

FROM PURITANS TO PATRIOTS: THE REPUBLICANIZATION OF AMERICAN THEOLOGY, 1750–1835

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Abstract: *While scholars and American religious historians have mainly addressed the effects of republicanism on church and state in the early United States, very few have examined how this ideology shaped theology proper. This article therefore presents the republican doctrine of God in America between 1750 and 1835. In the years between the First Great Awakening and the end of the Second, American Christians conceived of God as a reasonable, honorable, disinterested governor of a very public universe rather than an arbitrary, self-loving autocrat unaccountable to his subjects. During this time, God was essentially cast in the mold of the virtuous public servant, and this republicanization of theology both mirrored and reinforced the republicanization of America.*

Key words: *republican, republicanization, democratization, America, Puritan, patriot, disinterested, government, honor, virtue*

When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in America in 1831, he was originally tasked with studying its prisons. But after just nine months in the adolescent nation, the Frenchman had also gathered a sense of the American mind. Despite containing a number of generalizations about Americans and not a few of his own prejudices, Tocqueville's subsequent *Democracy in America* (1835) captured what historian Gordon Wood has called "the ideology of the Enlightenment": republicanism.¹ For Tocqueville, American religion was both a puritanical and a republican religion. In fact, one "corresponded in many points with" the other. He keenly observed, "It may be asserted that in the United States no religious doctrine displays the slightest hostility to democratic and republican institutions. The clergy of all the different sects hold the same language, their opinions are consonant to the laws, and the human intellect flows onwards in one sole current." In turn, Americans believed their faith "to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions."² Throughout America, and especially in New England, the sons of Puritanism had become sons of liberty.³

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¹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 100.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Bantam Books, 2004), 34, 350, 355.

³ Contemporary scholars have noted the similarities between elements of Puritanism and republicanism. For instance, George Marsden has noted that Lyman Beecher's "emphasis on 'the Moral Government of God' was essentially a republican restatement of the Puritan theory of the national cove-

However, republicanism was not so much a formal creed as it was a set of principles and ideals that imbued the American mind. John Adams acknowledged the permeating power of republicanism when he reflected to Thomas Jefferson in 1815, “The Revolution was in the minds of the people.”⁴ Indeed, American theology could not escape that Revolution. Republicanism was the American ethos, and it belonged to moral philosophy more than political science. Drawing from Greek and Roman antiquity, republican virtues were those found in the ancient republics: restraint, temperance, fortitude, dignity, justice, simplicity, frugality, and independence. In other words, the republican leader was the antithesis of the dissolute, capricious, self-indulgent tyrant. Republican values did not necessarily preclude monarchy, but they found their fullest embodiment in the idea of a commonwealth, a prosperous society where the *res publica* or public affairs of the community were served before individual interests.

For this reason, Mark Noll has noted the “unusual convergence of republicanism and Christianity in the American founding,” identifying a so-called “Christian republicanism” that dominated and even molded the church. “American Christians,” Noll insists, “despite substantial conflicts among themselves, took for granted a fundamental compatibility between orthodox Protestant religion and republican principles of government. Most English-speaking Protestants outside the United States did not.”⁵ Noll is by no means the only scholar to identify the republicanism of American Christianity. In *The New England Soul*, for instance, Harry S. Stout concluded that during the Revolution, “The American people, it was clear, were bound by ties of common ideology, not a common religious faith.”⁶ James P. Byrd has argued, “By the end of the Revolution, colonists had not shaped one republican Bible but many republican Bibles.”⁷ Nathan O. Hatch has even demonstrated *The Democratization of American Christianity* that took place in the early national period.⁸ However, none of these incisive works address in detail the republicanism of theology proper.

While American religious historiography has focused primarily on the effects of republicanism on church and state, very few scholars or theologians have examined how this ideology shaped Americans’ view of God. This article will therefore present the republican doctrine of God in America between 1750 and 1835. In the years between the First Great Awakening and the end of the Second, American Christians conceived of God as a reasonable, honorable, disinterested governor of

nant.” George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 21.

⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1967), 1.

⁵ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54, 57, 73–92.

⁶ Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 325.

⁷ James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

a very public universe rather than an arbitrary, self-loving autocrat unaccountable to his subjects. During this time, God was essentially cast in the mold of the virtuous public servant, and this republicanization of theology both mirrored and reinforced the republicanization of America.

I. A DISINTERESTED GOD

Perhaps nothing illustrates the republicanization of American theology more than the Puritanism of Jonathan Edwards and the patriotism of the New Divinity. Despite Edwards's near-mythical status in the Edwardsean tradition and his founding of "the first indigenous American school of Calvinism," almost none of his New England disciples adopted his doctrine of self-love.⁹ In fact, according to Samuel Hopkins, self-love was the essence of "moral depravity, or sin." In Hopkins's mind, there was "no such distinction between self-love and selfishness."¹⁰ Instead, he replaced Edwards's definition of virtue with something he called "disinterested benevolence," or being "pleased with the public interest—the greatest good and happiness of the whole."¹¹ While Hopkins's moral philosophy was adopted by theologians as diverse as Charles Finney and William Ellery Channing, his reformulation of theological ethics in the Edwardsean tradition was not quite as novel as many scholars have painted it to be.¹² If Edwards is indeed "America's theologian," Hopkins and his band of "Consistent Calvinists" were *American* theologians who integrated republicanism into Edwards's ideas.¹³ Although Hopkins

⁹ Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism and Reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1981), vii.

¹⁰ Samuel Hopkins, *System of Doctrines, in The Works of Samuel Hopkins, D.D., Vol. 1* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1854), 378, 381.

¹¹ Hopkins, 379. So committed was Hopkins to this doctrine that another sprang as its corollary: being willing to be damned for the glory of God. However, not nearly as many of Hopkins's contemporaries adopted this principle. In fact, this doctrine was often the object of ridicule by theological opponents of the Hopkinsians.

¹² According to Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, "Finney not only emerged from institutions that had been built by Hopkinsians but was influenced by the New Divinity itself." Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 30. David Robinson explains, "Upon returning to Newport, Channing continued to tutor one of the Randolph children, and pursued his theological studies with renewed vigor. There he came to know Samuel Hopkins, the greatest Calvinist thinker of his day. He was not attracted to him because of the famous Hopkinsian system of 'consistent Calvinism,' but rather for one element of that system which tallied with Channing's developing theological outlook. Hopkins insisted on a principle of 'disinterestedness' in the religious affections, and one of his basic tenets was 'that holiness consists in disinterested benevolence, which is in the nature of it, and in all its exercises, wholly contrary and opposed to self-love.'" David Robinson, "Introduction," in *William Ellery Channing: Selected Writings*, ed. David Robinson (New York: Paulist, 1985), 11.

¹³ Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Jonathan Edwards Jr. insisted that his father "has thrown much light upon the subject of affection as disinterested." Jonathan Edwards Jr., "Remarks on the Improvements Made in Theology by His Father, President Edwards," in *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park*, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 131. However, the Edwardseans elevated the concept of disinterestedness to new heights in their theological system.

helped introduce the concept into American religious culture, disinterestedness was already a well-founded republican principle in the public square. For example, on March 5, 1773, John Adams wrote in his diary that his defense of British soldiers in the so-called Boston Massacre was “one of the most gallant, generous, manly, and disinterested Actions of my whole Life.”¹⁴ And disinterestedness was by no means a Christian concept. Years later, in 1791, the Deist Thomas Jefferson told George Washington that Adams was “one of the most honest and disinterested men alive.”¹⁵

One of the primary reasons that the principle of disinterestedness pervaded the evangelical mind in America is due to the perception that self-love had begun to pervade the world around them. For Separate Baptist Isaac Backus, who also admired “our excellent Edwards,” the War of Independence was rooted in self-love—on both sides.¹⁶ According to Backus, “Self-love, under the specious name of government and a concern for the public good, has moved and now moves the Britons to act towards us like incarnate devils. And self-love in this country, by sinking our public credit, has exposed us to greater danger than all their fleets and armies could do.”¹⁷ In a sermon delivered at Princeton in 1776, president John Witherspoon, who months later signed the Declaration of Independence, lamented that the “friends of America” were very few and “disinterested” friends “still fewer.”¹⁸ Indeed, by 1776, American theologians had a litany of reasons to suspect that self-love had become a popular and even celebrated concept in their market-driven generation.¹⁹ That year Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations*, wherein he argued that human ambition and avarice were actually a social benefit. Also in 1776, Samuel Hopkins published *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, a work dedicated to the Continental Congress. Joseph Conforti explains, “Since disinterested benevolence required opposition to slavery and the slave trade and not simply the policies of Britain, Hopkins suggested, the slavery issue allowed one to separate Revolutionary hypocrites from authentic republicans wholeheartedly committed to true virtue and the public good.”²⁰ Nevertheless, by 1787, even the framers of the United States Constitution prided themselves in their ability to tailor the new gov-

¹⁴ John Adams, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols., ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:79.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 8 May 1791, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 41 vols. to date, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–), 20:291.

¹⁶ Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), 316. Backus identified himself among the “friends of Edwards’s writings.” Isaac Backus, *A History of New-England, With Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, vol. 2 (Boston: Edward Draper, 1777), 252.

¹⁷ Isaac Backus, *Policy As Well As Honesty* (Boston, 1779), in *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754–1789*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1968), 382.

¹⁸ John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men: A Sermon Preached at Princeton, on the 17th of May, 1776* (Philadelphia: Town & Country, 1776), 40.

¹⁹ The so-called “market revolution” did not occur until some time after the revolutionary era. See Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815–1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁰ Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement*, 128.

ernment to the natural self-interest of human beings. In *The Federalist No. 51*, James Madison asked, “But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” The respective offices must therefore be designed “in such a manner as that each may be a check on the other—that the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public rights.”²¹ Socially, politically, and economically, American Christians inhabited a world that seemed to welcome self-love as a public good.²²

As a result, the concept of disinterestedness was embraced by all denominations and all manners of American Christianity, including revivalism. For instance, in 1798, when the Reverend Samuel J. Mills reported the “unusual religious appearances” in the town of Torrington in the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine*, he happily noted that God had awakened dozens of sinners to the sovereignty of God and “the duties of unconditional submission and disinterested affection.”²³ Indeed, the Second Great Awakening featured an explosion of disinterested moral philosophy. Charles Finney, another reformer and abolitionist, declared, “I said there was no true benevolence, but disinterested benevolence; no true love but disinterested love.”²⁴

Not surprisingly, American theologians during this time molded God into the ideal republican. Whereas Puritans since John Cotton and Cotton Mather had preached the doctrine of self-love as the corollary to a psychological Trinity which emphasized God’s love for himself, their republican descendants conceived of the Trinity in a much more social frame, and the work of Christ in the most public, selfless kind of way.²⁵ For instance, in 1793, Charleston Baptist Richard Furman averred, “To counteract so great an evil, to prevent the exercise of base passions, to restore lost man an acquaintance with his true interests, and to furnish an example of disinterested, generous, love; the peaceable kingdom of Christ has been erected.”²⁶ At Yale, fellow Federalist and patriot Timothy Dwight described heaven as “a world of friendship; of friendship unmingled, ardent, and entire. The disinterested love of the Gospel dwells here in every bosom.”²⁷

Similar to their belief that the duty of the magistrate in a commonwealth is to serve the *bonum publica* (public good), New England theologians asserted that the

²¹ James Madison, “The Federalist No. 51,” in *The Federalist: A Commentary on the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 331–32.

²² See James German, “The Social Utility of Wicked Self-Love: Calvinism, Capitalism, and Public Policy in Revolutionary New England,” *Journal of American History* 82.3 (1995): 965–98.

²³ Mills’s account of the revival is in Bennet Tyler, ed., *New England Revivals, As They Existed at the Close of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1846), 55–62. Also see James R. Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the Decline of Congregationalism, 1774–1818* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 71.

²⁴ Charles Grandison Finney, *Systematic Theology*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Woodstock: Devoted Publishing, 2018), 153.

²⁵ John Cotton, *A Practicall Commentary . . . upon the First Epistle Generall of John* (London, 1656), 365; Cotton Mather, *Blessed Unions* (Boston, 1692), 48.

²⁶ Richard Furman, “Unity and Peace,” in *Life and Works of Dr. Richard Furman, D.D.*, ed. G. William Foster Jr. (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle, 2004), 305.

²⁷ Timothy Dwight, *Theology Explained and Defended, Volume 4* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1823), 510.

ultimate purpose of the cross was to achieve the greatest good for the moral universe. In fact, Edwardsean theologians often described Christ's atonement as if he were one of their local officials. In *The Scripture Doctrine of Atonement, Proposed to Careful Examination* (1785), Stockbridge pastor Stephen West concluded that the purpose of the death of Christ was to show "his regards to the good of the great community over which he presides." In a remarkably republican analogy, West explained, "Whenever the supreme Magistrate neglects the execution of the laws, he loses the confidence of the people; and his regard to the public welfare becomes suspected. No one can confide in his public spirit, when he suffers the disturbers of the peace to go unpunished: for ideas of true regard to public good, as necessarily connect punishments with crimes, as rewards with virtue."²⁸ Models of the atonement were drawn from a number of republican and patriotic images of the day. Founder and president of the Massachusetts Missionary Society Nathanael Emmons even illustrated the necessity of the atonement with an anecdote about George Washington.²⁹ Theological conservatives and liberals alike employed republican language and imagery to emphasize the disinterestedness of God and the community of his people. Just as Rhode Island College president Jonathan Maxcy described the nation of Israel as a "republican theocracy" in the Old Testament, so Horace Bushnell, the so-called father of American religious liberalism, pictured the New Testament church as "a commonwealth of the Spirit, as much stronger in its unity than the old satrapy of priestly despotism as our republic is stronger than any other government in the world."³⁰ American theologians were increasingly willing to describe the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit using the people and principles of the Enlightenment, and for a generation obsessed with questions of liberty and government, their Deity was naturally molded into a cosmic republican Ruler.

II. GOD AS GOVERNOR

In May of 1789, Methodist bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury addressed the newly elected president of the United States, George Washington. That Coke and Asbury were the first religious leaders in America to address the president is somewhat ironic, speaking as they did from a predominantly apolitical denomination that had often been accused of loyalism due to its British hierarchy. Nevertheless, rather adroitly, the two Englishmen spoke the unmistakable language

²⁸ Stephen West, "The Scripture Doctrine of Atonement, Proposed to Careful Examination," in *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park*, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 136–37.

²⁹ Nathanael Emmons, "Necessity of the Atonement," in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks*, ed. Edwards A. Park (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1859), 118.

³⁰ Jonathan Maxcy, "Discourse on the Atonement," in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks*, ed. Edwards A. Park (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1859), 92; cited in Robert Bruce Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee: The Life of Horace Bushnell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 123.

of republicanism, recognizing an obvious parallel between Washington's leadership of the country and God's providence of the earth. They wrote,

We have received the most grateful satisfaction, from the humble and entire dependence on the Great Governor of the universe which you have repeatedly expressed, acknowledging him the source of every blessing, and particularly of the most excellent constitution of these states, which is at present the admiration of the world, and may in future become its great exemplar for imitation: and hence we enjoy a holy expectation that you will always prove a faithful and impartial patron of genuine, vital religion—the grand end of our creation and present probationary existence. And we promise you our fervent prayers to the throne of grace, that GOD Almighty may endue you with all the graces and gifts of his Holy Spirit, that may enable you to fill up your important station to his glory, the good of his church, the happiness and prosperity of the United States, and the welfare of mankind.³¹

In republican Christianity, the kingdom of God was a just government that worked all things for the good of its people. The English and American constitutions, for all of their differences, provided a general framework from which to interpret the mechanism of God's providence. Similar to the way men governed earthly kingdoms, God governed the “august monarchical republic of the universe.”³²

As a result, the language of God's natural government of the earth and his “moral government” of moral beings became part of the *lingua franca* in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American church. Timothy Dwight, one of the chief developers of the theme of moral government, distinguished between the “Universe of Matter” and the “Universe of Minds.” In both realms God “controls all things with an almighty and unerring hand; and directs all to the accomplishment of the divine and eternal purpose, for which all were made.” Dwight reasoned, “Over the Universe of Minds, destined to an immortal existence, he exercises a moral and eternal government; and prescribes laws, which require the best conduct, and insure the greatest happiness.”³³ However, unlike the godless, autocratic kingdoms of Europe, the divine government was not a capricious regime unconcerned with the well-being of the people. In fact, the moral government of God was so reasonable that it took the individual actions and motives of each person into careful account. Moral government, Dwight explained, “is a government by motives, addressed to the understanding and affections of rational subjects, and operating on their minds, as inducements to voluntary obedience. No other government is worthy of God; there being, indeed, no other beside that of mere force and coercion.”³⁴ For a peo-

³¹ *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols., ed. Elmer T. Clark et al. (London: Epworth; Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 3:70–71 (29 May 1789). Also see Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38–39.

³² Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven: Thomas & Samuel Green, 1783), 87.

³³ Timothy Dwight, *Theology Explained and Defended, Volume 1* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1823), 112.

³⁴ Dwight, *Theology Explained and Defended, Vol. 1*, 209. According to John R. Fitzmier, “Greenfield Hill (1788), believed by some to be Dwight's best poetic accomplishment, can be seen as a pastoral descrip-

ple who had endured the so-called “Coercive Acts” (1774) at the hands of the British Parliament and had been inculcated in works such as Jonathan Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (1754), Americans’ resistance to the notion of God as a king who coerced his subjects was seemingly inevitable.³⁵

While the libertarian spirit of the age certainly strengthened arguments for Arminianism, republicanism did not so much displace Calvinistic theology as it transformed it from within. The Calvinism of the republican era was a distinctly and self-consciously reasonable system, juxtaposed with the deterministic authoritarianism of which so many patriotic Americans were suspicious in their new liberty-loving nation. American theologians sought to distance the idea of an absolutely sovereign God from the image of an earthly king who ruled according to his cruel and indecipherable will. God was a *moral* Governor, not a tyrant. His will was mysterious, but not mercurial. Therefore, especially in the post-Revolutionary years, Calvinistic theologians began to bend their Calvinism toward republican concepts of freedom and rationality, to the extent that many of them were even accused of departing from Calvinism itself.

For Nathaniel Taylor, one of Timothy Dwight’s chief disciples, moral government was his “central theme.”³⁶ While rejecting the traditional doctrine of imputation like most of his Edwardsean counterparts and re-emphasizing Edwards’s distinction between natural and moral ability, Taylor went one step further in his insistence that sin was a “certainty without necessity.”³⁷ Taylor’s so-called “New Haven Theology,” a brand of Calvinism with a “new republican mentality,” had virtually no room for inability of any kind.³⁸ According to Taylor, in the moral government of God, “every subject ... must be a free agent, i.e., he must possess the power to sin, and to continue in sin, in defiance of all that God can do to prevent him.” Such is a “government of free, uncompelled, voluntary moral agents, and God, if he adopts it, is restricted by its nature and its principles as man is.”³⁹ Many

tion of the godly community within a divinely blessed republic.” John R. Fitzmier, *New England’s Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752–1817* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 43.

³⁵ Noll posits that the concept of moral government “became a critical theological trajectory because of the omnipresence of Real Whig discourse in American public life.” Noll, *America’s God*, 291.

³⁶ In the introduction to Taylor’s *Lectures on the Moral Government of God*, Noah Porter writes, “This object directed all his studies. All his investigations had their starting point from this central theme, and however far he may seem to some to have wandered in the maze of scholastic distinctions or subtle refinements, he never lost the clue by which he returned to the subject of his great argument.” Noah Porter, “Introduction,” in Nathaniel W. Taylor, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God, Volume 1* (New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1859), iii.

³⁷ In his famous sermon on the doctrine of original sin in 1828, *Concio ad Clerum*, Taylor argued, “The very birth of a human being is an event which involves the certainty of entire moral depravity, without the supernatural interposition of God to prevent it. Do you ask, when will he begin to sin? I answer, I *do not know*, the precise instant.” Nathaniel W. Taylor, *Concio ad Clerum* (New Haven: A. H. Maltby and Roman Hallock, 1849), 24.

³⁸ Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 100.

³⁹ Nathaniel W. Taylor, “Essay on the Question—In What Different Respects May God Be Supposed to Purpose Different and Even Opposite Events?” Appendix 3 in Taylor, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God*, 2:341.

concepts of moral government so emphasized human freedom and divine reasonableness that the sovereignty of God now appeared dependent upon human decision-making. Just as earthly governors were bound by consent and the rights of the people, so God was bound by the law of free choice. With time, Arminian theologians like Charles Finney, himself influenced by Taylor, would democratize the concept of moral agency such that the aim of moral government was no longer about vindicating the authority of the Moral Governor, but about influencing free moral beings who essentially governed themselves.⁴⁰ The images and tropes that republican theologians dared to borrow from their own generation would be developed and extended further in the next.

The concept of God as governor was not relegated to the North or the Northwest. E. Brooks Holifield has demonstrated how seemingly all denominations in the South integrated some form of governmental theology. "By the 1840s," Holifield insists, "it was a standard practice of Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian theologians to affirm a notion of penal satisfaction but then to expound on the idea that the atonement was also necessary to preserve the 'moral government' of the cosmos."⁴¹ Some theologians in the South, like William B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, even traced their views directly to the New England Theology, where moral government had transformed into an entirely new doctrine of atonement in the Reformed tradition.⁴² Instead of mirroring the views of his Puritan predecessor, Joseph Bellamy, one of Jonathan Edwards's two chief disciples, originated the so-called moral governmental theory of atonement. In this republicanized model, Christ did not die in the place of individual sinners or exchange his righteousness with the elect, but rather publicly suffered the equivalent of damnation in order to vindicate the honor of the Moral Governor. In *True Religion Delineated* (1750), the first complete exposition of moral governmental theory, Bellamy presented God as a governor strikingly similar to his own:

But his public conduct, as moral Governor of the world, has more evidently discovered the very temper of his heart, and shown how he loves right and hates wrong, to an infinite degree. Governors, among men, discover much of their disposition, and show what they love and what they hate, by their laws; and they

⁴⁰ While maintaining the Edwardsean concept of public justice, Finney largely replaced the New Divinity emphasis upon the honor of the law with the influence of law. For instance, Finney proposed, "The thing required by public justice is that nothing shall be done to undermine or disturb the influence of law." Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, ed. J. H. Fairchild (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976), 197.

⁴¹ E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795–1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 195.

⁴² Johnson was mentored by Jonathan Maxcy in Columbia, South Carolina. Johnson's 1822 sermon "Love Characteristic of the Deity," preached before the Charleston Baptist Association, is a clear illustration of New Divinity influence. Johnson preached, "For he is the great moral Governor of the Universe, in whom all his creatures live, move, and have their being." Johnson insisted that Christ died to "maintain the dignity and preserve the rights of God's moral government," describing his death as "a full and adequate atonement to the violated law, and dishonored government of God." William B. Johnson, "Love Characteristic of the Deity," in *Southern Baptist Sermons on Sovereignty and Responsibility*, ed. Thomas J. Nettles (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2003), 48, 58.

show how fervent their love and hatred is, by all the methods they take to enforce them; and so does the great Governor of the world.⁴³

If God were to leave sin unpunished, Bellamy reasoned, the result would be “arbitrary tyranny and servile subjection.” In order to emphasize the rationality of God and to defend his character against potential comparisons with earthly tyrants, Bellamy logically separated God’s nature as Governor from his sovereignty. “Hence, we may learn, this is really a branch of the law of nature, that sin should be punished: it results from the nature of God, the Governor of the world; it was no arbitrary constitution; it did not result from the divine sovereignty . . . in threatening sin with eternal death, he acted not as a sovereign, but as a righteous Governor: his nature promoted him to do so; he could not have done otherwise.”⁴⁴ In this new republican Calvinist soteriology, divine sovereignty had to be safeguarded from the appearance of arbitrariness. In a culture that did not easily dissociate church and state, moral government was one of the many theological responses to the growing American belief that absolute power corrupted absolutely.

American theologians, however, did not completely mold God into the image of their governors. In fact, the office of governor was tied directly to the events of 1776. In their state constitutions, Whigs were hesitant to invest any kind of legislative authority (i.e., veto power) to the governor at all. Thomas Jefferson described his ideal governor as a mere “Administrator.”⁴⁵ In Pennsylvania, where radical Whig thought was most extreme, the governorship was totally eliminated. As Gordon Wood notes, “The Americans, in short, made of the gubernatorial magistrate a new kind of creature, a very pale reflection indeed of his regal ancestor. . . . For them George III was only a transmigrated Stuart bent on tyranny. And only a radical destruction of that kind of magisterial authority could prevent the resurgence of arbitrary power in their land.”⁴⁶ In contrast with an impotent earthly governor, when necessary, republicanized theologians sought to clarify the true authority of the Moral Governor. For instance, Jonathan Maxcy maintained, “If sinners are to be forgiven, it must be done in consistency with the meaning and authority of law; for God cannot contradict himself. The legislative and executive parts of his government must coincide. Hence, if sinners are to be forgiven, something equivalent to the punishment of sinners must be done, in order to fulfill the meaning of the law, and to support government.”⁴⁷ God had become so republicanized in the American mind that he even possessed his own branches of government! The ultimate aim of moral government, in all of its branches, was to maintain divine honor.

⁴³ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated, in The Works of the Rev. Joseph Bellamy, D.D., Vol. 1* (New York: Stephen Dodge, 1811), 77.

⁴⁴ Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 81, 347.

⁴⁵ Jefferson’s Third Draft, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 1: 1760–1776*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 360.

⁴⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic: 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 136.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Maxcy, “Discourse on the Atonement, Part 1,” in *The Literary Remains of the Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D.D.*, ed. Romeo Elton (New York: A. V. Blake, 1844), 70.

III. GLORY AS HONOR

Moral governmental theology not only migrated across the Atlantic into England, where it was often called “American theology,” but it sometimes migrated back again.⁴⁸ In 1830, when Georgia Baptist Jesse Mercer defended his view of the atonement in ten letters to Rev. Cyrus White in the *Christian Index*, he was also defending the moral governmental view of English Particular Baptist Andrew Fuller, who had been influenced by the New Divinity and whom White had cited to justify his Arminian theology.⁴⁹ According to Mercer, “The atonement, therefore, must be that in its nature which will honor him in the view of all rational intelligences.” Quoting Fuller, Mercer then argued that, in regard to justice, the “very design” of the atonement is “to repair its honor.”⁵⁰ For Mercer, who served as a delegate to Georgia’s constitutional convention, honor lay at the heart of God’s glory, government, and gospel. He even defined the true Christian as “a believer in Christ, whose sole dependence for salvation is in Him; and who, from sincere regard for his person and honor, is endeavoring to follow his precepts and examples.”⁵¹ Since the Presbyterians at Westminster confessed in 1646 that the chief end of man is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever,” Protestants in the Reformed tradition had identified glory as the due which all human beings owed to God. Jonathan Edwards had elaborated further upon the theme in *The End for which God Created the World* (1765). However, in the post-Puritan generation, American theologians in the North and South often preferred to call divine glory by its republican name: honor.

While the concept of honor was consistently used by the earliest American Puritans, it took on new life in the revolutionary era. In fact, one might say that the Revolution was, in some sense, waged over honor. Charles Inglis, one of the most outspoken loyalist clergy in the colonies, argued that “from the very Nature and Design of Government, it is the Duty of [those governed] to honour and obey [those who govern].”⁵² In *God against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy’s Case against the American Revolution*, Gregg L. Frazier contends, “At the base or core of the ministers’ argument against resistance and rebellion is a profound sense of duty and honor.”⁵³ However, American Christians often condemned the loyalist sense of honor. Methodist preacher Ezekiel Cooper had in mind Anglicans like Inglis when he wrote to Francis Asbury in 1789 about a revival in Baltimore, “The cross is a mortifying thing to nature—a fathomable, honourable religion, allowing the maxims, customs, and pleasures of this world many would like; but when gospel holi-

⁴⁸ Edwards A. Park, *New England Theology* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1852), 7–8.

⁴⁹ For an examination of Jonathan Edwards’s influence upon Andrew Fuller, see Chris Chun, *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards in the Theology of Andrew Fuller*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 162 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁵⁰ Jesse Mercer, *Memoirs of Elder Jesse Mercer*, ed. C. D. Mallary (New York: John Gray, 1844), 288.

⁵¹ Mercer, 327–28.

⁵² Charles Inglis, *The Duty of Honouring the King, Explained and Recommended* (New York: Hugh Gaine, 1780), 12.

⁵³ Gregg L. Frazier, *God against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy’s Case against the American Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 87.

ness, the pure religion of Christ is preached and enforced—that we must deny ourselves of all vanity, and walk the strait and narrow way of humility and meekness, love and obedience, they pray to be excused.”⁵⁴

Patriots were no less concerned about honor in politics and religion, but in the words of Benjamin Franklin, “Honour does not *descend*, but *ascends*.”⁵⁵ Historians have shown how most “early Americans came to understand honor and virtue as akin to, and often indistinguishable from, morality and ethics.” Tracing the “development of American honor culture,” Craig Bruce Smith contends, “Honor in America changed from a distinctly British concept into something that was more ethically centered as a nascent proto-nationalism developed in the new United States.” He adds, “Patriots viewed the American Revolution as a matter of honor and a test of virtue caused by a British ethical failing. Patriots felt that British policy had attacked their honor, and they were forced to react. America would win or lose based on its ability to maintain its virtue. The Revolution, in turn, influenced dynamic societal and ethical change.”⁵⁶

During this transformation in American society, divine honor also adopted a more ethical connotation in the minds of the American people. By 1814 and the beginning of the so-called “Era of Good Feelings,” theologians like Congregationalist John Smalley were still insisting that the work of the Son was accomplished “without any dishonor to his violated law.”⁵⁷ Honor was an almost ubiquitous idea in early national America that also colored American religion. Consequently, American Christians associated honor with the character of God and the nature of the gospel. Massachusetts Baptist pastor Hezekiah Smith admitted that he would not have engaged in a 1766 controversy over believer’s baptism “had not the Solicitations of my Friends, my own Character, and the honour of God, prevailed above every other Consideration.”⁵⁸ Many American Christians even seemed to use glory and honor interchangeably. In 1760, Sarah Osborn, one of the first female evangelical leaders in America, prayed a very republicanized prayer in her diary, “O my God, give me a spirit of government, I beseech thee. Meekness and courage, Lord; let these join with prudence, and by thy assistance I can do great things for my generation. But without thy help, all will be confusion; I can do nothing. Lord, help me. O, help me for thine honor’s sake, and dispose of me this afternoon as most consists with thy glory.”⁵⁹ While glory and honor were not identical in the American

⁵⁴ Ezekiel Cooper, “Brief Account,” in *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols., ed. Elmer T. Clark et al. (London: Epworth; Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 1:608.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin Digital Edition*.

⁵⁶ Craig Bruce Smith, *American Honor: The Creation of the Nation’s Ideals during the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 2, 12, 13.

⁵⁷ John Smalley, “The Sufficiency of the Atonement of Christ for the Salvation of All Men,” in *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park*, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 147.

⁵⁸ Hezekiah Smith, “Journal,” 3:62; cited in John David Broome, *The Life, Ministry, and Journals of Hezekiah Smith* (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 2004), 55–56.

⁵⁹ Sarah Osborn, “April 17, 1760, Thursday morning,” in *Sarah Osborn’s Collected Writings*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 185.

mind, they were certainly near synonyms, as America's republicanized theology demanded that God be not simply a great ruler, but an equally good one. The concept of honor therefore captured the moral element of divine glory in the republican generation.

After the death of Alexander Hamilton in a duel with Aaron Burr over honor, American theologians vehemently defended the honor of God against its earthly counterfeits. Revolutionary War chaplain and Congregationalist minister Samuel Spring preached a sermon titled *The Sixth Commandment Friendly to Virtue, Honor, and Politeness: A Discourse, in Consequence of the Late Duel* (1804). The duelist, Spring charged, "prefers death and worldly honor before life and worldly disgrace. He is therefore a murderer; he is a self-murderer. For the divine law requires us to preserve human life for the sake of God's honor and the utility of man, and with an awful sanction forbids the selfish, willful termination of it."⁶⁰ In the wake of Hamilton's shocking death, in the true spirit of republicanism, American preachers reminded their congregations that real honor was not self-seeking, but God-glorifying and good-promoting. Spring asked, "Was the public good, was the glory of God ever the supreme object of a duelist?"⁶¹ Other republican clergymen also connected honor and glory in 1804. Presbyterian minister and Union College president Eliphalet Nott denounced the honor of the duelist as "the honor of a murderer. Besides this, I know not of any glory which can redound to the infatuated combatants, except it be what results from having extended the circle of wretched widows, and added to the number of hapless orphans."⁶² In the American mind, honor was the glory of the divine character, and this republicanized theology naturally emphasized the disinterestedness of God and the good of the cosmos.

In another sense, honor was the most public element of God's glory in American society. Just as the republican leader received honor from the community he virtuously served, so God received honor when his disinterestedness was perceived by the moral universe. Joseph Bellamy held that the "design of the incarnation, life, and death of the Son of God, was to give a practical declaration, in the most public manner, even in the sight of the whole intellectual system, that God was worthy of all that love, honor, and obedience which his law required, and that sin was as great an evil as the punishment threatened supposed."⁶³ Samuel Hopkins believed divine glory "to consist wholly in his moral perfections and character" and that God will never cease to "regard and maintain his own rights, and claim and secure the honor due to his name."⁶⁴ Although republican Christians were uncomfortable with the self-love of God, they did not relinquish the idea that God always seeks his own glory, and that he did so by publicly defending his honor at the cross. By no means

⁶⁰ Samuel Spring, *The Sixth Commandment Friendly to Virtue, Honor, and Politeness: A Discourse, In Consequence of the Late Duel* (Newburyport: E. W. Allen, 1804), 15.

⁶¹ Spring, *The Sixth Commandment*, 20.

⁶² Eliphalet Nott, *A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of General Alexander Hamilton* (Schenectady: G. Y. Van Deogart, 1853), 16.

⁶³ Joseph Bellamy, *An Essay on The Nature and Glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, IV*, in *The Works of Joseph Bellamy, D.D.*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853), 313.

⁶⁴ Hopkins, *System of Doctrines*, 68, 77.

was this moralized and publicized conception of honor relegated to the Edwardsean tradition. Yale president Ezra Stiles, no admirer of the New Divinity, offered one of the clearest examples of American exceptionalism by a clergyman in his election sermon *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, preached before the Connecticut General Assembly in 1783. For Stiles, the United States had rendered “supreme honors to the Most High, the God of armies,” and themselves, precisely because “this great american revolution” was conducted on the side of virtue and before the watching eyes of the entire world. After praising the “disinterested benevolence” of Washington and others, Stiles concluded his sermon by addressing the assembly at large,

How glorious to bear a part in the triumphs of virtue, the triumphs of the Redeemer, in the last day of the great and general assembly of the universe? How glorious to make a part of that infinitely honored and dignified body, which clothed with the Redeemer’s righteousness and walking in white robes, shall be led by the Messiah, thro’ the shining ranks of archangels, seraphims, and the innumerable hosts of the whole assembled universe, up to the throne of God, and being presented to and received by the triune Jehovah, shall be seated with Jesus in his throne at the summit of the universe, to the conspicuous view, and for the eternal contemplation of the whole intellectual world.⁶⁵

In the republican mind, virtue always had an audience, and this was the essence of honor. Therefore, just as Christ’s vicarious death brought honor to the Father by demonstrating his moral probity to the entire world, so Americans could bring honor to God by serving as virtuous examples to their communities and to every tribe and tongue. In the Revolution, the moral and public ingredients of honor allowed many American Christians to believe they were glorifying God by embodying the very same virtues that brought him honor in the gospel. By glorifying God before the nations, they were honoring God.

IV. REPUBLICANIZED THEOLOGY

With such an intimate union between republicanism and American theology after the First Great Awakening, it is somewhat understandable that “during the Second Great Awakening, evangelicals recast the nation’s origins as avowedly Christian.”⁶⁶ When believers and unbelievers for so long spoke the same republican language, and American Christianity gradually coalesced with the ideology of the Enlightenment, to many of their Jacksonian descendants it might easily have seemed that republicanism had always been the essence of revolutionary faith. However, the traditional narrative that Jeffersonian republicanism gave way to Jacksonian democratization in American religion is a somewhat generalized account, as scholars like Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe have demonstrated that revivalist Charles Finney, in some ways the embodiment of democratized religion, was actu-

⁶⁵ Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, 41–42, 52, 98–99.

⁶⁶ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 201.

ally a harsh critic of certain elements of Jacksonian politics.⁶⁷ In some ways, with his adherence to doctrines like moral government and disinterested benevolence, Finney had more in common with the republican generation than the one defined by a “corrupt bargain.”⁶⁸

Especially in the years between 1750 and 1835, and even well beyond, American Christians molded their Deity into the ideal republican leader. With a sensitivity to the perceived avarice and caprice of the godless European monarchies, theologians conceived of God as a disinterested, honorable, reasonable, and public figure who governed his moral universe according to the classic virtues of the Greek and Roman republics. These virtues were not inconsistent with Yahweh of Holy Scripture, but they were emphasized over others in order to ensure that God was set apart from the prevailing images of carnal authority. Concepts like government and honor and reason did not completely replace those of kingdom and glory and power, but they helped revolutionize the American image of God for a revolutionary people. As a result, the Moral Governor of the universe was both markedly different from the rulers of the earth, and, oddly enough, strikingly similar. While America was by no means founded as a Christian republic, its founding Christians held firmly to a republicanized theology.

⁶⁷ See Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 88–93.

⁶⁸ See Mark R. Cheatham, *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018).