

How the Upstart Sects Won America: 1776-1850

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Using our reconstructed denominational statistics for 1776 and 1850, we demonstrate that the so-called Protestant "mainline" began to collapse rapidly, not in the past several decades as is widely supposed, but late in the 18th Century. Hence, by 1850 the Baptists and Methodists — vigorous, evangelical sects in that era — dominated the religious landscape. Treating the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists as "firms" competing within an unregulated religious economy, we seek to understand why the upstart sects won. The vital factors include organizational structures, the clergy, evangelical techniques and, perhaps most important, theology

During the past 20 years there has been growing awareness that the decline in religious participation, so long prophesied by social scientists, somehow passes over conservative congregations. Indeed, although some social scientists attempt to dismiss these signs of conservative vigor as but one last dying spasm of piety, others have been impelled by the facts to seek explanations of why the conservative churches are prosperous and growing, even as the liberal churches decline (Kelley, 1972; Bibby, 1978; Hoge & Roozen, 1979; Warner, 1983; Richardson, 1985; Roof & McKinney, 1987). In this essay we too seek to explain why liberal religion fades. Rather than focus on recent events, we have taken an historical approach; and, although our study is limited to the American religious economy, we expect that the underlying processes we uncover will generalize across time and space.

We shall argue that the fortunes of the so-called "mainline" Protestant bodies began to decline rapidly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, not in the 1950s and 1960s. Using reconstructed denominational statistics beginning in 1776 (Finke & Stark, 1986; Stark & Finke, 1987), we shall show that the Congregationalists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians truly dominated the religious scene at the start of the American Revolution, but in less than eight decades, by 1850, they had slumped into numerical insignificance, while the Methodists and Baptists swept over the land.

This fact has gone largely unnoticed for several reasons. First, these denominations experienced modest growth in their absolute numbers of members throughout this period; but, of course, the population was growing at a thundering pace, and so each year the *relative* size of these bodies grew smaller. The market shares of the Congregationalists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians went into eclipse almost two centuries before their failures were translated into a decline in absolute numbers. The second reason the decline of liberal Protestantism is so badly misdated has to do with its political and cultural influence. The liberal Protestant bodies have been dominated by the privileged and powerful who

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were able to define their denominations as the “mainline” long after they had become a “sideline” in terms of market appeal. Indeed, in 1987 the Congregationalists (United Church of Christ), Episcopalians and Presbyterians accounted for the religious affiliation of 25% of U.S. Senators and Representatives but could claim the loyalties of only 7% of the population. In contrast, Baptists account for more than 20% of American religious affiliation, but for only 10% of those in Congress. A third reason for the misdating is the fact that liberal Protestants have dominated religious discourse through their control of the elite seminaries and their near monopoly on “respectful” media coverage — and they have written nearly all the influential histories of American religion. Nevertheless, by early in the 19th century, these were bodies in decline. Ironically, their decline was caused by their inability to cope with the consequences of religious freedom.

This paper attempts to show that religious freedom created a relatively unregulated American religious economy and that competitive forces of the market place found the liberal Protestants unprepared, unable and often quite unwilling to attract and hold a committed following. To put our underlying thesis succinctly: in relatively unregulated religious economies, groups begin to lose their market positions as soon as, and to the degree that, they become secularized.¹ By “secularize” we mean to move from otherworldliness to worldliness, to present a more distant and indistinct conception of the supernatural, to relax the moral restrictions on members, and to surrender claims to an exclusive and superior truth. It follows from this definition that as groups secularize they will proselytize less vigorously. It is hard to witness for a faith with nothing special to offer in the religious message.

SHAPING THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

On the eve of the American Revolution, the era of religious persecution in the colonies had ended and religious toleration prevailed. In the immediate post-war period, however, toleration was giving way to the principle of religious freedom. Not only would all faiths be permitted to worship, but all would be given equal opportunities. That is, there would be no established churches, and the state would be separated from all religious entanglements. Although the United States never sustained an established religion, many of the colonies had done so, and several of these arrangements at the state level lasted well into the 19th century. As would be expected, the established denominations vigorously opposed disestablishment, preferring to depend on taxpayer support rather than on voluntary contributions. They soon were overwhelmed by a most unlikely alliance: the rationalists and freethinkers (including many influential political leaders) who resented their taxes going to *any* religion, and the upstart, aggressive, evangelical, Protestant sects, who resented their taxes going to *false* religions. Moreover, no denomination had sufficient national following to seek establishment by the federal government so freedom was born somewhat of necessity (Mead, 1956; Miller, 1935). Since all religious groups wanted their own religious freedom, even if few of them really wanted religious freedom for all, there was no other safe way to proceed but to create an unregulated, free market, religious economy. However, without state sponsorship, religions must compete, for religious

1. We have chosen to use the term *secularize* rather than *liberalize* in order to avoid confusion, since many sociologists insist on attaching political as well as theological content to all forms of the word *liberal*, while many historians regard sects as on the theological left and place theological “liberals” on the right

affiliation becomes a matter of individual choice. Each must capture some segment of the market in order to survive. Hence, aggressive firms successfully appealing to large segments of the population will grow; those failing to attract and retain members will decline.

As we shall see, many of the religious organizations of the colonies were ill-prepared to cope within these new conditions. The idea of appealing for members was alien to organizations accustomed to severely limiting the active involvement of the laity. Moreover, the highly educated and dignified clergy who controlled these denominations disdained the vigorous marketing techniques employed by upstart evangelicals; they viewed the informal religious practices of the frontier with contempt and distanced themselves from the common folk; the latter responded in kind.

In this essay we argue that the advent of a free market transformed American religion in two major ways. First, the primary basis of growth during the period 1776-1850 was an immense increase in religious mobilization; the rate of active membership rose rapidly. As new firms appeared in the marketplace, each seeking adherents, any given individual was more likely to find (or be found by) a church that was able and willing to meet his or her religious and social needs. If the high church ways of Episcopalianism did not suit, perhaps the emotionalism of a Methodist revival would fill the bill. So, much of the success of the Methodists and Baptists during this era was the result of bringing in large numbers of the previously unchurched. Second, the "mainline" denominations of 1776 failed to adapt to the competitive situation. The primary aspect of their failure was an inability to move West with the frontier, so that soon the colonial mainline was a significant religious presence only in the larger towns and cities along the Atlantic seaboard.

Against this overview we shall now develop more specific arguments and examine pertinent data.

WINNERS AND LOSERS: 1776-1850

The comparative study of American religions in the 18th and 19th centuries always has suffered from a lack of data adequate for making comparisons among denominations, across regions or over time. Recently, however, we have developed denominational membership estimates for both 1850 and 1776 for individual states and the nation. The 1850 estimates are based on religious statistics collected as a part of the regular 1850 census (U.S. Census, 1854). Because the census did not collect data on actual membership, the number of members for this time period is estimated by regression equations based on the seating capacity, the value of church property and the number of religious organizations. In other work we have demonstrated that these estimates have a high level of validity and reliability (Finke & Stark, 1986).

For 1776, the membership data are estimated from the number of churches by colony and denomination, as reported in the *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Paullin, 1932) and *The Colonial Clergy and the Colonial Churches of New England* (Weis, 1936). The 1776 estimates are not as refined as the 1850 estimates, but they do provide a valuable regional and denominational profile of religion in colonial America (Stark & Finke, 1987), and are an adequate bench mark for assessing changes over time.

Finally, both the 1850 and 1776 membership estimates have been converted into rates of adherents. Since some denominations counted children as members and others did not,

we added children to the membership totals when necessary.² This helps to standardize the measurement of membership across denominations and also allows for differential age structures across states.

When we calculated adherence rates for 1776 we were struck by how low they were and by the lack of regional variation. Overall, only 17% of the colonial population were affiliated with a church, an amazingly low number in light of modern notions about religious decline since the pious days of the Pilgrims. In fact, Pennsylvania and New Jersey both had higher adherence rates in 1776 than did the Puritan Commonwealth of Massachusetts. So much, then, for nostalgic misconceptions about the uniform Calvinist piety of colonial New England. However, the trends in adherence rates from 1776 to 1850 (Stark & Finke, 1987) reveal an amazingly rapid rise in the national rate — it doubled from 17% in 1776 to 34% in 1850. Moreover, this rise in the adherence rate occurred in all of the original parts of the national and even in many of the new additions. For example, the adherence rate for the East North Central Region (including Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin) was 37% in 1850. Clearly, the forces released by a de-regulated religious market had greatly increased the level of religious mobilization.

If religion was booming, however, not all religious bodies were sharing in the growth. Figure 1 compares the “market share” of major bodies in 1776 and 1850. Looking first at 1776, we see that the Congregationalists, Episcopalians and the Presbyterians dominated, although their overall market penetration was very poor; but of those who were active in a religious body, 55% belonged to one of these three bodies. At the time it seemed certain to informed observers that this pattern would persist — that these were *the* American faiths. Indeed, in 1761 Ezra Stiles, one of the leading intellectuals of colonial times, used a demographic projection technique taught him by Benjamin Franklin to proclaim that in 100 years there would be seven million Congregationalists and fewer than 400,000 Baptists. In fact there were far fewer than 500,000 Congregationalists in 1860 and about two million Baptists. As Figure 1 shows, in just 74 years the combined market total of the Congregationalists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians had shrunk to only 19.1% of religious adherents, even though the proportion belonging to churches had doubled.

During those 75 years, the Congregationalists had not only failed to spread into new parts of the expanding nation, but they had even lost out in New England where, in 1776, they had had 63% of the adherents. By 1850 the Baptists and Methodists had 39% of the adherents in New England while the Congregationalists had 27%.

The Episcopalians also fared badly in their share of the religious market. Nationally the Episcopalians dropped from 15.7% to 3.5% of all church adherents; their losses were especially severe in the South Atlantic region, where they dropped from 27% of all adherents to a mere 4%.

The Presbyterians' share of the religious market also declined, from 19% to 11.6%. Unlike the Congregationalists and Episcopalians, the Presbyterians' growth in actual numbers did keep pace with the growth of the population but failed to match the expansion of the proportion who were churched. As will be seen, the Presbyterians fared better because they were able to achieve some growth on the new American frontiers.

² The exact formula used to convert adult membership into total adherents is (Adult Members × (Total Population/Children 13 and under)) This formula was used for each denomination not counting children, with state as the unit of analysis.

FIGURE 1: WINNERS AND LOSERS, 1776-1850

PERCENT OF ALL RELIGIOUS ADHERENTS



Congregationalists

1776		20.4%	85,177
1850		4.0%	313,252

Episcopalians

1776		15.7%	65,940
1850		3.5%	273,727

Presbyterians

1776		19.0%	79,360
1850		11.6%	905,675

Baptists

1776		16.9%	70,479
1850		20.5%	1,602,323

Methodists

1776		2.5%	10,507
1850		34.2%	2,679,751

Catholics

1776		1.8%	7,323
1850		13.9%	1,088,016

During this 75-year period, the Baptists achieved very substantial growth primarily through conversion, while the Catholics grew rapidly through immigration. But the major shift in the American religious market in this period was the meteoric rise of Methodism. In 1776 the Methodists were a tiny religious society nominally connected to the Church of England and had only 65 churches scattered through the colonies. Seven decades later they towered over the nation. With 13,302 congregations enrolling more than 2.6 million members, Methodism was the largest single denomination, accounting for more than a third of all American church members. Not only did the Methodists flourish on the American frontiers; they boomed everywhere except for the Mountain and Pacific regions, sparsely settled areas still largely dominated by Catholic missions.

The central question then becomes clear. *Why* did the leading denominations of 1776 crumble in a free market religious economy? What did they do wrong? Or, what did the Methodists and the Baptists do right?

Readers will have noticed our use of market terminology from time to time in this essay. This is neither accidental nor a lapse into bad taste. Whether the commodity involved is tangible, as in the case of automobiles and lawn mowers, or intangible, as in the case of ultimate meaning or salvation, the "invisible hand" of a free market prunes the weakest participants and rewards the fit. Martin Marty (1984: 169) has described the religious situation in America in the wake of the Revolution as: "a textbook example of free enterprise in the marketplace of religion, a competition in which the fittest survived. Whenever someone discovered new nooks and crannies on the spiritual landscape, they quickly developed new movements or sects. The message of the aggressors to the uncommitted was 'Be saved!' and to each other, 'Adapt or die!' " Whatever else may be involved, religious organizations in the American religious economy live or die on the basis of their marketing efforts. As Demerath (1974: 23) has pointed out, it is both necessary and appropriate to recognize a "denominational headquarters as a business enterprise." It is equally necessary and appropriate to bring the tools of economic and marketing analysis to bear on the performance of these enterprises.

To distinguish the winning from the losing denominations, we must, in marketing terms, analyze 1) their organizational structure (denominational polity); 2) their sales representatives (clergy); 3) their product (religious message); and 4) their marketing (evangelical) techniques.

Our use of a market model is not intended to demean the content of religion, or to reduce religion to a mere matter of getting out and selling. To the contrary, we argue that a major market weakness of the colonial mainline was precisely a matter of doctrinal content, or the lack of it. The religious message had become too vague, too accommodated and too secular to have broad appeal. Here too the market model is an essential tool to understanding which kinds of religious content best satisfied the concerns of people who were free to *choose* from a wide selection of faiths.

For the sake of clarity, we will restrict our analysis of the religious market in three ways. First, we will limit our attention to the major Protestant denominations involved in direct competition for members, excluding Roman Catholics, Lutherans and other bodies which in this period were viewed as immigrant churches trying to serve an ethnic segment of the population.³ Second, we shall give little attention to specific evangelical techniques, because this topic requires more coverage than we can offer in this essay. These techniques will be discussed at length in future work. Finally, we will limit our treatment of regional variations and of the singular ability of the upstart sects to function along the frontiers. This is also a large topic which will be addressed in future work (Finke & Stark, forthcoming).

Denominational Polity

Social scientists agree that an organization's structure can have tremendous impact on its efficiency and success, and this is equally true of religious organizations (Harrison, 1959; Wood & Zald, 1966; Szafran, 1976). Nevertheless, it would appear at first glance that variations in denominational polity during our time period played little or no part in which grew and which did not.

3. These comments should not be misinterpreted; Catholics, Lutherans, and all churches were forced to use persuasion rather than coercion in the recruitment of new adherents. See Dolan (1978) for a review of the Catholics' use of revivalism from 1830 to 1900.

The two most successful denominations, the Baptists and the Methodists, seem to be polar extremes in terms of polity. Historians have often cited the democratic structure of the Baptist Church as an attractive feature to the people of the early frontier (Hudson, 1981; Ahlstrom, 1972; Sweet, 1952); but the Methodist Church was even more successful on the frontiers despite their hierarchical structure with strong, centralized authority placing control firmly in the hands of the clergy. Similar variations would seem to exist among the losers: the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Congregational Church seem at opposite extremes, with the Presbyterians falling somewhere in between.

However, when we look more closely at these denominational organizations, we find that historians were correct to stress the way in which the democratic congregational life of the Baptists helped them church the frontiers. What they failed to note was that this applied to the Methodists as well. In those days the Methodists were about as democratic *locally* as were the Baptists. A professional clergy had not yet centralized control of the Methodist organization. Although the circuit-riders were fulltime professionals vested with substantial authority, they visited a congregation only from time to time and played the role of visiting evangelist more than the role of pastor. Indeed, in this era the actual pastoral functions were performed in most Methodist churches by unpaid, local "amateurs" just like those serving the Baptist congregations up the road. These Methodist amateurs did most of the preaching, baptizing, marrying and burying. As a result, the average Methodist congregation was a model of "congregationalism," in the sense that control actually resided in the hands of the adult membership. It was only when the circuit-riders dismounted and accepted "settled" pastorates that the "episcopal" structure of Methodism came to the fore. Indeed, it may well be that when the Methodists were able to create a national organization based on the circuit-riders, they had the best of both worlds — centralized direction *and* local control (Miyakawa, 1964). In any event, despite apparent differences in polity, both the Methodists and the Baptists were surprisingly democratic and thus able to respond to the actual desires of the market.

In contrast, the Congregationalists were not nearly so "congregational" as either of the upstart sects, being dominated by a highly professional clergy. This was the result of two inter-related factors. First, as discussed in detail below, the Congregationalists had opted for a highly educated clergy, which led to a chronic shortage of pastors and maximized the bargaining power of the clergy, both individually and collectively. A second factor was establishment. As the established faith of the New England colonies, Congregational churches were organized at town meetings, were supported by the town's "religious taxes," and "the towns played the customary role in concurring in the choice of the minister" (McLoughlin, 1971: 795). This system made the clergy influential in local governmental affairs. Moreover, establishment allowed the Congregationalists to depend on secular organizational structures to provide central coordination of their religious affairs within New England, and left them with no alternative model for coordination among frontier congregations. Whereas the Baptists would form regional associations whenever four or five Baptist churches were established, Congregational churches established outside of the New England region were often isolated units lacking any regional support. In fact, to be united with churches beyond the local state line was simply contrary to the organizational plan of the early Congregational churches (Atkins & Fagley, 1942).

The 1801 "Plan of Union" with the Presbyterians illustrates the organizational problems of the early Congregationalists. The plan, which was first supported by the

Congregational General Assembly of Connecticut and later approved by the General Associations of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine, was designed to unify the frontier missionizing efforts of both the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. The result was the Congregationalists were simply swallowed up by the Presbyterians, in large measure because the latter had established presbyteries, not only congregations, on the frontier. Since there was no alternative Congregational central structure, the Plan of Union led new Congregational churches to join a presbytery and thus effectively to switch denominations (Sweet, 1939). The Congregational associations in individual states were simply not able or willing to support the national expansion of their church. In the end, the "Plan" slowed the decline of the Presbyterians and confined the Congregationalists to New England.

Unlike the Congregationalists, the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians did have national and regional organizations, but each was beset with organizational problems. The American Revolution did great damage to the Episcopalians. Many members supported the Crown and fled at war's end. Sweet (1952) reported that the majority of Virginia's 100 Anglican parishes were defunct by the end of the war and that the number of active Anglican clergy had dropped from 91 to 28. Sweet also estimated that North Carolina, Georgia and Pennsylvania each had only one active Anglican priest by the end of the Revolution. In addition to these disasters, the Episcopalians lost their formal connection with the Church of England, thus ending their supervision by the Bishop of London, as well as the substantial flow of subsidies and mission clergy provided by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Although the process of national reorganization began in 1783, effective new central authority was lacking for several more decades. Thus, in a critical time when rapid growth was shaping a new nation, the Episcopal Church was struggling to support its remaining churches and to recover from the war; it lacked the resources to expand its share of the religious market.

In contrast, the Presbyterians were well-organized, emerged from the Revolution with enhanced prestige, and had established strong presbyteries throughout the nation; but their growth was constantly plagued by divisions within their organization. While the "Plan of Union" contributed to their growth, the new "Presbygational" churches also contributed to doctrinal and polity controversies. In a similar fashion, camp meetings contributed to Presbyterian growth in rural and frontier areas, but they also aroused disapproval "back East," leading to sharp regional and doctrinal controversy. The Presbyterians worked tirelessly for unity, understanding it to be rooted in uniformity. Their efforts to enforce strict national standards in polity and doctrine frequently shattered the very unity they sought and prompted frequent regional schisms (Sweet, 1964b; Ahlstrom, 1975).

In summary, it appears that the situation facing the churches in this period placed very stern demands on denominations to become what might best be described as lean, mean, competitive organizations prepared to seek souls to the ends of civilization and beyond. Perhaps local "congregationalism" was not a sufficient basis for meeting these demands, but it appears to have been necessary. This suggestion is further supported by the fact that the "Methodist miracle" of growth which occurred during this period, when the local congregations were pretty much self-governing, was followed by the "Methodist collapse" which began soon after the clergy had assumed full control.

While it is convenient to speak of organizations doing this or that, organizations *per se* never do anything. Only people ever act. So let's bring human beings into view. Who

was representing these denominations in the religious marketplace? What was their background and training, and how were they recruited and deployed? Moreover, what was their message?

Ministers and their Messages

While the organizational forms used by the Baptists and Methodists were quite different, their clergy were nearly interchangeable. In both denominations, ministers came primarily from the ranks of the common folk, and to a very important extent remained common folk. Unlike the Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian ministers, who typically were of genteel origins, and who were highly trained and well-educated, the Baptist and Methodist clergy were of the people. They had little education, received little if any pay, spoke in the vernacular, and preached from the heart.

The local preacher was a neighbor, friend, or relative of many of the people he served. While this may have hampered the prophetic role of religion — causing the clergy to hold the same prejudices as their flocks — it fostered a close relationship between the minister and the people in the pews. The minister shared the wants, needs and desires of the people, and he made every effort possible to share the same religion too.

One of the most striking differences between the clergy of the upstart sects and those of the colonial mainline, and the easiest to document, was education. It was no secret that the great majority of Baptist and Methodist ministers had little education. The 1853 *Baptist Almanac* estimated that in 1823 only about 100 of the 2,000 Baptist clergy had been “liberally educated,” and the famous Methodist itinerant Peter Cartwright estimated that at the General Conference of 1844 fewer than 50 (of approximately 4,282 traveling ministers) “had anything more than a common English education [grade school], and scores of them not that.” But neither denomination was apologetic for this lack of education. Cartwright boasted that these uneducated clergy “preached the Gospel with more success and had more seals to their ministry than all the sapient, downy D.D.’s in modern times” (Cartwright, 1856: 267).

As with most Methodist leaders of the time, including Bishop Asbury, Cartwright was not opposed to higher education, but rather to the use of theological schools for the designing of “man made” ministers.⁴ A committee of the Indiana Conference on the establishment of Indiana Asbury University, proclaimed their reassurance that it would never be “a manufactory in which preachers are to be made.” And the Methodist *Discipline* of 1784 advised preachers never to let study interfere with soul-saving: “If you can do but one, let your studies alone. We would throw by all the libraries in the world rather than be guilty of the loss of one soul.”

In his invaluable work on the colonial clergy, Weis (1936) tabulated data on the educations of all men who had held pulpits in New England from the first settlement through 1776. Of the 1,586 who had *ever* been pastor of a Congregationalist church, 1,507 or 95% were college *graduates*. Of the 127 Anglicans and 51 Presbyterians, all were college graduates. Of the 217 Baptists, however, only 25 (or 11.5%) had college degrees. Weis listed no Methodists, and, in fact, our data locate only two Methodist congregations in New England as of 1776, which had probably just appeared.

4. For example, Peter Cartwright helped to establish McKendree and MacMurray colleges and introduced the first bill to establish a state university in Illinois when he served as a member of the state legislature (Miyakawa, 1964).

Somewhat later statistics on seminary enrollments also display the vast educational differences among Protestant clergy. In 1831, according to the *American Almanac* (1833), Congregational seminaries enrolled 234 students, the Presbyterian seminaries 257, Episcopalian 47 (they still drew on men educated in England), and the Baptists 107. Since they wouldn't even found their first seminary until well past this time, the Methodists had no seminarians in 1831. By 1859, according to the *American Almanac* (1861) there were 275 men in Congregationalist seminaries and 632 in Presbyterian seminaries; the Episcopalians had 130 seminarians, the Baptists had 210 and the Methodists had 51. In fact, the Congregational, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian seminaries had educated over 6,000 ministers before a single student graduated from a Methodist seminary. The first Methodist seminary was not established until 1847, and even then it is estimated that "at least two thirds of the ministers were in opposition" to seminary education for ministers (Clark, 1952: 296). Moreover, when their seminary was established, the intent was "not to call young men to the ministry, but to prepare . . . young men who have previously been called by God and his church" (in Clark, 1952: 344). A student was not allowed admission to the seminary unless he could provide a certificate demonstrating he was a licentiate (an unordained church member granted a license to preach).

Although the Baptists opened theological schools long before the Methodists, seminary-trained Baptist ministers were always a small minority and largely confined to the Northern states, even though the South was the Baptist stronghold. The position of the Baptists was that "God never called an unprepared man to preach."⁵ Thus, even by the middle of the 19th century, the Baptists and the Methodists still relied on an uneducated clergy.

If the Baptist and Methodist ministers lacked education in comparison to the other leading Protestant bodies, they were not less educated than the people they served. In 1870, for example, only 2% of 17-year-olds graduated from high school (U.S. Census, 1975). As Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury argued, "a simple man can speak and write for simple, plain people, upon simple truths" (in Miyakawa, 1964: 90-91). On the frontiers of America, or even in New England, the Baptist and Methodist clergy held the same level of education as the population in general. While their lack of education is often viewed with scorn (Sweet was clearly eager to show how his Methodist forbears had made up for this later in the 19th century by founding many colleges), it was, in fact, the education of the colonial mainline clergy that was truly unusual. These men were recruited from and moved most comfortably within "society" — the social and financial elite. Indeed, Robert Baird wrote that in 1844 many ministers "belong to families of the first rank in the country; and as they can at least give their families a good education, with the advantages of such an education, as well as a good character, and the good name of their fathers, their children are almost invariably prosperous and often form alliances with the wealthiest and most distinguished families in the country" (Baird, 1844: 306). In general, neither the ministers, their parents, nor their children came from or remained in the ranks of the people.

How did the higher levels of education affect the ministers, the religious message and the overall membership growth of these denominations? As suggested above, higher education no doubt changed the social status of the minister. Rather than being a local boy, called by the people to preach, he was a trained professional with many more years

5 See the 1871 *Baptist Quarterly* for an overview of the Baptist position on an educated ministry.

of schooling than 98% of the population. This increased social status was not always a benefit, for it often increased the social distance between the minister and his congregants. Phares (1964: 134) illustrated this social distance when he contrasted a young seminarian's prayer for rain with that of the local deacon. Whereas, the young seminary preacher asked for "copious showers," the local deacon admitted he didn't know what copious meant, but he did know: "What we need is a pine knot floater and a nubbin stretcher." Though both prayers might have been sincere requests for rain, only the latter was clearly understood by the people.

As democratic convictions grew, many Americans began to detect objectionable attitudes among the highly-educated, often regarding them as snobs who thought they were better than ordinary folks. This was particularly true in the growing frontier areas and in the South where many people retained bitter memories of clergy from established churches looking down on them (Newman, 1894: 336). In New England, where battles were being waged over religious taxes and disestablishment, the privileges of the highly educated and well paid clergy were also being questioned. One Connecticut dissenter provided this succinct critique: "Preachers that will not preach without a salary found for them by law are hirelings who seek the fleece and not the flock" (in McLoughlin, 1971: 927). The highly educated minister might have enhanced the "respectability" of religion, but he did little to gather the flock.

In addition to influencing patterns of interaction between minister and flock, an educated clergy had expanded career opportunities. For many, the pinnacle of success was teaching at a seminary or college, not becoming a famous preacher or serving as a leader in the local association or conference. Once again, Cartwright summarizes the position of many itinerants when he writes: "Multiply colleges, universities, seminaries and academies; multiply our agencies, and editorships, and fill them all with our best and most efficient preachers and you localize the ministry and secularize them, too; then farewell to itineracy" (in Sweet, 1946: 68). In short, the educated clergy entered a prestigious full-time profession with a variety of career opportunities, whereas the uneducated clergy answered a call from God and the people to serve the local church in saving souls.

The education and background of the ministers also influenced their message and its delivery. Perhaps the contrast between theology and faith conveys the vivid differences between educated and "called" clergy. Does the religious message address matters of faith directly relevant to the experience and concerns of the laity, or is it a discourse on abstruse theological matters? Put another way, is it a message of conversion or a message of education?

Neither the Baptists nor the Methodists set forth their confessions in complex theological writing that required extensive instruction. The Baptists had traditional ties with Calvinism, whereas the Methodists emphasized Arminian views, but both denominations stressed spiritual conversion and a strong individual responsibility to God.⁶ For each denomination the power of God was experienced as well as taught, and their messages seldom excluded the topics of sin and salvation, or hellfire and redemption. Their emotion-packed messages centered on experience with the sacred while warning of secular evils.

6. For a list of the five essential Baptist principles, see Sweet (1964a: 43).

Writing in 1792, Jedidiah Morse, the "father of American Geography" described Methodist preachers thus:

Their mode of preaching is entirely extemporaneous, very loud and animated. They appear studiously to avoid connection in their discourses, and are fond of introducing pathetic stories, which are calculated to affect the tender passions. Their manner is very solemn, and their preaching is frequently attended with surprising effect upon their audiences (in Gaustad, 1982 309)

In contrast, the denominations of the colonial mainline offered a message that was literate and intellectual, but which increasingly said little about salvation, hellfire or the other principal themes of the Baptist and the Methodist sermons. Moreover, even in 1776 many a Congregational pastor was well down the road to Unitarianism. Whatever their personal theological convictions, the educated clergy of these denominations preferred sedate and learned discourse to emotional exhortations.

The Presbyterians of Kentucky, Tennessee and other frontier areas, where more emphasis was placed on religious experience, were somewhat exceptional; but even on the frontier an introduction to Presbyterianism often required an instructional approach that was attractive to the well-educated but was often viewed as overly formal for the average farmer. When describing the relationship between the Presbyterians and the Methodists, Jacob Young quipped, "They were the aristocracy, and we the poor people" (Young, 1857: 98).

Content was not the only factor here; style of delivery also mattered. The late Marshall McLuhan might have suggested that in some ways the minister *was* the message. The Baptist and Methodist preachers looked like ordinary men because they were, and their sermons could convert and convince ordinary people because the message was direct and clear. The words were not read from notes, but seemed (to both speakers and hearers) to issue directly from divine inspiration. No wonder that Baptist and Methodist services could so often become outbursts of emotional participation. As Peter Cartwright recalled "while I was preaching, the power of God fell on the assembly, and there was an awful shaking among the dry bones. Several fell on the floor and cried for mercy. . . ." (Cartwright, 1856: 55-56). We must never underestimate the impact of humble and ardent preachers on the spread of faith.

Charles G. Finney, one of the greatest preachers of the era (despite being a highly educated man), put the matter clearly in his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, published in 1835 (in Sweet, 1944: 137).

Many ministers are finding it out already, that a Methodist preacher, without the advantages of a liberal education, will draw a congregation around him which a Presbyterian minister, with perhaps ten times as much learning, cannot equal, because he has not the earnest manner of the other, and does not pour out fire upon his hearers when he preaches

If the goal was to arouse faith, the carefully drafted, scholarly, and often dry, sermons of the learned clergy were no match for the impromptu, emotional pleas of the uneducated preacher. Theology has its place, but it doesn't save souls as the Methodists and Baptists understood at the turn of the 19th century. What saved souls, they had discovered, was a heartfelt message of conversion.

Reliance on well-educated clergy also created a serious practical problem for the colonial mainline: a constant shortage of clergy. This shortage allowed clergy to be very selective in their placement, and nearly all chose to serve a well-established congregation rather

than to pioneer a new one. Sweet (1952: 116-17) offered an apt comparison of the way clergy of different denominations reached a new settlement: "In the Presbyterian system the minister was called by the people; the Baptist farmer-preacher came with the people; the Methodist circuit-rider was sent to the people." Because the Baptists and the Methodists had a surplus of available clergy, they could move with the people, rather than wait for them to call. As a result, the Baptists and the Methodists usually were the only firms operating in the newer market areas. In contrast, the constant shortage of educated clergy for the Congregational, the Episcopalian and the Presbyterian churches limited their range to established markets.

Why did the Baptists and the Methodists have an abundance of clergy? Because both denominations developed systems which made it easy for gifted laymen to enter the ministry. Among the Baptists the local preacher, or farmer-preacher, was often a man of local origins whose call was ratified by his fellow congregants. Often more than one member of a congregation would receive "God's call," and those not selected to fill the local pulpit had to seek elsewhere, typically by starting a new congregation. The result was free-market competition among Baptist preachers and a generous supply of clergy to fill any available slot.⁷ In short, if the Baptist farmer-preachers came with the people, it was because they *were* the people.

Although the Methodist literature is filled with concerns over a shortage of itinerant clergy, the circuit rider, as noted above, was only the most visible and romantic element of the Methodist system for serving sparsely settled areas. The itinerants would organize and coordinate the activities of the local churches, and their visits provided variety, excitement and supervision. But much of the responsibility was delegated to the locals. It was they who provided the class leaders, the exhorters, and the local preachers who carried on the day-to-day functions of the church (see Norwood, 1964: 471; Sweet, 1946: 47; Baird, 1844).

Not only could the Baptists and Methodists generate surplus clergy; both denominations operated with incredibly low overheads. The Baptists typically paid their preachers nothing at all. Most earned their living with a plow just like other members of the congregation (hence the name farmer-preacher). Local Methodist church leaders also received little, if any, pay. Even the circuit riders received only the most meager wages. Their official salary was \$100 per year in 1834, but the western circuit riders were often granted only a small percentage of this sum (see Miyakawa, 1964: 50-51). If the itinerant minister was married, which was strongly discouraged, the official policy was to grant an additional \$100 for his wife, \$16 for each child under seven, and \$24 for each child from seven to fourteen years of age. These additional stipends, however, were almost never granted to the western circuit riders. A few of the Baptist clergy in the North were paid wages similar to those of the other denominations, but throughout most of the nation they received little, if any, pay.

In comparison, the average yearly income for Presbyterian and Congregational ministers at this time was estimated at between \$1,000 to \$4,000 in large towns and between \$400 to \$1,000 in small country towns (Hayward, 1936). The uneducated, and often unpaid, clergy of the Baptists and Methodists made it possible for these denominations to sustain congregations anywhere a few people could gather. It is hard to imagine any sum of money that would have caused an Anglican Bishop to travel nearly

⁷ Read John Taylor's *History of Ten Baptist Churches* for an example of how the selection process might work.

300,000 miles on horseback as Francis Asbury did, disregarding weather and chronic ill-health, "to goad his men and to supervise their work" (Marty, 1984: 171). Thus did the upstarts sweep over the nation because, just like Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, they always got there "fustest with the mostest."

Harvard and Yale Divinity Schools did not train their students to earn their own livings behind a horse and plow, nor were the students prepared to spend half their days in the saddle going from one rural hamlet to another. Indeed, we suspect that the primary impact of these schools on their students, then as now, may have been to replace faith with theology and belief with unbelief. It may be that secularization ensues whenever religion is placed within a formal academic setting, for scholars seem unable to resist clearing up its imperfections. Instead of being fascinated with mysteries, religious scholars will often seek to create a belief system that is internally consistent. Finding that things won't fit, they begin to prune and revise and redefine (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). New England dissenters also seemed to recognize this trait in religious scholars. In 1793 a Baptist congregation, the society of Woodstock, included the following excerpt in their constitution: "yet may we say without wrong to particular persons that we believe the confining the ministry of the gospel to a class of men who must of necessity be educated in some seminary of learning, and consequently cramped down by certain rules, notes, forms, &c. and their receiving approbation, license and ordination from none but their own brethren has a direct tendency to corrupt the simplicity of the gospel, and deprives the people of their inherent right of judging of the qualifications of their teachers . . ." (in McLoughlin, 1971: 802).

We should point out, however, that it is not education in general that leads to this process of secularization. Clearly, religious participation did not decline as the education of the population increased. Instead, we are suggesting that the message becomes more worldly, and is held with less certainty, as religion becomes the focus of scholarly critique and attention.

Whether this corrosive effect of scholarship on religion is inevitable, clearly this is what happened at the elite Protestant colleges in America beginning well before the Revolution. Ahlstrom (1975: 483) characterized Harvard late in the 18th century as "essentially and conscientiously Unitarian." As Harvard's divinity school took shape "its faculty and students were Unitarian and remained so with few exceptions during the entire nineteenth century" (Ahlstrom, 1975: 483). As for Yale, in 1778 it appointed as its new president Ezra Stiles, who was of the opinion that revivals depend on driving people "seriously, soberly, and solemnly out of their wits" (in Ahlstrom, 1975: 490). Given the religious climate at these two schools it is important to realize how totally they dominated the "manufacture of ministers" during the period in question. Weis's data on the colonial New England clergy show that of the 1,676 who were college graduates, 57% had Harvard degrees and 26% were Yale men.

Moreover, it was in the religion departments and divinity schools of these colleges, not in the science departments, that unbelief was formulated and promulgated in American intellectual life. As Turner (1985: xiii) summed up his important conclusions:

In trying to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science, the defenders of God slowly strangled Him. If anyone is to be arraigned for deicide, it is . . . not the godless Robert Ingersoll but the Godly Beecher family.

Whatever the case, clergy who flirted with Unitarianism, or thought Methodists and Baptists literally were “out of their wits,” would have been of little worth out where the “great harvest of souls” was underway, even had they been willing to venture forth. And clergy accustomed to gentlemen’s agreements limiting competition were ill-equipped to hold their own in a free market. A poignant example was reported by Peter Cartwright in his autobiography. Arriving in a new area, Cartwright was approached by the local Presbyterian minister who requested that he not form a church in his neighborhood because it was within the “bounds of his congregation.” The Presbyterian minister explained that Cartwright’s group might “diminish his membership and cut off his support.” Cartwright responded:

I told him that was not our way of doing business, that we seldom ever preach long at any place without trying to raise a society. . . I told him the people were a free people and lived in a free country, and must and ought be allowed to do as they pleased (Cartwright, 1856: 90).

In contrast, when Baptists and Methodists collided in pursuit of flocks, no holds were barred and no quarter was asked or given. No sooner had Cartwright left a stop on his circuit where he made 23 converts, when nearby Baptists responded by sending three preachers to recruit them. Word was sent to Cartwright “for fear these preachers would run my converts into the water before I could come round.” Arriving in the nick of time, with his converts standing on the bank of the creek, Cartwright managed to recover them to the fold of those who believed in “infant sprinkling.”

CONCLUSION

In addition to being the year of *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776 was also the publication year of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. It is altogether fitting, therefore, to contrast Ezra Stiles’s optimistic projections of the future of the Congregationalists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians with Adam Smith’s analysis of why established denominations will be overwhelmed when and where an unregulated religious economy comes into being. Indeed, we can provide no better summary of our position than that provided by Smith two centuries ago.⁸

[Clergy] may either depend altogether for their subsistence upon the voluntary contributions of their hearers; or they may derive it from some other fund to which the law of their country may entitle them; such as a landed estate, a tythe or land tax, an established salary or stipend. Their exertion, their zeal and industry are likely to be much greater in the former situation than in the latter. In this respect the teachers of new religions have always had a considerable advantage in attacking those ancient and established systems of which the clergy, reposing themselves upon their benefices, had neglected to keep up the fervour of faith and devotion in the great body of the people; and having given themselves up to indolence, were become altogether incapable of making vigorous exertion in defence even of their own establishment. The clergy of an established and well-endowed religion frequently become men of learning and elegance, who possess all the virtues of gentlemen; but they are apt gradually to lose the qualities, both good and bad, which gave them authority and influence with the inferior ranks of people, and which had perhaps been the original causes of the success and establishment of their religion . . . in general every religious sect, when it has once enjoyed for a century or two the security of a legal establishment, has found itself incapable of making any vigorous defence against any new sect which chose to attack its doctrine or discipline. Upon such occasions the advantage in point of learning and good writing may sometimes be on the side of the established church. But the arts of popularity, all the arts of gaining proselytes, are constantly on

8. We are indebted to Lawrence Iannaccone for bringing these passages to our attention.

the side of its adversaries. In England those arts have been long neglected by the well-endowed clergy of the established church, and are at present chiefly cultivated by the dissenters and by the methodists. The independent provisions, however, which in many places have been made for dissenting teachers, by means of voluntary subscriptions, of trust rights, and other evasions of the law, seem very much to have abated the zeal and activity of these teachers. They have many of them become very learned, ingenious, and respectable men, but they have in general ceased to be very popular preachers. The methodists, without half the learning of the dissenters, are much more in vogue (740-741).

Thus Smith noted that in England, on the eve of the American Revolution, the Anglican establishment slept, the Calvinist dissenters dozed, and only the "methodists" had fire in their bellies and brimstone on their minds. On the other side of the Atlantic it was the same. Established faiths had drawn a tepid, popular response; only a tiny minority in the American colonies were churching. The Anglican, Congregationalist and Presbyterian clergy had become "men of learning and elegance," who flocked to Harvard and Yale but who would not serve churches outside the settled and comfortable towns and cities, and whose "arts of gaining proselytes" were modest. Yet, upstart forces stirred. The Baptists began "running" large numbers "into the waters," while 65 American congregations had begun to capitalize their name: Methodists. Seventy-five years later, immense strides had been made in churching America; and it was rough and ready upstarts, those ignorant sectarian "ranters," who accomplished the task.

In closing, we must note that the meteoric rise of the Methodists was short-lived. By the turn of the century they had been passed by the Baptists, and in contemporary discussions of why conservative churches grow as liberals decline, the Methodists are classified with the latter. We think it instructive that the Methodists began to slump at precisely the same time that their amateur clergy were replaced by professionals who claimed episcopal authority over their congregations. As this took place, the Methodists also launched massive efforts to compensate for their lack of an educated clergy. In an amazingly short time the Methodists had produced a clergy as learned as any New England Congregationalists'. So, when we come to write the rest of the story of the churching of America, we must pursue in detail the implications of the Methodist collapse and why and how the Baptists have managed to hold out. As we move forward from the 1850s, we shall also have to see how the Roman Catholics adopted Methodist and Baptist methods as they adjusted to the American free market.

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