberty" was the idealized version of the violent defiance of authority, seemingly the most aggressive version of "freedom from"—the self-assertion of individuals with little regard for the natural liberty of others. This "stubborn autonomy" was the doctrine of a lawless border culture, whether in the British Isles or the American Appalachian backcountry. Whether Presbyterian or Anglican, such migrants were especially associated with New Light revivalist religion, a militantly anti-Establishment movement that had a long record of conflict with the established church and persecution at the hands of the state.

This egalitarian culture was embittered by the highly unequal ownership of land in the backcountry. "In the absence of any strong sense of order as unity, hierarchy, or social peace, backsettlers shared an idea of order as a system of retributive justice. The prevailing principle was *lex talionis*, the rule of retaliation." This created "a climate of violence" in which "natural liberty" could be asserted by individuals in defiance of the restraint of institutions. Patrick Henry was representative of this culture; for him, natural liberty "did not recognize the right of dissent or disagreement. Deviance from cultural norms was rarely tolerated; opposition was suppressed by force."<sup>15</sup> One man's "freedom from" could easily become another's "subjection to."

Fischer's taxonomy is illuminating; but it risks homogenizing a reality that was more diverse, missing the ways the phenomena it describes changed over time and neglecting the way the American Revolution was the product of profound change within the colonies themselves. Fischer stops short of explaining what happened to these four different conceptions of liberty during the 1770s and afterwards, notably during what can be seen as the second Civil War of the 1860s, and how (as is argued here) "freedom from" was progressively collapsed into "freedom to." For the practicalities of mobilizing support for independence in c. 1763–76, years of coercion and intimidation in every colonial town and village, and then the need to compel participation in fighting after 1776 and to define an idealistic cause that independence would realize, produced a polity in which negative and positive liberty were fused to

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 490, 566, 573, 585, 595–603; quoting William Penn, *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience* (London, 1670).

<sup>15</sup>Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, pp. 638, 704, 749, 754, 765, 769, 777–82.

an almost unprecedented degree. Yet the self-image of the new Republic as embodying “freedom from” was never renounced.<sup>16</sup>

Fischer adhered to the familiar patriotic view of the American Revolution as solely a response to innovations in policy from “the imperial elite in London;” as a result, “all four American cultures . . . forgot their differences and joined together in the movement that led to the American Revolution.” Why it was so easy for them to forget differences that Fischer shows were still so profoundly formative, and remained so even for long after the Revolution, is not explained. Nevertheless, Fischer’s important model contains an element that may lead to a greater sense of the dynamic of development: his conclusion that of all the determinants that shaped the culture of British America, religion was the most powerful.<sup>17</sup> This priority becomes clearer when we seek to explain not the “cultural character” of colonial regions but political events, notably the outbreak of armed resistance in 1776 and the mobilization of a substantial part of thirteen of the twenty-six colonies’ populations for war. As John Adams later recalled, “The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations.”<sup>18</sup>

### Religious and Political Liberty

During this transformation, liberty remained a common preoccupation on both sides of the Atlantic. Almost all shades of opinion characterized the British empire as unique in its regard for and possession of liberty. When the Revolution disrupted it, “People on both sides of the controversy employed the language of liberty as a form of shorthand or code of cherished beliefs with which to argue, persuade, and motivate.”<sup>19</sup> Yet one historian has pointed out the “imprecision” and “vague generalizations” that colonial Americans entertained about liberty before 1763.<sup>20</sup> This shared language, imprecisely apprehended, was sharpened into a revolutionary creed in the subsequent conflicts.

One reason for this early imprecision in the civic arena was that “liberty” initially related as much to spiritual as to worldly affairs. Colonial

<sup>16</sup>This self-image is found even in so learned an analysis as John Philip Reid, “Liberty and the Original Understanding,” in *Essays in the History of Liberty: Seaver Institute Lectures at the Huntington Library* (San Marino: Henry E. Huntington Library, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, pp. 795, 823–4, 827.

<sup>18</sup>John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, Feb. 13, 1818, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (10 vols., Boston, 1850–6), X, p. 282.

<sup>19</sup>Reid, “Liberty and the Original Understanding,” pp. 2–3. Reid argues that “Rights recognized by law or expounded in theory were constitutional rights and termed natural primarily for embellishment” (p. 10); here I contend that natural law and its religious basis were in of great importance.

<sup>20</sup>Lawrence H. Leder, *Liberty and Authority: Early American Political Ideology 1689–1763* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), pp. 118–30.

American discourse had long emphasized divine law and said little of any separately understood natural law. Natural law arguments were taken up relatively late, some time after the Stamp Act controversy, and primarily in New England; they spread to the other colonies chiefly after the passage of the Coercive Acts of 1774. Natural law was nevertheless still often taken to be synonymous with the theological concept of fundamental law. Its role as the chief guarantor of “liberty” was the especial preoccupation of New England Congregationalism, although it was shared by all colonial Calvinist ministers of whatever denomination who saw their predestinarian and populist doctrine everywhere losing ground to the advancing legions of Anglican Arminianism. The colonies’ embrace of natural law meant a departure from common-law, Anglican England; indeed, it created a rebellion.

It had been Whig doctrine that man gave up his natural liberties on entering civil society. Revolution followed with the explosive reassertion in the early 1770s of the continuing primacy of natural law. According to one Boston preacher, “There are some natural liberties or rights which no person can divest himself of without transgressing the law of nature.” By this route, “freedom to” was reintroduced. Men’s rights were essentially twofold: “A man cannot . . . give up the liberty of private judgment in matters of religion. [Nor can he] grant to others a power to order and govern all his actions that were not of a religious nature.” So a particular vision of God’s intentions came to take precedence over a model of immunities, the rights and liberties of Englishmen.<sup>21</sup>

A struggle between conceptions of “freedom from” and “freedom to” can be traced in America from John Winthrop in the 1640s through Jonathan Edwards in the 1740s, irrespective of the later question of independence. Yet the paranoia of the 1670s about “Popery and arbitrary power” was heard in ever more heightened tones in America in and after the 1760s, acquiring a new political application. A language of spiritual liberty, of emancipation from the unregenerate, became a language of political liberty and emancipation from an empire which in the 1750s had still been generally hailed by colonists as liberty’s guarantor against the Catholic threat in North America.

So metropolitan legislation on the secular issues of jurisdiction and taxation was perceived in the American colonies as having a spiritual dimension. In 1766, a Philadelphia Stamp Act Commissioner warned the government in London that the Presbyterians had become “as averse to Kings, as they were in the Days of Cromwell, and some begin to cry out, *No King but King Jesus*.”<sup>22</sup> To the Arian minister Jonathan Mayhew, who preached an incendiary sermon

<sup>21</sup> Simeon Howard, *A Sermon Preached to the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company in Boston* (Boston, 1773), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, I, pp. 185–208, at 188–9.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (2nd edn., New York: Collier, 1963), p. 321.

during the Stamp Act crisis, “The essence of civil liberty does not consist in, or depend upon, the number of persons by whom a nation is governed; but in their being governed by such persons and laws as they approve of.” He reminded his hearers that however free men might be, “they are not without law to God, but under the law to Christ.”<sup>23</sup> It was a demand for “freedom to.” Such demands carried a practical threat. As Francis Bernard, Governor of Massachusetts, reported to London of the mob violence and destruction of property in the same Stamp Act disturbances at Boston, on the evening of August 26, 1765, “a great company of people gathered together crying liberty and property, which is the usual notice of their intention to plunder and pull down an house,” which indeed occurred.<sup>24</sup>

Objections to the Stamp Act were initially expressed in the old terms of violating “the inherent rights and liberties of . . . natural born subjects within the kingdom of Great Britain.”<sup>25</sup> But this changed: taxation issues, small in themselves, came to be seen in an apocalyptic perspective. Benjamin Franklin wrote in October 1773 that the 1766 Declaratory Act’s claim that Parliament could legislate for the colonies “in all cases whatsoever” would convince the colonists “that they are at present under a power something like that spoken of in the Scriptures, which can not only kill their bodies, but damn their souls to all eternity, by compelling them, if it pleases, to worship the Devil.”<sup>26</sup> John Adams agreed: “If Parliament could tax us, they could establish the Church of England, with all its creeds, articles, tests, ceremonies, and tithes, and prohibit all other churches, as conventicles and schism shops.”<sup>27</sup>

Ancient Dissenting fears and preoccupations thus linked with the disputes of the 1760s and ’70s over Parliament’s rights to impose taxes. Some fifty years later, John Adams would write that this “apprehension of Episcopacy” had done as much as anything else to “arouse the attention, not only of the inquiring mind, but of the common people, and urge them to close thinking on the constitutional authority of parliament over the colonies.” But this, argued Adams, had been forgotten.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776) achieved its remarkable currency in the colonies not because of what it said on colonial grievances

<sup>23</sup> “Jonathan Mayhew: Memorandum,” in *Perspectives in American History*, 4 (1970), pp. 140–3.

<sup>24</sup> Governor Francis Bernard to the Earl of Halifax, Aug. 31, 1765, in Merrill Jensen, ed., *English Historical Documents: American Colonial Documents to 1776* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1955), pp. 676, 678.

<sup>25</sup> Declarations of the Stamp Act Congress, Oct. 19, 1765, printed in Jensen, ed., *American Colonial Documents to 1776*, pp. 672–3.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “Rules for Reducing a Great Empire to a Small One,” published in the London *Public Advertiser* in October 1773, in Jared Sparks (ed.), *The Works of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols., Boston, 1836–40), IV, pp. 388–98, at 393.

<sup>27</sup> John Adams to H. Niles, Feb. 13, 1818, in Adams, *Works*, X, pp. 287–8.

<sup>28</sup> John Adams to Jedediah Morse, Dec. 2, 1815, in Adams, *Works*, X, p. 185.

in the legal and constitutional disputes of 1763–76, which was almost nothing, but because of what it said to colonial religious sensibilities. Not all were sincere in this use of language. Loyalists were not the only ones to sense that some colonial patricians were fomenting mob action for their own ends. Gouverneur Morris was sure that freedom and religion were only “watchwords. . . . The bellwethers jingled merrily and roared out liberty and property, and religion, and a multitude of cant terms which everyone thought he understood, and was egregiously mistaken. . . . The heads of the mobility grow dangerous to the gentry, and how to keep them down is the question.”<sup>29</sup> This was a question with which Morris had to deal on the patriot side of the ensuing war.

The years before 1776 saw a steady heightening of colonial rhetoric about “liberty” and fear of its logical converse, “slavery,” imposed by “tyranny.” As elsewhere, so in New England, anxieties reached fever pitch that the British ministry were conspiring to introduce tyranny in the home country. As one New England minister warned in 1774, “We have reason to fear, at least, that a design is forming to dethrone his present majesty, King George III, our rightful sovereign, and to introduce the Pretender, and with him the popish religion.” Peter Whitney quoted a fevered English source complaining of legions of “popish bishops, priests, Jesuits etc.” who were already converting “hundreds and thousands, if not ten thousands, yearly.”<sup>30</sup> The falsity of the claims did not lessen their rhetorical effect.

Even in this setting, literal theological millenarianism was not dominant: one study has suggested that millenarianism was present in only about one-sixth of patriot writings during the Revolution.<sup>31</sup> What mattered more were mainstream issues of Dissenting ecclesiology and ecclesiastical polity, mobilized by certain catalysts; and here the New England clerical intelligentsia was responsible for by far the largest outpouring of printed exhortation in the immediate approach to revolution.<sup>32</sup>

Politicians now re-expressed this language, in an idiom indebted to natural law, to demand “freedom to.” At a New England town meeting of November 20, 1772, Samuel Adams claimed: “Among the natural rights of the colonists are these: First, a right to life; secondly, to liberty; thirdly, to property.”<sup>33</sup> Backcountry rhetoric was not identical, but congruent: Patrick

<sup>29</sup> Gouverneur Morris to [John] Penn, 20 May 1774, in Jensen, ed., *American Colonial Documents to 1776*, pp. 861–3. The “mobility” refers to the anti-British movement.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Whitney, *The Transgression of a Land punished by a multitude of Rulers. Considered in two Discourses, Delivered July 14, 1774 . . . a Day of Fasting and Prayer, On Account of the Dark Aspect of our Public Affairs* (Boston, 1774), pp. 61–2.

<sup>31</sup> Melvin B. Endy, Jr., “Just War, Holy War, and Millennialism in Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (1985), pp. 3–25.

<sup>32</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 6, 260, 277.

<sup>33</sup> *The Votes and Proceedings of the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, In Town Meeting assembled, According to Law* (Boston, 1772; Dublin, 1773), p. 2.

Henry (whose “Give me liberty, or give me death!” speech in the Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775 echoed the religious language of the Covenanters more than any other public idiom then available) made “repeated references to the book of Jeremiah.”<sup>34</sup> For the rank and file, “Liberty or death was not a rhetorical exaggeration when the choice referred to the revolutionaries’ minds. . . . Slavery meant an infinite, hereditary misery, while death in resistance meant bliss.”<sup>35</sup> The Presbyterian synod, sitting at New York in May 1775, explained in a pastoral letter that “there is no soldier so undaunted as the pious man, no army so formidable as those who are superior to the fear of death.” The Synod’s pastoral letter of 1783 congratulated members “on the general and almost universal attachment of the Presbyterian body to the cause of liberty and the rights of mankind.”<sup>36</sup> A Hessian officer wrote that the war was “nothing more nor less than an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian Rebellion”; “What [the Huguenots] called ‘religion’ is here ‘liberty,’ the same fanaticism, the same furious events.”<sup>37</sup>

### The Historical Self-Understanding of A New Society

These features contributed powerfully to create a new sort of society after the fighting was over. As Crèvecoeur observed, “The rage of civil discord hath advanced among us with an astonishing rapidity. Every opinion is changed; every prejudice is subverted; every ancient principle is annihilated . . . the son is armed against the father, the brother against the brother.”<sup>38</sup> One English critic found that the colonial call for “liberty” was a bid to secure for the individual “the uncontrolled power of doing *as much evil as he can*,” and that “many of the American leaders have attempted to sanctify their revolt by a specious appearance of *religion*.”<sup>39</sup>

Only now did religion unite the inhabitants of colonial America. Charles Woodmason, Anglican priest and itinerant in the southern back-

<sup>34</sup> Charles L. Cohen, “The ‘Liberty or Death’ Speech: A Note on Religion and Revolutionary Rhetoric,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 38 (1981), pp. 702–17, at 704.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 32, 145–6.

<sup>36</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1904), pp. 466–9, 481.

<sup>37</sup> Johann Heinrichs to Herr H., Jan. 18, 1778: “Extracts from the Letter Book of Captain Johann Heinrichs of the Hessian Jäger Corps, 1778–1780,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 22 (1898), pp. 137–70, at 137; Heinrichs to August Ludwig Schlözer, n.d., in Ernst Kipping, *The Hessian View of America 1775–1783* (Monmouth Beach, N.J.: Philip Freneau Press, 1971), p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. Albert E. Stone (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 342–3.

<sup>39</sup> [Ambrose Serle], *Americans against Liberty; or an Essay on the Nature and Principles of True Freedom, shewing that the Designs and Conduct of the Americans tend only to Tyranny and Slavery* (London, 1775), pp. 6–7, 10–12.

country, had earlier seen how the sects were “eternally jarring among themselves—The Presbyterians hate the Baptists far more than they do the Episcopalians, and so of the Rest.” This was, moreover, a deliberate strategy, as he reported to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1767:

Not less than 20 itinerant Presbyterian, Baptist and Independent preachers are maintained by the Synods of Pennsylvania and New England to traverse this country poisoning the minds of the people – instilling democratical and commonwealth principles into their minds – embittering them against the very name of bishops, and all Episcopal government and laying deep their fatal Republican notions and principles.<sup>40</sup>

Against this background, the experience of revolution in North America and France contributed greatly to discredit the polemic about “liberty” that had characterized the English-speaking world and provided much of its self-identity. Even Edmund Burke was finally driven in 1790 to condemn the excesses of the “popular” member of the commonwealth in France, now “to be covered with the ‘all-atoning name’ of liberty.” Liberty was to be the cloak of a multitude of evils.<sup>41</sup>

The long-term effects of this conflict over the meanings of liberty are still powerfully formative, for the denominational polemics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were transposed to become the dominant framework for the historical self-understanding of the new Republic. In 1860, John Wingate Thornton’s key anthology explained “the politico-theological phase of the conflict for American Independence” in crude, antithetical terms: one side stood for “liberty,” the other for “arbitrary rule,” “oppression,” and “slavery.” He offered a teleological history of the development of a unified state: “One nationality, and that of a Protestant people, was essential to constitutional liberty in America . . . So God formed the fair Temple of American Liberty.” Learned, grave Puritans, claimed Thornton, had crossed to New England in the early 1600s to escape “the tyrant Charles I.” According to Thornton, 1776 was the third act in a drama of which 1640 and 1688 were the first two. Thornton quoted Increase Mather’s Election Sermon of 1677: “our fathers . . . did not, in their coming hither, propound any great matters to themselves respecting this world; only that they should have liberty to serve God, and to walk with him in all the ways of his worship.”<sup>42</sup> Given this model, the self-understanding of the United States had to be that it embodied “freedom from.” Evidence to the contrary was not admissible.

<sup>40</sup> Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), pp. 43, 240–1.

<sup>41</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Clark, ed., pp. 412, 414.

<sup>42</sup> John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: or, the Political Sermons of the Period of 1776. With a Historical Introduction, Notes, and Illustrations* (Boston, 1860), pp. iii–iv, ix, xiii, xviii, xxx, 41, 108, 145.

This conception of a dominant practice of “freedom from” survived even David Hackett Fischer’s analysis demonstrating its problematic status. Fischer argued that the unity of the new United States was precariously preserved in the years immediately after independence; “The balkanization of British North America would have been [a] catastrophe for the cause of freedom in the modern world.” Inconsistently, Fischer also wrote that America’s “diversity of libertarian ideas has created a culture of freedom which is more open and expansive than any unitary tradition alone could possibly be . . . . In time, this plurality of freedoms may prove to be that nation’s most enduring legacy to the world.”<sup>43</sup>

This was a stock response to the deep divisions over the nature and meaning of liberty that Fischer had himself so well analysed. The vision of the new Republic as exceptional, emancipated, regenerated, and pristine was essentially a religious one; it might be argued that the dynamics of revolution and war in 1776–83 (followed by another Civil War in the nineteenth century and world wars and social upheaval in the twentieth) conflated the different understandings of liberty that Fischer explored and fused them in a unitary public doctrine, sometimes now termed a “civic religion.” This conception of “freedom to” might easily become a militant idea; under the impact of resurgent religious fundamentalism in the United States and in its government, the present is the most clearly defined of such instances. Although academic history has not yet responded to these changes, the higher journalism has done so.<sup>44</sup>

The competing claims by rival interest groups within contemporary U.S. society almost all seek to capture and exploit a shared notion of “freedom to.” Outside observers increasingly see these competing groups as invoking the “all-atoning name” of liberty to justify self-interest, a suspicion that has been applied to the state itself. Since the Iraq War of 2003, there has been a growing awareness of the United States’ only limited success in exporting an idea of “negative liberty” around the world. This mixed track record can be explained in terms of the conflicts over the meaning of liberty embedded in the history of the United States and traced to divergent understandings present from the seventeenth century. An idea of liberty that seems within the United States to be related to “freedom from” is often perceived from outside as a disguised form of “freedom to.” The country was long shielded from this reality by its cult of “the Founding,” but that cult is weakening. It appears less possible now for states to have been founded *de novo* by inspired writing on a *tabula rasa*; the past experience from which people seek most anxiously to escape is precisely the past experience that still influences them most.

<sup>43</sup> Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, pp. 841, 898. See also Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), p. viii.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., George Monbiot, “Their Beliefs are Bonkers, But They Are at the Heart of Power,” *Guardian*, Apr. 20, 2004; and John Sutherland, “God Save America,” *Guardian*, May 3, 2004.

So the rhetorical strategy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dissenting polemicists finds parallels in present-day U.S. discourse. It was a theme reactivated even before the 9/11 attacks: Allan Bloom observed that with the American Revolution, “the questions of political principle and of right had been solved once and for all.” Accordingly, “when we Americans speak seriously about politics, we mean that our principles of freedom and equality and the rights based on them are rational and everywhere applicable. World War II was really an educational project undertaken to force those who did not accept these principles to do so.”<sup>45</sup>

The universalizing quality of such claims, the Manichean dualism of good and evil, the self-described monopoly on virtue, the missionary zeal, and the unilateral foreign policy that stems from them have been described as a new Jacobinism, appealing to others in American society who do not understand the full implications of the message (nationalists, opponents of value-relativism, business interests) and exploiting the fear of global terrorism.<sup>46</sup> But that analysis, although illuminating, neglects the indebtedness of this value system to an evangelical Christian fundamentalism that has powerful antecedents in America and was implicit in the Revolution itself. As President George W. Bush explained in an interview in 2002, his values were “God-given values. These aren’t United States-created values.”<sup>47</sup>

This idea had been reintroduced into American discourse before Bush’s presidency. One scholar has pointed to a transition in U.S. foreign policy goals in the 1990s from their Cold War function of defending the “free world” to a policy of seeking “a full-scale transformation of the international order,” an objective masked by “ritualistic allusions to freedom, world peace, and global leadership.”<sup>48</sup> If this phenomenon is older than the Iraq War of 2003, it is also much broader. It may be suggested that the common feature of many aspects of contemporary U.S. culture (quite aside from the government’s

<sup>45</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 153, 158. “Every educational system has a moral good that it tries to attain and that informs the curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being. . . . Democratic education, whether it admits it or not, wants and needs to produce men and women who have the tastes, knowledge and character supportive of a democratic regime” (p. 26).

<sup>46</sup> Claes G. Ryn argues that “A personality type has ascended to great influence in [the U.S.] that is rhetorically dedicated to doing good for the world but is fundamentally motivated by a will to dominate.” *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2003), p. 3. Ryn’s argument is weakened by, but does not depend on, his claim for a fundamental transition in the late twentieth century from an idea of “freedom from” embodied in the American Revolution and entrenched by that Revolution in the new republic (pp. 4–5). It is argued here that the American Revolution also embodied powerful expressions of “freedom to” for reasons essentially religious.

<sup>47</sup> George W. Bush interview, *Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 2002, quoted in Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: the Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. viii–ix and passim.

foreign policy) has been not to possess the world, but to remake it in its own image. To possess the world would still be condemned in the United States as “imperialism.” By contrast, a moral obligation to homogenize the world in conformity to a U.S. model can be defended as defeating an “evil empire” and instituting the reign of virtue.

No such evangelical project has been intruded into the affairs of nations since the 1770s, and as at that time it contrasts with other understandings of “liberty” elsewhere in the world. It raises the questions whether other societies have been more successful in safeguarding “freedom from,” despite the difficulty of defending that concept philosophically, and whether the United States’ persistent self-image as a defender of freedom rather than as a crusading state rests on an important misinterpretation of its origins. What future the United States’ militant assertion of “freedom to” offers to “the rights and liberties of Englishmen,” at home and abroad, is likely to be decided by the historical self-understanding that the people of the United States entertain of themselves. Historians reinterpret the past in the light of the present; yet, too often, they do so too late to be of use.

