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Jedidiah Morse and the Crusade for the New Jerusalem: The Cultural Catalysts of the Bavarian Illuminati Conspiracy

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JEDIDIAH MORSE AND THE CRUSADE FOR THE NEW JERUSALEM:
THE CULTURAL CATALYSTS OF THE BAVARIAN ILLUMINATI CONSPIRACY

by

Rachel A. Snell

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
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Without eyes there is no light;
Without knowledge there is no wisdom.
Sirach 3:25

For my Parents,
Who always supported my yearning for knowledge.

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Note on the Published Political Sermons

The political sermons of the late 1790s constitute a major source for this analysis; Ellis Sandoz described them as a “source of exciting and uncommonly important material” in the foreword to his collection entitled *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*.¹ Understanding the significance of these voluminous and revealing sources requires some background information for the reader.

During the 1830’s, nearly a generation after the events considered in this thesis, Alexis Tocqueville observed, “the American clergy stand aloof from secular affairs . . . religion is a distinct sphere, in which the priest is sovereign, but out of which he takes care never to go.”² This observation contrasts directly with the role assumed by American clergy during the eighteenth century, Congregationalists especially expected their ministers to exert influence beyond the boundaries of their personal parishes. Although the majority of published sermons in New England emerged from printing presses in the urban centers of Boston, Hartford or New Haven, the creation of sermons for publication was not limited to the clergy located near these cultural hubs. Ministers throughout New England, including those on the frontier, produced sermons for publication throughout the century.

Colonial and early national clergy sought publication for their sermons with the blessing of their congregations; in many cases, published sermons included a note on the title page proclaiming the publication had been “at the desire of the hearers.”³ Very often lay leaders exerted considerable control over which sermons reached the printing presses.

¹ Ellis Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), xi.

² Alexis Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Richard D. Heffner, ed. (New York: Signet Classic, 2001), 154.

³ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 180.

Committees or a direct vote at the town meeting selected ministers to address the town for certain special occasions, including fast days and thanksgiving sermons. Ministers appeared before the legislature on election day at the request of the governor and militia officers requested certain ministers to address their troops. The body that selected the minister, often also determined if the sermon was suitable for publication.

Although prefacing their sermons with the approval of their congregation may have been a formality, no minister who desired to continue in his chosen occupation and maintain his reputation would dare falsify the approval of his congregation. The ministers were not publishing with impunity; they were subject to congregational review.

Therefore, Nathan Hatch convincingly argues that:

The most likely sermons of all to be placed before the public were the very ones that received the heartiest ‘amen’ among the influential laymen. In other words, the printed sermons of Revolutionary New England are probably more representative of what was understood and believed in the pew than sermons that failed to arouse anyone’s interest and thus were buried quietly in a minister’s dusty file of manuscripts.⁴

The appearance of Morse’s sermons in print form throughout the new nation suggests the appeal of his message, as do the publication of his orthodox, Old Calvinist allies.

If political turmoil encouraged the acceptance of Morse’s conspiracy theory by his parishioners and other Americans, political turmoil also increased the number of publishing clergy. Hatch observed that during the 1790s “when most of America seemed to the Standing Order to be hell-bent on destroying republican institutions and orthodox Christianity, clergymen in Connecticut and Massachusetts flooded the press with 574 sermons, almost double the number for any previous decade.”⁵ Many of these political sermons reacted to a perceived increase in irreligion, defined by the clergy as habitual

⁴ Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 181-182.

⁵ Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 178.

absence from public worship and the disregard for virtuous behavior. Declining church attendance during the 1790s meant ministers utilized the fast day or thanksgiving day sermon as the main means of addressing a large and influential audience.

Sermons preached on fast days, election days, thanksgiving days, military occasions or any other event that warranted a special weekday sermon reached a broader audience.

The occasions held immense ceremonial importance. Here were unparalleled opportunities to speak to a broad range of men and women in local society, not just church members. Not surprisingly, town and parish ministers whose position to speak was sanctioned by the state in both theory and practice frequently used weekday sermons to comment on public as well as religious affairs.⁶

In the 1790s, when Congregational Church membership diminished rapidly and women comprised the bulk of church members, Congregational clergy turned to the fast day sermon to reach a large segment of society. By declaring fast days in 1798 and 1799, the Federalists, whether intentionally or not, supported the clerical argument for a cooperative relationship between church and state by providing them with the opportunity to speak before a large audience. Furthermore, election day sermons allowed the ministers an opportunity to speak into the ears of the elite, “If the Sabbath were designed to reach ‘the whole of community,’ the annual election was geared toward those chosen to hold the levers of power.”⁷ This explains Morse and Timothy Dwight’s affinity for making their most impassioned claims about the fate of the American republic in sermons delivered on special occasions.

The sermons that appear in this study, with the exception of Methodist itinerant John Leland’s *The Right’s of Conscience Inalienable* and several discourses by William

⁶ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 172.

⁷ Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*,” 63.

Bentley before Masonic Lodges in Massachusetts, were special occasion sermons written by members of the orthodox, Old Calvinist clergy and were printed in New England. Pamphlets, newspapers and letters exhibit the viewpoint of the conservative clergy's opponents. I have chosen to focus specifically on the fast day sermons of Jedidiah Morse because they best articulate the anxieties felt by the conservative clergy, their attempt to maintain their social position and their genuine concern for the future of the American republic. This study also offers an explanation for the demise of the American clergy's involvement in political affairs that Tocqueville observed in 1831.

Introduction

Civil Millennialism and the Paranoid Style

Individuals and groups have been fascinated with the existence of secret societies throughout history. The first recorded traces of secret societies lie in the ruins of ancient Sumerian and Egyptian cultures, and the fascination continues today with the prominence of conspiracy theories including the Kennedy Assassination and the convoluted history of the Knights Templar in modern popular culture. Even the Illuminati, fodder for conspiracy theorists in the late-eighteenth century remains a vital aspect of modern conspiracies in such books as Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*. Leaders have often found it convenient to adopt conspiracy theories against their enemies. Likewise, individuals outside positions of power create conspiracy theories to explain what they do not comprehend or approve. There is a great amount of power available in harnessing a conspiracy theory, what could be more threatening than a group in the shadows threatening your culture, your religion, your government or even your very existence.

American history encompasses a long series of suspected conspiracies and great influence held by secret societies. The power and eminence held by members and former members of the Skull and Bones, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Affairs and the so-called Bilderberg Group suggests the scope of the concerns expressed by conspiracy theorists. During the late eighteenth century, the conservative Congregational clergy of southern New England adopted a conspiracy centered on the actions of the Bavarian Illuminati. Although unquestionably proven false by the early years of the nineteenth century, the legacy of the Illuminati, one of the first major conspiracy theories after the adoption of the Constitution, remains to this day. Modern conspiracy theorists detect the presence and influence of the Illuminati in such American

symbols as the one-dollar bill and the Statue of Liberty. The amazing persistence of the Bavarian Illuminati over two centuries of American history demands a study of its own, but this thesis will examine its role in the reorganization of the New England Congregational church in the nineteenth century.

The New England minister Jedidiah Morse has come to personify the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy. One of the first to embrace the prospect of a conspiracy, Morse presentation of the Illuminati threat fits the model of what the historian Richard Hofstadter has termed the paranoid style,

When I speak of the paranoid style, I use the term much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style. It is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself . . . In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy.⁸

Hofstadter regarded the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy of the late eighteenth century as a representative example of the paranoid style. Its most important distinction is that it is not primarily motivated by self-interest. A concern for the public good separates its style from clinical paranoia. While the two share similarities, the distinction between selfish concern and public welfare is particularly important for understanding the motivations of the clergy. Hofstadter succinctly described the differences between them,

Although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world . . . directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesmen of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others . . . His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feelings of righteousness and his moral indignation.⁹

⁸ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 4.

⁹ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 4.

History has judged Morse and his cohort as conspiratorial reactionaries, but this misrepresents the true motivations behind the clerical campaign of 1798 and 1799. While preserving the status quo would also preserve the traditional clerical role, the conservative clergy expressed genuine concern for the future of the American republic and the welfare of its citizens. The tumultuous climate of the 1790s combined with the ideology of civil millennialism and the divisions in the Congregational fold spurred these men to influence popular opinion by using the paranoid style. The historical context of these terms expresses the important place held by each in New England society.

Millennial thought was pervasive in New England, but did not achieve the same popular acceptance in the other regions. The lingering influence of Puritan heritage in New England was especially important for this difference. Early Massachusetts residents carried the concept of an intimate connection between religion and government from England and implemented this ideal in their covenanted communities. From the very beginning, the colonists of Massachusetts identified their struggle and purpose with the Biblical Israelites. Like the Israelites, they had a covenant with God and the success of the colony and the continuation of their sacred contract depended on a cooperative relationship between religion and government.

The popular emergence of millennialism can be traced to the Great Awakening; however, it was the political and social upheaval of the French and Indian War that forged the connection between religion and government termed civil millennialism.¹⁰ The tremendous legacy of the Congregational clergy's political sermons exhibits the lasting power of millennial thought in New England. "The cosmic interpretation of the conflict-God's elect versus Antichrist- appeared as a significant pattern in the intricate tapestry of

¹⁰ Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 5.

ideas used by New England clergymen to explain the war's purpose."¹¹ Nearly a half century later, these bonds would remain unbroken in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The inclusion of political events and Biblical examples foretelling the forthcoming battle between the forces of good and evil became commonplace in New England sermons. This civil millennialism would perform a large role in the coming Revolutionary struggle with Great Britain, as "New England ministers of the Revolutionary era resisted tyranny in God's name, hailed liberty as the virtue of the 'New American Israel,' and proclaimed that in sharing these values with all mankind America would become the principal seat of Christ's earthly rule."¹²

The term republicanism eludes concrete definition, as an ideology, republicanism assumed many different forms and historians have difficulty supplying a universal definition for this term, yet it remains essential to understand numerous events in American history. In *the Federalist No. 39*, James Madison supplied this definition for the American version of republicanism, "a government which derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people, and is administered by persons holding their offices during pleasure for a limited period, or during good behavior."¹³ As an ideology, republicanism assumed many differing identities and historians have difficulty supplying a universal definition for this term, which is essential to understanding numerous events in American history. In the pivotal years of 1774 and 1775, republicanism appeared as a utopian force "impelling and giving expression to the

¹¹ Hatch, *The Sacred Cause*, 22.

¹² Hatch, *The Sacred Cause*, 25.

¹³ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, (New York: New American Library, 1961), 241.

regenerative ambitions of the Revolution.”¹⁴ However, the significant role of republicanism in American development “was a profoundly traditional one, the preeminence of the ‘public good.’”¹⁵ This strain of republican thought that emphasized public virtue influenced Jedidiah Morse. As the historian Robert Shalhope has suggested, “republicanism meant maintaining public and private virtue, internal unity, social solidarity, and vigilance against the corruptive powers.”¹⁶

Various sub-groups within American culture adopted republicanism to their previously held theological, political, economic or social beliefs resulting in numerous strains of republicanism. When first introduced to the New England intellectual landscape, the Whig political ideologies of republicanism, liberalism and virtue could easily be reconciled with this earlier version of the purpose of government. According to historian Nathan Hatch, the incorporation of Whig political ideals was nearly seamless,

The fact that traditional New England vocabularies incorporated republican terms without substantive damage to Puritan forms does imply that the transition took place with a minimum of intellectual effort. New England’s strong dissenting tradition, it seems, was particularly susceptible to the eighteenth-century Commonwealth tradition; common assumptions about human nature, society, and history allowed assimilation to occur almost unnoticed.¹⁷

The historian James Kloppenberg has especially noted the overlapping of several distinct traditions in the creation of a powerful patriot movement. Protestant religious traditions in New England and Scottish common sense philosophy as explained by John Locke proved particularly well matched. Liberalism developed in response to “the inherited patterns of social hierarchy and economic ideas of mercantilism that together

¹⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, “Republicanism: the Career of a Concept,” *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (1992): 18.

¹⁵ Rodgers, “Republicanism,” 18.

¹⁶ Robert E. Shalhope, “Republicans and Early American Historiography,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1982), 335.

¹⁷ Hatch, *The Sacred Cause*, 92.

served as props for privilege in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”¹⁸ While some brands of liberalism were at odds with Protestant theological dogma, Lockean liberalism, with its roots in Protestant Christianity, proved the exception,

His [Locke’s] concept of individual liberty dissolves if it is removed from the context of divinely established natural law, which encumbers the freedom of individuals at every turn with the powerful commands of duty. Locke’s belief in a natural law discernible by reason led him to condemn the unregulated pursuit of self-interest that Hobbes considered natural and that later writers who celebrated a market economy sanctioned.¹⁹

This particular variety of liberalism was successful in New England because of its foundation in natural law, which could also be interpreted as God’s law, “Scottish philosophers did share a commitment to the accountability of the individual to the community, and that commitment appealed to Americans as much as did their comforting theories of knowledge.”²⁰ The firm sense of personal duty entrenched in Lockean liberalism made the concept compatible with traditional religious morals, particularly the notion of a covenanted community and the responsibility of all community members to uphold the conditions of the covenant. Furthermore, Lockean liberalism allowed a dependence on God’s divine will, unlike rational enlightenment thought, a belief in God’s involvement in human affairs fit within the framework of Revolutionary ideology largely because of virtue.

Virtue, another term that eludes easy definition, became essential to the New England clerical interpretation of republicanism. This paper will utilize the following definition of virtue, the modern understanding most closely related to the eighteenth century clerical interpretation. Virtue, conformity to a particular standard of right, usually

¹⁸ James T. Kloppenberg, “The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987), 15.

¹⁹ Kloppenberg, “The Virtues of Liberalism,” 16.

²⁰ Kloppenberg, “The Virtues of Liberalism,” 17.

religious and a particular moral excellence expected from both individual and society played an essential role in the clerical adaptation of republicanism. The concept of virtue linked millennial theology and republicanism, forming a hybrid termed civil millennialism. Inherent, in civil millennialism is the expectation of a coming apocalypse and the concept that political and social actions can influence the outcome of the apocalyptic battle between good and evil. Nathan Hatch, who coined the term civil millennialism, wrote, “under the aegis of civil millennialism ministers of varying theological persuasions came to do homage at the same shrine, that of liberty, and expressed their allegiance in projections of the future which were as novel as they were pervasive.”²¹ Although the combination of political ideology and religious theology that became civil millennialism was present throughout the nation, New England had the strongest tradition of millennial expectations, “New Englanders had for a century also watched political developments for signs of the coming times.”²² New Englanders also remembered a long history of trying to meet the public duties required of members in covenanted communities. Generations before the Revolution, New Englanders maintained the importance of a cooperative relationship between religion and government, public virtue and public duties. This created a volatile mixture when coupled with republicanism and liberalism. In the clergy’s interpretation of the state of virtue in American society, the increase in infidelity and irreligion in the post-war period meant the forces of evil were winning. This turn of events was particularly critical to men who entertained dreams of creating a “New Israel” in the American nation.

²¹ Hatch, “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America,” 408.

²² Hatch, “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America,” 409.

New England society was particularly susceptible to the forging of a connection between religious and political spheres for several reasons. Several sources influenced the development of civil millennialism; however, it is impossible to prove the influence of just one. First, the conflicts with France renewed anti-Catholic sentiment in America and fit neatly within millennial theory, “These perceptions of a massive French-Catholic conspiracy were linked directly to an apocalyptic interpretation of history in which the French were accomplices in Satan’s designs to subjugate God’s elect in New England.”²³ The distrust and suspicion of all things Catholic had longstanding roots in New England, and the threat of a Catholic triumph fit neatly into the language of the millennium. Congregational clergy were quick to predict if France were victorious, “Cruel *Papists* would quickly fill the *British Colonies*, seize our Estates, abuse our Wives and Daughters, and barbarously murder us; as they have done the like in *France* and *Ireland*.”²⁴ Perhaps most significantly, many considered the events of the French Revolution a continuation of the American Revolution. When Revolutionary events in France turned to violent excess, those who saw a connection between the Revolutionary sagas in each country feared the occurrence of similar events in their country. Rural uprisings such as the Whiskey Rebellion in the mid 1790s appeared as manifestations of coming violence and chaos.

Two distinct developments after the American Revolution influenced the use of millennial theology in New England. First was the dramatic popularization of millennialism, “At the end of the eighteenth century there was enormous popular interest

²³ Hatch, “Origins of Civil Millennialism,” 419.

²⁴ Thomas Prince, *A Sermon Delivered at the South Church in Boston . . .* (Boston, 1746) quoted in Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 38.

in the apocalyptic books of the Bible.”²⁵ This upsurge in the popularity of millennial thought during the early republic was fueled by the drama of recent events, “Millennialist rhetoric predicting Christ’s return to earth also expanded. Millennialism thrived on dramatic events, such as the episodic colonial revivals or the French and Indian War, and the Revolution proved an efficient incubator for yet another cycle.”²⁶ As pervasive as millennial theology was in the new nation, dramatic differences existed between the millennial theology embraced by orthodox Congregationalists and evangelicals. The majority of Christian religious leaders agreed “that only Christianity provided the means to prevent sinfulness, promote social virtue, and hold society together.”²⁷ While the members of the orthodox clergy supported the church as an institution, many evangelicals preached nearly the opposite, “It was the disappearance of the church and the unmediated operation of the Spirit upon the individual soul that would mark the advent of the millennium.”²⁸ The millennialism expressed by the evangelicals differed from the traditional civil millennialism of New England because the evangelical vision lacked a direct civil or political dimension.

The Christian republicanism embraced by the New England Congregational clergy in the late-eighteenth century placed considerable importance upon private and public virtue. Congregational ministers equated the success of the republican experiment in the United States with the meticulous observation of proper Christianity. Therefore, these social leaders believed increased political chaos and irreligion signaled the failure

²⁵ Lienesch, “The Role of Millennialism,” 446.

²⁶ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 216.

²⁷ Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 57.

²⁸ Hatch, *Democratization*, 176.

of republican government. Certain that only Christianity could preserve the republic, the clergy adopted the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy to regain an ordered society.

The conservative New England clergy led by Jedidiah Morse believed the decay of public virtue, the rise of evangelical faiths and Democratic-Republican politics posed dire threats to their social power. They were mistaken, the development of rifts between various sections of the Congregational church were even more threatening. Shared enthusiasm for the Revolutionary cause and a willingness to set aside theological differences had temporarily reunited the factions during the Revolutionary War, but this tenuous bond would dissolve in the early years of the republic. The clerical campaign to expose the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy displayed the divisions within the Congregational fold that held the greatest consequences for the future of the American Congregational church.

Chapter I
Hebrews in the Wilderness:
New England in the 1790s

By April 1799 the majority of Congregational clergy in the Boston area agreed, “The world is thrown into a general derangement, both as to civil and religious considerations.”²⁹ In the years after the Revolution, the ideals of the struggle had taken root in all aspects of American society. The republican spirit of the age shaped the cultural climate in ways unforeseen by the political and social elites who had supported the Revolution. The Massachusetts clergy did not expect this sort of development when they assisted the spread and acceptance of Revolutionary ideals during the Revolutionary era. From their pulpits these men witnessed what they termed, “. . . pride and selfishness, vice and irreligion, joined with a spirit of general slumber” infesting society.³⁰ The members of the Federalist Party shared the concerns of the clergy and also experienced a similar precarious social position. Historians Richard Buel Jr. and Nathan O. Hatch have demonstrated that political elites in New England lacked confidence in the support of their electorate unlike elected leaders in other states. In short, the New England Federalists did not inspire the same mass popular appeal that their political opponents did. Therefore, Massachusetts Federalists tenaciously clung to the ideals of Federalism, “virtue, harmony, carefully limited power, and an avoidance of foreign wars and entanglements.”³¹

²⁹ Ezra Weld, *A Discourse, Delivered April 25, 1799 Being the Day of Fasting and Prayer Throughout the United States of America*, (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1799), 30; Evans Imprint No. 36699.

³⁰ Convention of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts Ministers, *An Address . . . to their Christian Brethren . . . May 30th, 1799*, (Boston, 1799), 2; Evans Imprint No. 35339.

³¹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium In Revolutionary New England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 101.

The Congregational clergy exemplify this strong reaction to societal change in Massachusetts. For these men both the increasing republican nature of society and the escalating success of evangelical faiths conspired to endanger their societal role. The clergy experienced “a classic case of status anxiety” during the 1790s that would strongly influence their actions during the clerical campaign of 1798 to 1799.³² Jedidiah Morse, the pastor of Charlestown’s Congregational parish became a leader amongst the conservative Congregational clergy through his strong political connections to the Federalist Party, his education and social background, and his immense concern for public virtue and social reform. When he introduced the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy in 1798 Morse arose as a symbol of conservative Congregationalism throughout New England and the nation. Morse and his allies felt besieged by the changing nature of American society, they identified evangelical religion and democratic politics as the enemies of republicanism. However, the disunity of the Congregational church would prove detrimental to their goals of social reform. Although conservative and liberal Congregationalists expressed similar concerns about the popularity of evangelical faiths and the democratic spirit of American citizens, each faction would embrace different methods to preserve their social role and promote their interpretation of republicanism.

A series of internal schisms had weakened the Congregational clergy during the eighteenth century, beginning with the split between orthodox and liberal Congregationalists, in the aftermath of the disorder and enthusiasm of the Great Awakening revivals. The rational spirit of the Age of Enlightenment greatly influenced those who became liberal Congregationalists; and it “convinced them that true religion was a matter of sound understanding and upright morals, not of self-abasement and

³² Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 102.

claims of spiritual union with God.”³³ The emphasis upon rational thought and logic pushed many liberals to reject one of the primary tenants of Calvinism, the doctrine of predestination. By the early national period, the liberal Congregationalists had become “firm Arminians and were drifting even further from Calvinism.”³⁴

The Old Calvinist faction of the orthodox Congregationalists supported the Half-Way Covenant for two reasons. First, they questioned whether one could adequately prove the legitimacy of a conversion experience and second, “the Old Calvinists took very seriously the notion that the church had the duty of inculcating morality in the people. If it set standards too high, it would exclude people who might benefit from membership and would fail to fulfill its social role.”³⁵ In the Old Calvinist interpretation, the social role of the church was paramount; therefore, the social role of the minister was equally important.

During the 1790s, western Massachusetts and all of Connecticut remained dominated by orthodox Congregationalists who possessed significantly higher numbers than the liberals. Yale College, located in the Old Calvinist territory of Connecticut, was a bastion of orthodox Old Calvinism and Timothy Dwight, its president from 1795 until his death in 1817, would be a crucial ally of Jedidiah Morse. During the 1790s Dwight focused on the social duties of the church, therefore he identified with the goals of the orthodox, Old Calvinist clergy. From the moment of the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, Dwight corresponded with fellow religious leaders and stressed the importance of morality, “Here he would warn that the new Constitution, however indispensable as a

³³ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 23.

³⁴ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 23. For an explanation of Arminianism or any other religious term mentioned in this work, see the Glossary in Mark A. Noll’s *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 563-569.

³⁵ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 24.

purely negative system of restraint ‘will neither restore order, nor establish justice among us, unless it be accompanied and supported by morality, among all classes of people.’”³⁶

Echoing the arguments of the conservative clergy throughout southern New England, Dwight became “an outspoken advocate for the public role of (and, not surprisingly, the public support for) the clergy as moral monitors” of society.³⁷

A Yale graduate and the son of a fiercely religious and conservative farmer, Jedidiah Morse became an orthodox, Old Calvinist minister despite receiving a preaching position in Charlestown, adjacent to Boston and part of liberal Congregationalist territory. Morse devoted little of his time to theology, “Of a more practical than speculative bent, Morse was responsive to the Old Calvinist concern that the church fully live up to its social responsibilities.”³⁸ In particular, Morse highlighted the social duties of the Congregational minister, namely to guard the moral character of society. For this reason, Morse and similar clergy referred to themselves as “watchmen” and utilized the theology of civil millennialism to legitimate their role as social guardians. In his 1799 fast day sermon, Morse discussed the criticism the clergy had received for meddling in politics, but Morse asked,

Is this any new crime? No; it is as old as Christianity; nay it is as old as the priesthood itself. The priests and prophets under the Old Testament dispensation; Christ and his Apostles under the New; the faithful Christian Clergy in every age and every country, have *preached politics*; that is, they have inculcated subjection to civil magistrates, and obedience to the laws; have cautioned the people against animosities and divisions; warned them of their dangers, whether from foreign or domestic enemies, and have exerted their talents and influence to support the religion and lawful government of their country.³⁹

³⁶ Colin Wells, *The Devil and Doctor Dwight: Satire and Theology in the Early American Republic*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 137.

³⁷ Wells, *The Devil and Doctor Dwight*, 138.

³⁸ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 24.

³⁹ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29, 1798*, 18-19.

Clearly, the orthodox Old Calvinist clergy represented by Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight felt they were fulfilling the ancient duties of the priesthood, however, as the new century approached they faced strong opposition. Despite changing popular attitudes and a vastly different cultural climate, the orthodox clergy clung to their civil millennialist outlook. In fact, they obstinately clutched their increasingly obsolete social role that they had not effectively filled since the Revolution, “for doing what only twenty years ago they were called upon to perform as a *duty*, they are now censured and abused; and represented as an expensive, useless, nay even, noxious body of men.”⁴⁰ Religious leaders like Dwight and Morse reacted with horror to the waning presence of deference in New England society.

Massachusetts had dramatically changed as a result of the Revolution. Perhaps most significantly, deference, the mainstay of colonial society was under assault from the egalitarian spirit of the age. A transplant of English society, deference consisted of a system of social relationships based upon family background, wealth and education. In this system men considered socially inferior were expected to defer to their social superiors in virtually all aspects of colonial society. This allowed men of high social standing to easily maintain authority in colonial society, few members of the inferior classes considered challenging assumed social supremacy.

A hint at the impact the decline of deference from American society is illustrated by Alfred F. Young’s analysis in *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*. Within this text Young includes two very different incidents in the life of George Robert Twelves Hewes, in the first the presence of deference shapes Hewes’s encounter with John Hancock. On New Year’s Day 1763, Hewes arrived at the Hancock House, “He was introduced

⁴⁰ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29, 1798*, 19.

directly to the *kitchen*, and requested to seat himself, while report should be made upstairs.”⁴¹ An incident fifteen years later demonstrates Hewes’s less deferential attitude, his biographer, Benjamin Bussey Thatcher related that Hewes refused to remove his cap for any man. This rejection of deference was radical and extreme; he had changed a great deal from the man patiently waiting in Hancock’s kitchen in 1763. Over the course of the Revolutionary struggle and after becoming acquainted with republican ideals of equality, Hewes, according to his biographers, determined that “I am as good as any man regardless of rank or wealth.”⁴² This realization was not unique to George Hewes; people throughout the nation reached similar conclusions. For many Americans this rejection of deference, “above all was what the Revolutionary events of Boston meant, as did the war that followed.”⁴³

These cultural changes were not unique to Massachusetts, American society as a whole changed with the injection of republican principles. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich richly portrayed the decay of deference from American society in *A Midwives Tale*. On the edge of the American frontier, in Hallowell, Maine, midwife Martha Ballard recorded her perceptions of a changing society. For Ballard this change manifested itself in the attitudes of her household help. The young girls hired to assist the aging Ballard with her household chores exhibited saucy and independent attitudes. Difficult to control, these young women left Ballard’s employ when they saw fit and demanded the full and timely payment of their wages. Accustomed to holding the authority in relationships with servants, Ballard and her husband felt “a shared sense that the world had indeed slipped

⁴¹ Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 3.

⁴² Young, *Shoemaker*, 56.

⁴³ Young, *Shoemaker*, 57.

from its familiar orbit, that the axis of the universe was changing.”⁴⁴ Although separated by great distance, the clergy shared the same sentiments as the Ballards.

During the early national period, the clergy received criticism for their continued involvement in politics, most notably many citizens disapproved of the practice of preaching politics from the pulpit, common amongst many conservative clergy in southern New England. The clergy believed they were continuing the practice of their Puritan ancestors, preserving the intimate connection between church and state. Some members of the public thought otherwise and voiced their disapproval in local papers, accusing the clergy of “neglect [to] the sacred duties of their office.”⁴⁵ In the same anonymous letter, the writer stated the clergy’s concerns over irreligion and the decrease in public virtue were misplaced. Instead placing the blame at the feet of popular evangelicals and politicians, this author felt they should examine their own actions.

The Clergy are pat to complain of the decay of Religion; that their churches grow thin, and that people chose rather to frolic on the Sunday, than go to the house of worship; but while they reprobate the people, let them reflect on their own conduct; probably they will find, that this inattention to public worship is in some degree their own fault.⁴⁶

Jedidiah Morse proved particularly susceptible to this sort of criticism, many, including his father the Deacon Jedidiah Morse, felt Morse devoted too much of his time to researching his geographies or politicking for Federalist candidates. The commenter of the newspaper piece under examination seems to have felt strongly that Jedidiah Morse was a poor example of a clergyman and increased the irreligion in his parish through his own actions,

⁴⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwives Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 224.

⁴⁵ *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, Monday, January 7,- to Thursday, January 10, 1799.

⁴⁶ *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, January 7- January 10, 1799.

If the parish observe the Minister busy about many things; if they find him more anxious about the *geographical* description of the City of Washington or the Georgia Lands, than the *New Jerusalem* or the *Land of Canaan*; if they find him neglect his parish on a Sunday and employ himself during the week, to collect ridiculous fables to swell an appendix to a political publication. If he will do these things, he must expect that his flock will not increase.⁴⁷

The writer advised Morse and his conservative cohorts to “not be surprised if some of his *own sheep* have strayed across the river, and become the care of a more attentive shepherd.”⁴⁸ The majority of clerical readers must have reacted in shock to the condemnation of a lay observer. Prior to the Revolution, the majority of New Englanders deemed public criticism of the clergy socially inappropriate, but in this new social climate, especially with the decrease in deference, the clergy became subject to public disapproval in the papers and elsewhere. After the Revolution, many congregations decided to dismiss their pastors for unsatisfactory job performance, yet another source of anxiety for the conservative clergy.⁴⁹

Social change was not the only factor effecting the Congregational clergy’s decisions and actions during the last years of the eighteenth century. Although concern for their social role and the diminishment of their personal power preoccupied the clergy, the strong emphasis they placed on the intimate relationship between religion and politics, that now faced criticism, had deep roots in Puritan traditions. The clergy’s use of civil millennialism during the years leading up to and during the American Revolution emphasized the political and social role of the clergy. During the Revolutionary crisis especially, the clergy had bridged political thought and religious doctrine. This role contained similarities to the traditional role held by the clergy; the chaos of the period

⁴⁷ *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, January 7- January 10, 1799.

⁴⁸ *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, January 7- January 10, 1799.

⁴⁹ Noll, *America’s God*, 90.

only increased the importance of the clergy's social watchmen role. During the 1790s, an era of extreme political and social chaos, New Englanders naturally turned to the past for guidance and they were lead by their religious leaders, the men who stood to lose their traditional role and source of power.

In the 1790s, the Federalist political leaders and the dominant social and religious leaders in Massachusetts, the Congregational clergy, found themselves in similar positions. Neither group had anticipated the sort of social change the Revolution had precipitated and both feared the potential outcome of these changes. Likewise, Federalist politicians and Congregational clergy recognized a limited sphere for their social role in their new society. Furthermore, since both groups were largely comprised of individuals with New England Calvinist backgrounds there was a very firm sense of a quickly approaching millennium. Many people in late eighteenth century America interpreted the American Revolution and subsequent French Revolution as harbingers of a new era. The close association between republicanism, liberalism and, most importantly, virtue led many to recognize the American Revolution as a Christian movement.

Hatch and James M. Banner agree that “‘what drew . . . [men] to Federalism was a mental association with established authority and an affinity for the fixed and traditional,’ it is also impossible to dismiss the impact of this reactionary definition of virtue, lodged so close to the heart of New England republican conviction.”⁵⁰ What, in their opinion, separated Federalists and their Congregational allies from their political and social opposition was a continued emphasis on virtue. During this period, despite the success of Madison and Jefferson's campaign for disestablishment in Virginia, New England Federalists maintained the necessity of a close relationship between government

⁵⁰ Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 137.

and politics. Although civil millennialism had a strong influence before the Revolution, it became a stronger influence on some clergymen in the Revolution's wake.

Republican political ideology heightened concern for moral and religious foundations. Republican principles had enormous importance for American religion because, though they were often vague and elusive, they placed great authority in the very laypeople with whom the clergy had long struggled. . . . Contemporaries agreed that a successful republican society and government, by definition, depended on a 'virtuous people.'⁵¹

Ironically, for the Federalist politicians and Congregational clergy just as they determined political and religious success depended on the virtue of American citizenry the populace had begun to embrace republican ideals most visibly through the popularity of evangelical religions and Democratic-Republican societies. This new society did not mirror the virtue the clergy wanted to see in society. Their concern for the fate of society in both a religious and political sense, as well as their own personal fears, prompted them to search for a solution.

In Massachusetts, and particularly in the minds of conservative Congregational clergymen, the Democratic-Republican societies struck at their diminishing social power. To the clergy these organizations represented the continued decline of deferential politics that had begun during the Revolution and now seemed to be increasing, "so the groundswell of opposition to the federal government in the early 1790s further eroded and undercut public confidence in this traditional and venerable political practice."⁵² Over the course of the decade, the clergy developed an awkward relationship with the new wave of democratic-minded organizations that quickly gained popularity amongst the nation's inhabitants. New England was no exception, the political influence held by

⁵¹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 213.

⁵² James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the New Republic: The New Nation in Crisis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 68.

the Masonic Lodges and social organizations formed by former officers of the Continental Army presented the clergy with new opportunities for addressing the public. Although the southern New England clergy remained dedicated to discrediting the actions and purposes of the Democratic-Republican societies, other democratic-minded organizations provided a new speaking medium for the clergy, “addresses to the Masonic Lodges and Cincinnatus Clubs soon began to replace the election sermons as the most prestigious forums for clerical wisdom.”⁵³

The Democratic-Republican societies seriously challenged the traditional hegemony of the Congregational clergy. These vocal social critics filled the pages of numerous sermons with warnings against the politicians they believed composed the democratic-republican societies. In July of 1799, Jedidiah Morse advised the students of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, to be wary of the present state of society,

In the present disorganized state of society in general, your temptations will be numerous, and your dangers great. You will have need, therefore, to be strongly fortified against that infidel and insidious philosophy which has produced such extensive havoc and desolation on the principles and morals of mankind.⁵⁴

Although their battle against the Democratic-Republican societies would continue, another foe presented a great challenge.

The decline of deference and the rise of popular democratic organizations are examples of a striking change in American society, however, where the increase of republican ideology most threatened clerical status was in the increase of popular evangelical sects. Baptists had begun to challenge Congregational dominion in southern New England since the Great Awakening. Baptist growth continued through the century

⁵³ Emory Elliot, “The Dove and the Serpent: The Clergy in the American Revolution,” *American Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1979): 200.

⁵⁴ Jedidiah Morse, *An Address to the Students at Phillips Academy Delivered July 9, 1799*, (Charlestown: Samuel Etheridge, 1799), 12; Evans Imprint No. 35837.

and showed “no signs of abating in the early republic.”⁵⁵ During the nineteenth century, Methodists would also enjoy rapid growth in this region. During the turbulent years of the early republic, the stagnation of Congregational churches caused the conservative clergy to view any sect successful in converting the populace as a threat. The anti-elitism of the popular evangelicals fueled the fire of an already growing controversy.

Inherent in the popular success of evangelical sects, was a denunciation and criticism of the elite, educated ministers who had dominated New England religion since its inception. One of the foremost premises of the evangelical sects was the thought common people could interpret the Bible independent of their minister’s guidance. Congregational ministers in Massachusetts abhorred the “religious assault on well-bred and high-toned culture,” that challenged their social role.⁵⁶ The Congregational clergy were accustomed to interpreting not only religious theology, but also political and social events in New England. Over the course of generations, the New England clergy had assumed the role of societal watchmen. They perceived themselves to be in a position of moral oversight; in fact, many came to view the ministry as a public office, in the words of historian Donald M. Scott, “The ministry in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England was a form of public office . . . [which] had particular responsibility for the preservation of social order.”⁵⁷ Although the clergy strove to maintain this position in the New Republic, increasingly public sentiment opposed their actions. The two pillars that had traditionally supported the domination of the Congregational clergy, deference and

⁵⁵ Jonathan D. Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness: The Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

⁵⁶ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 21.

⁵⁷ Donald M. Scott quoted in Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 59.

the established church, were under attack from all sides and evangelicals often led the assault.

The evangelical opposition to the established church in Massachusetts and Connecticut outspokenly criticized the Congregational clergy as ignorant, indolent and above all covetous. Methodist itinerant John Leland delivered a sermon in Connecticut entitled *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable* shortly after his return from Virginia in 1791. Leland was a staunch admirer and supporter of the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom penned by Thomas Jefferson. Within the pages of his discourse, Leland condemned the practice of educated ministers interpreting the Bible for the masses. He questioned the justice of this arrangement, “Were not the learned clergy (the scribes) his [Jesus’] most inveterate enemies?”⁵⁸ Leland not only insinuated that the learned clergy were superfluous, he also implied that they were the successors of Christ’s enemies. Leland criticized the conservative Congregational clergy for espousing politics from the pulpit and desiring a tax supported salary, in this way Leland and his evangelical cohorts threatened the social power structure of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Anti-elitism was a common characteristic of nearly all the evangelical sects, “All of these movements challenged common people to take religious destiny into their own hands, to think for themselves, to oppose centralized authority and the elevation of the clergy as a separate order of men.”⁵⁹

Morse and his colleagues found themselves engaged in a battle for public opinion, a battle they were clearly losing during the 1790s. The clergy were dismayed to discover the evangelical itinerants were encouraging the people to think for themselves on

⁵⁸ John Leland, “The Rights of Conscience Inalienable,” (1791) in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 1090.

⁵⁹ Hatch, *Democratization*, 58.

theological matters. Even Congregational clergy with Democratic-Republican sympathies, such as William Bentley of Salem, Massachusetts, who would later challenge the authenticity of Morse's Illuminati claims, found lay participation unacceptable, "What Bentley found most appalling was that 'the rabble' not only noised abroad strange doctrine but actually went beyond what they were told in the attempt 'to explain, commend and reveal' religious matters. The people, he groaned, were doing theology for themselves."⁶⁰ The situation reminded the New England clergy of the early years of colonial settlement and the actions of Anne Hutchinson. Once again, inferior and unqualified individuals were interpreting scripture.

Furthermore, New England's Congregational clergy found the notion of a separation between church and state inconceivable. Puritan theology emphasized an intimate relationship between church and state, particularly in the influential doctrine of civil millennialism. Accustomed to their usual role and spurred to greater action by the ideologies of the American Revolution, the clergy hoped to assume a greater role in post-Revolutionary American society. During the 1790s Jedidiah Morse sought to enlarge the role of the parish minister and, as an avid geographer, Morse wanted not only to chart the expansion of the new nation, but wanted to shape it.

In his major geographical work, *The American Geography*, "He assigned the clergy a large role in maintaining Connecticut's happiness by serving 'as a check upon the overbearing spirit of republicanism.'⁶¹ He even suggested that when ministers preached the annual election sermons in the New England states, they should submit histories of the events of the past year for reference in settling any political disputes and

⁶⁰ Hatch, *Democratization*, 21.

⁶¹ Jedidiah Morse, *The American Universal Geography* (Boston, 1793) quoted in Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 32.

preventing the rise of political factions.”⁶² However, the majority of the American citizenry were no longer willing to allow elites to interpret political events for them.

Understandably, many in American society found the 1790s marked by a great deal of turmoil. At this point, American republican government was little more than an experiment and no one was sure whether the results would be successful. While the instability of the political and economic systems created a large amount of societal stress, the transforming cultural climate had the most severe repercussions on the relationship between the clergy and their congregations. The ideals of the Revolution influenced both the clergy and the members of their churches; however, they interpreted the impact of these ideals very differently. For the masses, republicanism, liberalism and virtue completely redefined their conception and their place in American society. Like George Robert Twelves Hewes, they developed a new sense of their self worth, “Above all, the Revolution dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves about issues of freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation.”⁶³ The ideals of popular sovereignty and the voice of the people codified in the Constitution expounded these ideas, “The correct solution to any important problem, political, legal, or religious, would have to appear to be the people’s choice.”⁶⁴ It seems a reasonable interpretation, if the people were the deciding authority in legal and political matters, why could they not reach independent conclusions about religion.

The clerical networks faced a crisis with the effective repudiation of their traditional societal role. Through their support of the Revolution and Constitution, most ministers had anticipated an important role in shaping the moral and political society

⁶² Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 32.

⁶³ Hatch, *Democratization*, 6.

⁶⁴ Hatch, *Democratization*, 6.

forming around them. The Congregational clergy “were most deeply committed to the project of the new United States” and had envisioned a continued, if not expanded, role as societal watchmen.⁶⁵ However, this expectation did not fit into the role most republican citizens envisioned for their ministers. After the Revolution, New England’s established ministry found themselves suddenly thrust into a new religious arena, “Congregationalists accustomed to state recognition . . . were forced willy-nilly, to adjust. More than simply adjusting, they now had to compete for souls, for public allegiance, and for intellectual commitment.”⁶⁶ Despite this new set of challenges, the conservative New England ministry was unwilling to discard their visions of a religious and republican utopia in the United States; furthermore, they were unwilling to give up their role in forming this utopia.

Nathan Hatch articulated the challenges faced by the conservative clergy in *The Democratization of American Christianity*. These challenges resulted from the increasingly republican nature of society, “In such a society the elites could no longer claim to be adequate spokesmen for the people in general. In this climate, it took little creativity for some to begin to reexamine the social function of the clergy and to question the right of any order of men to claim authority to interpret God’s Word.”⁶⁷ The clergy faced the difficult task of proving their usefulness to society and the necessity of their traditional role in this new republican society. Unfortunately, for the clergy, the developing society of the 1790s in no way resembled the society the clergy had envisioned. Although, republican society was beginning to emphasize different characteristics of republican ideology, in the words of historian Mark A. Noll,

⁶⁵ Noll, *America’s God*, 253.

⁶⁶ Noll, *America’s God*, 257.

⁶⁷ Hatch, *Democratization*, 24.

The direction in which political conceptions moved defined also the direction of theological change. In the early years of the new nation, that evolution was away from a republicanism defined largely by civic humanism, with ideals of disinterested public virtue and freedom defined as liberation from tyranny. The movement was toward a republicanism aligned with liberalism, with ideals of individualized private virtue and freedom defined as self-determination.⁶⁸

The changing concept of virtue is key, through each fast day, thanksgiving and election sermon conservative clergy railed against the state of virtue in the new nation. In the minds of the religious elite, the means of influencing the morals of society lay in the connection between virtue and piety. The Morse and other members of the conservative Congregational faction feared this new societal structure did not align with the traditional principles of New England religion.

Perhaps the conservative Congregational clergy in southern New England were more concerned with the moral welfare of their society than their counterparts in other states. The unique bond formed between Puritan theology and republican ideology in the years leading up to and during the American Revolution attributed to this seemingly illogical anxiety. A society accustomed to identifying present events with Biblical narratives, many pious New Englanders believed they were citizens of the New Jerusalem. Continuing the Biblical imagery used to describe the Revolutionary struggle, New Englanders now applied similar themes to the social development of the New Republic, “Having watched the divine wonders against ‘Pharaoh’ and having quickly taken up arms to overthrow ‘Egypt,’ New Englanders knew that their perilous experiment, now in the wilderness, depended on nothing but their own moral fitness.”⁶⁹ While New Englanders continued to adhere to the principles of republicanism shared by all American citizens up and down the eastern seaboard, they retained their own unique

⁶⁸ Noll, *America's God*, 210.

⁶⁹ Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 120.

interpretation, which “often reflected perceptions of the republic as a commonwealth, virtue as piety and benevolence, vice as sin, and liberty as a opportunity to do what is right.”⁷⁰ Hence, the New England version of republicanism was unique to that espoused in other regions of the United States. The great emphasis placed on the need for a virtuous citizenry and leadership can be traced to the theological and political development of New England.

Southern New England’s conservative religious leaders sought to reestablish the cooperative relationship between church and state, religion and government. Historian Jonathan Sassi succinctly described the goals of the conservative Congregational clergy in *A Republic of Righteousness: the Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy*,

Amid the general cultural and theological milieu emphasizing the values of the common good, unity, and order, the Congregational ministry posited its particular strategy for attaining these goals. By teaming up with society’s civil leadership, the ministry hoped to inculcate Christian virtue and suppress vice. Because vice and irreligion were so intertwined, an approach was needed for both problems.⁷¹

The Congregational church continued to support a close alliance between church and state throughout the early national period, although their determined support of establishment seemed out of touch with republican society. The clergy believed in an essential, close working relationship between church and state, a relationship they deemed necessary for the experiment of republicanism to prove successful. They may also have been aware that the removal of required tax support would seriously injure the Congregational church.

⁷⁰ Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 120.

⁷¹ Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 60.

Throughout the 1790s and beyond, the clergy tenaciously clung to establishment as a means of preserving republican government in America. In Massachusetts and Connecticut especially, the clergy eloquently supported the Congregational church's tax sustained status. In an Election Day sermon preached before Massachusetts governor John Hancock, Lieutenant Governor Samuel Adams and the State Legislature, David Tappan delineated the differences of "cooperation from unjustifiable melding of church and state."⁷² Tappan, the Harvard educated son of a Congregational minister was the pastor of the Newbury Congregational church. A member of the orthodox, Old Calvinist, conservative Congregational faction, Tappan stressed the appropriate relationship between religion and government,

We mean not to advocate such a union or cooperation of the two orders, as involves a heterogeneous mixture of civil and spiritual objects; as places the Magistrate upon CHRIST's throne, in the church, and invests the Christian Minister with the honors and powers of the State: Such motley alliances are the offspring of political and priestly ambition, aided by equal cunning; are the main pillar of both civil and religious tyranny; and the course of infinite mischiefs to the intellectual and moral character as well as the temporal condition of mankind.⁷³

In sermon after sermon, the orthodox Old Calvinist clergy sought to prove that they were embracing the ideals of Revolution. In their fast and election day sermons in particular, they stressed their embrace of republicanism and tried to convey their brand of virtue and republican society. Furthermore, they sought to effectively sever any tie to the established churches of Europe; Isaac Lewis of Greenwich, Connecticut, offered similar assurance to his congregation,

It is not however our wish that anything similar to the religious establishments of Europe, should be introduced into our country. We hope never to see our

⁷² Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 60.

⁷³ David Tappan, "A Sermon for the Day of General Election," (1792) in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 1114.

magistrates employed, in prescribing articles of faith; nor in the exercise of the least coercive power to compel men to adopt this, or that creed, or submit to any one mode of worship in preference to another. May liberty of conscience, in this land, be never violated.⁷⁴

The theory of virtue was essential to the New England clergy's concept of Revolutionary political ideals. Virtue acted as the linchpin connecting republican ideals and Puritan religious traditions. Furthermore, the clerical emphasis on the connection between a virtuous citizenry and a successful republican government was largely responsible for their concern over the morals of society. After the war, however, the development of differing interpretations of the ideal republican society created tensions between vastly different definitions of virtuous citizenry.

The New England clergy identified public virtue as essential to the continued existence of republican government, while corruption would surely destroy it. Timothy Dwight picked up the theme of virtue in a sermon preached before the Connecticut Society of Cincinnati and later published at the organization's request. Dwight's address provided a definition of virtue compatible with the theology and expectations of the orthodox, Old Calvinist clergy. Dwight defined virtue as "The love of doing good . . . It ought to be observed, that it is not a passion, nor an aggregate of passions; but a principle, or disposition, habitual, active, and governing. It is the mental energy, directed steadily to that which is right."⁷⁵ The virtue expounded by Dwight and his allies was elusive and retained similar characteristics to the covenanted community idealized by the early Puritans. Maintaining a virtuous citizenry, placing the common good ahead of personal gain and following carefully the dictates of civil and religious leaders was the duty of

⁷⁴ Isaac Lewis, *Political Advantages of Godliness* quoted in Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 235.

⁷⁵ Timothy Dwight, *The True Means of Establishing Public Happiness: A Sermon Delivered, the 7th of July 1795*, (New Haven: T&S Green, 1795), 14; Evans Imprint No. 28610.

Christians in the New Republic. Present in the addresses by orthodox clergymen were the dangerous consequences of social upheaval. Abiel Holmes, pastor of the First Church in Cambridge, warned against “the natural effects of national despondency” in his 1799 fast day sermon.⁷⁶ Speaking before two congregations Holmes laid out the grave threat posed by national licentiousness and immorality, “The combined forces of the State will be incapable of being brought into decisive operation. The supineness and timidity of the people will be discovered by the enemy, which must now perceive itself invited to an easy conquest.”⁷⁷ The community-focused virtue espoused by conservative Congregationalists in New England directly contrasted with the individual liberty supported by Jeffersonians and evangelicals.

For many former revolutionaries, popular sovereignty satisfied the three competing principles of Early American society, namely religion, republicanism and liberalism. James Kloppenberg described popular sovereignty as an attempt to incorporate these values into American government and society, “Its haphazard development notwithstanding, the idea of popular sovereignty, rooted firmly in experience, had universal appeal. It seemed to represent at once the fulfillment of the Puritan concept of the covenant, the republican idea of a public-spirited citizenry, and the liberal idea of responsibly self-interested individuals exercising their right to self-government.”⁷⁸ To the modern perspective, the concept of popular sovereignty seems unremarkable, even blasé, but for the time it was a radical notion. Some segments of society accepted the new concept more readily than others, for instance the sovereignty of

⁷⁶ Abiel Holmes, *A Sermon Preached at Brattle-Street Church . . . April 25, 1799, the Day Appointed by the President of the United States for a General Fast*, (Boston: Young & Minns, 1799), 14; Evans Imprint No. 35628.

⁷⁷ Holmes, *A Sermon Preached at Brattle Street Church*, 14.

⁷⁸ Kloppenberg, “The Virtues of Liberalism,” 25.

the common person was enthusiastically embraced by the Democratic-Republicans. The Congregational clergy in New England found the doctrine of popular sovereignty incompatible with their perceptions of a virtuous society and their role in it, the conservative Old Light, Calvinist clergy in particular expressed concern that unscrupulous politicians would mislead the “unsuspecting American people.”⁷⁹ Timothy Dwight, also stressed the limitations of popular sovereignty, “The public concerns are too numerous, the public officers, in opinions, characters, and interests, too various, the opportunities of secure oppression too easy, and the neglects of duty too frequent, to allow any possible firmness or consistency.”⁸⁰ Dwight, Morse and ministers like them clung to the belief that clergy should guide the actions of the populace.

For the clergy to ensure the virtuous nature of the citizenry, the citizens must attend public worship on a regular basis. The sermons of the period almost continuously berate the public for irreligion and breaking the Sabbath, which would have been criminal offenses earlier in the century and now remained largely ignored by authorities. Whether large parts of the population had ceased attending church entirely or if many worshippers abandoned the Congregational fold for evangelical denominations is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, membership in many Congregational churches declined during the 1790s throughout New England. The home parish of Jedidiah Morse in Charlestown, Massachusetts, serves as an example, when Morse assumed leadership of the congregation in 1789 the number of members stood at one hundred and thirty-five; about a decade later in 1800, the church had gained fewer than ten members. Particularly ominous for Morse and his colleagues “this lack of growth in his congregation contrasted

⁷⁹ Morse, *A Sermon . . . May 9th, 1798*, 13.

⁸⁰ Dwight, *The True Means of Establishing Public Happiness*, 7.

sharply with a rapid increase in the Charlestown population.”⁸¹ Meanwhile, the evangelical population grew.

The period encompassing the administrations of Washington and Adams, also known as the Age of Federalism, was also a time of social, political and religious chaos. Perhaps because of its chaotic nature, this period produced many passionate social critics. Historian John Howe characterized the 1790s as an Age of Passion, describing American political life as

Gross and distorted, characterized by heated exaggeration and haunted by conspiratorial fantasy. Events were viewed in apocalyptic terms with the very survival of republican liberty riding in the balance. Perhaps most remarkable of all, individuals who had not so long cooperated closely in the struggle against England and even in the creation of a firmer continental government now found themselves mortal enemies, the basis of their earlier trust somehow worn away.⁸²

During the social and political upheaval of the 1790s, the orthodox, Old Calvinist clergy tried to steer important aspects of their changing society, and they could not comprehend the criticism levied against them by evangelical leaders and the Democratic-Republican press. The emphasis the orthodox clergy placed upon virtue and civil millennialism meant they were seriously concerned for the moral welfare and future existence of the American nation, and they felt personally attacked. As Morse noted, “the apparently systematic endeavors made to destroy, not only the influence and support, but the official existence of the Clergy” required strenuous rejection.⁸³ Beset from all sides, the stage was set for a spectacular battle.

⁸¹ Richard J. Moss, “Jedidiah Morse and the Illuminati Affair: A Re-Reading,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 16, no. 2 (1988): 142.

⁸² John Howe cited in Stanley Erkins and Eric McKirtland, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

⁸³ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29, 1798*, 17.

Chapter II
Vigilant Watchmen:
Clerical Campaign of 1798-1799

The morning of May 9, 1798, the Reverend Jedidiah Morse stepped up to the pulpit of Boston's New North Church to deliver a sermon that would have far-reaching consequences. Before the upturned faces of the congregation, he unveiled the existence of a plot "to root out and abolish Christianity, and overturn all civil government."⁸⁴ These words began the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy that would hold much of New England society in a grip of fear and uncertainty for nearly eighteen months. Within two months time Yale College president Timothy Dwight and the Congregational minister of Braintree, Massachusetts, Ezra Weld would echo the Bavarian Illuminati threat.

Americans became acquainted with the Bavarian Illuminati through a 1798 book written by Scottish professor and scientist John Robison entitled *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*. Richard Hofstadter described

Robison's book as

A conscientious account, laboriously pieced together out of the German sources, of the origins and the development of Weishaupt's movement. For the most part, Robison seems to have made his work as factual as he could, but when he came to estimating the moral character and the political influence of Illuminism, he made the characteristic paranoid leap into fantasy.⁸⁵

Robison claimed the Illuminati were dedicated to "overthrowing government, religion and morals throughout the world."⁸⁶ Furthermore, Robison claimed that "agents of the Illuminati had made their way from Germany into the Jacobin clubs in Paris and were

⁸⁴ Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 21.

⁸⁵ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*, 11.

⁸⁶ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 75.

responsible for the anarchic, atheistic direction of the French Revolution.”⁸⁷ Moreover, he claimed that branches of the Illuminati existed in the United States. Morse echoed Robison’s concerns in each of his fast day sermons, in 1798 he notified his parishioners that, “There is great reason to believe that the French revolution was kindled by the *Illuminati*; and that it has been cherished and inflamed by their principles.”⁸⁸ Morse also despondently reiterated Robison’s charges of Illuminati agents in America; however, Morse went one-step further and insinuated that the Illuminati had infiltrated high levels of American government. Morse alleged,

There are too many evidences that this Order has had its branches established, in some form or other, and its emissaries secretly at work in this country, for several years past. From their private papers which have been discovered, and are now published, it appears, that as early as 1786, they had several societies in America, And it is well known that some men, high in office, have expressed sentiments accordant to the principles and views of this society.⁸⁹

Although Morse seemingly possessed a great deal of confidence in Robison’s sources and accusations, Robison personally had little connection to the Illuminati movement; he had participated in an English Masonic guild and held the actions of Masonic organizations on the Continent in suspicion. Nevertheless, within the pages of his detailed account, Robison portrayed himself as an expert and there is no evidence that Jedidiah Morse knew the threat of the Bavarian Illuminati to be exaggerated.

The historical narrative of the Bavarian Illuminati is relatively simple; Adam Weishaupt a professor of law at the University of Ingolstadt founded Illuminism in 1776. The modern reader would be hard pressed to find antireligious opinions in Weishaupt’s writings, “its teaching today seem to be no more than another version of Enlightenment

⁸⁷ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 75.

⁸⁸ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 23.

⁸⁹ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 23-24.

rationalism, spiced with an anti-clerical animus that seems the inevitable response to the reactionary-clerical atmosphere of eighteenth century Bavaria.”⁹⁰ A utopian and rather naive movement, the main goal of the order was to spread the rules of reason to the entire human race. As benign as the goals of Weishaupt’s Illuminati may appear to the modern reader, the clergy felt the organization constituted a major threat to their way of life. In his May 1798 introduction to the Bavarian Illuminati, Morse offered this description of their goals and purpose,

The express aim of this society is declared to be, ‘To root out and abolish Christianity, and overturn all civil government.’ Their principles are avowedly atheistical. They abjure Christianity- justify suicide- declare death an eternal sleep- advocate sensual pleasures agreeable to the Epicurean philosophy- call patriotism and loyalty narrow minded prejudices, incompatible with universal benevolence- declaim against the baneful influence of accumulated property, and in favor of liberty and equality, as the inalienable rights of man- decry marriage, and advocate a promiscuous intercourse among the sexes- and hold it proper to employ for a good purpose, the means which the wicked employ for bad purposes.⁹¹

The Illuminati experienced a great deal of success during the 1780s, converting many intellectuals and political elites including dukes and princes of the German states and reportedly, philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and educator and reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. In 1785, leaders of the Bavarian government banished Weishaupt from the principality and initiated widespread persecution of Illuminati members the government deemed dangerous and subversive, resulting in the disintegration of the group by the end of the decade. Despite the disestablishment of the Illuminati, the order may have continued to influence Masonic lodges and modern internet searches result in numerous groups claiming ties to Weishaupt’s Illuminati. Nevertheless, the historical order of Illuminati founded by Adam

⁹⁰ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*, 10.

⁹¹ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 21.

Weishaupt had been defunct for at least a decade when Robison's claims surfaced in 1798.⁹²

Whatever his knowledge of the Bavarian Illuminati, Morse passionately expressed the dangers he saw threatening the United States. From his pulpit in Charlestown he bellowed his warning,

Yes, my brethren, it is a sacred truth, that our most precious religious and political interests are at this moment imminently endangered, by *the hostile designs, the insidious arts and demoralizing principles of a FOREIGN NATION*; and I plainly declare to *you* that I mean the FRENCH NATION.⁹³

In the clerical campaign of 1798 and 1799, the conservative Congregational clergy attempted to protect republican government in America. They felt the future of American republican government was in question and in this crisis, conservative ministers, many of them members of the orthodox, Old Calvinist fold, recommended "their congregations to stay the course. They circled the wagons, so to speak, around the Federalists party and New England Congregationalism."⁹⁴

After allowing his announcement of the Bavarian Illuminati threat to percolate through the fall and summer months, Jedidiah Morse again addressed the theme of virtue and republicanism. In Morse's mind, the two were intimately linked, and while his 1798 Thanksgiving sermon addressed the danger posed by the Illuminati he devoted much of his oration to the importance of public virtue. From his pulpit, Morse chided his congregation for their immoral behavior, "Party zeal and animosities have, in some instances, marred our happiness. Prejudices have too often blinded the eyes of the mind

⁹² Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*, 10; Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 78-89 and 95-99. For more information on the Bavarian Illuminati, an excellent source is Trevor W. McKeown, "A Bavarian Illuminati Primer," *Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon*, <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/illuminati.html> (Accessed 16 March 2006).

⁹³ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached April 25, 1799*, 12.

⁹⁴ Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 79.

against the perception of truth.”⁹⁵ True to his desired role as a vocal moral compass for his community, Morse imparted advice that was the culmination of two decades hard work by the Congregational ministry. The connection between virtue and republican government Morse voiced that November morning was the offspring of Congregational Revolutionary rhetoric,

Christianity sheds a most benign and salutary influence on society. It ‘teacheth us, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. It prohibits the indulgence of those appetites and desires *only*, which cannot be satisfied without impairing the happiness of others. It is highly friendly to genuine liberty.”⁹⁶

Throughout the clerical campaign of 1798 and 1799, conservative clergy in southern New England reacted to the incorporation of millennial thought and republican ideology into New England society, the careful creation of two decades and tremendous social upheaval.

The 1798 thanksgiving sermon did not stress the Illuminati threat as much as the fast day sermons. This could be for several reasons, including a different audience or a different atmosphere for the occasion. However, Morse still informed his congregation of a very grave threat, suggesting that if American citizens did not change their behavior the civil future of the government was in question. In presenting a solution Morse first decried the lack of laws against such behavior, “Many of our laws, indeed, against vice and immorality, those particularly against profane swearing, debauchery, gaming, and Sabbath-breaking, are but a dead letter.”⁹⁷ Clearly, Morse believed the government was neglected its moral duties. Consequently, Morse adopted an approach akin to popular sovereignty, to a certain extent the people must police themselves. Recalling the earlier

⁹⁵ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29, 1798*, 9.

⁹⁶ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29, 1798*, 25.

⁹⁷ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 12.

covenanted community, Morse advised, “No community can attain the ends of society, which are peace, security, and happiness, unless government be respected and obeyed.”⁹⁸ Morse held the people responsible to the concept of popular sovereignty as he interpreted it, as voters they must ascertain that they elect wise, pious and virtuous leaders and because they chose these leaders, they must obey and respect them. Morse believed that somewhere along the path to American independence, someone had neglected to inform the American people they could not mount an insurrection in response to every unjust action. This was the wrong interpretation of republicanism, and if it continued, Morse feared constant societal unrest. Therefore, in every one of his published sermons Morse stressed respect for and obedience towards society’s civil and religious leaders.

Biblical comparisons were common within the religious and political rhetoric of the early republic, Morse and many others perceived a strong connection between the present American situation and the Biblical book of Isaiah,

How far the facts and circumstances, in the foregoing narrative, apply to our case as a nation; what degrees of resemblance there are in the causes which involved good Hezekiah and his people in their great perplexity and distress, and those which have brought us into our present unhappy and perilous situation, I leave everyone to judge for himself.⁹⁹

Biblical comparisons proved a useful rhetorical tool for religious leaders in early America because the majority of Americans were well acquainted with the Bible. Therefore, the majority of listeners found comparisons between a present event, person or country and a Biblical theme, event or character readily comprehensible. Moreover, this ready comprehension made tedious explanation unnecessary, if a speaker compared the current actions of the French nation to the actions of the Assyrian nation, his listeners readily

⁹⁸ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 14.

⁹⁹ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 11.

recognized Assyria and by extension France as “a treacherous and faithless, as well as powerful nation.”¹⁰⁰ In the hands of a speaker accustomed to integrating religious and political imagery, such as Morse, Jefferson became the weak and wicked Ahaz and Adams the pious and wise Hezekiah. The message was blunt; any person familiar with Isaiah would oppose the election of a presidential candidate with many similarities to the Biblical King Ahaz. As Abiel Holmes so appropriately questioned in 1799, “Who does not perceive a happy resemblance between the conduct of the Jewish King, and of the AMERICAN PRESIDENT?”¹⁰¹

Morse expressed particular concern in the leadership abilities of an irreligious leader. He asked his congregation, “Can *he* be a friend to his fellow creatures who hates Christianity, who opposes its progress, who seeks its subversion, ridicules its ordinances, and vilifies its teachers?”¹⁰² There was no need for Morse to name the man he spoke of, every citizen of Massachusetts and Connecticut was well aware that the conservative clergy opposed the election of Jefferson, widely suspected of holding deist beliefs, a belief the clergy equated with atheism. If Jefferson portrayed the wicked Ahaz, Adams was clearly the good King Hezekiah, “whose moral, religious, and political character are well known.”¹⁰³ There were no secrets with Adams, a pious son of New England, his Unitarian leanings conveniently forgotten; only Adams reliably navigated the ship of state. Morse believed Adams had already proven his worth,

For myself, I cannot forbear observing, that I consider it as one of the most prominent evidences of the Divine Goodness to our country, that the ‘life and usefulness’ of this great and good man have been preserved . . . That bold and decisive policy which he has adopted and pursued, and in which, happily, he has

¹⁰⁰ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Holmes, *A Sermon Preached at Brattle Street Church*, 19.

¹⁰² Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 27.

¹⁰³ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 19.

been supported by Congress and the People, has, I verily believe, been the means of saving our Constitution.¹⁰⁴

High praise indeed, but even the illustrious Adams could not insure the survival of American republicanism alone. In that crusade, he had a great ally in the orthodox, Old Calvinist branch of the Congregational clergy. In his next sermon, Morse would fully discuss the importance of the clerical role.

In May 1799, one month prior to his second fast day sermon discussing the Illuminati, Morse traveled to Philadelphia. While there he met with Oliver Wolcott Jr. and Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, Morse later wrote that during this meeting the three men discussed the current political situation and Morse's efforts in New England. Soon after his return to Charlestown, Morse received Abbé Augustin Barruel's inflammatory memoirs entitled, *Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*. The book included the same material as Robison's earlier account but "made the conspiracy even more extensive, tracing its origins to the early eighteenth century with the work of Voltaire and D'Alembert."¹⁰⁵ The panicked tone and pervasive scope of Barruel's book may explain the increased paranoia present in Morse's 1799 fast day sermon. Shortly after reading Barruel's *Memoirs*, Morse wrote to Wolcott claiming, "that the *Jacobins*, like their father, the first *Disorganizer*, can transform themselves into any shape, even into that of an angel of light, in order to accomplish their purposes, prejudices, vices- in a word, all that is wrong in human nature, against all good."¹⁰⁶ Supplying Morse with information proved a successful strategy for Wolcott, the Federalist Party benefited from his claims of conspiracy, very quickly leading Federalist newspapers in Philadelphia and New York to

¹⁰⁴ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 84.

¹⁰⁶ Jedidiah Morse quoted in Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 84.

reprint extracts of the sermons. “Within Massachusetts, Federalist leaders had four hundred copies distributed to the state’s clergy by members of the legislature on their return from the winter session in Boston.”¹⁰⁷

His involvement with the upper echelons of Federalist leadership increased Morse’s sense of the danger currently faced by American society, government and religion. However, there is no evidence that Federalist elites allowed Morse inside the political circle he so coveted. There is also no evidence that Morse was a party lackey, he first discovered the Illuminati narrative independently of any Federalist influence and his language suggests that he genuinely believed in the dangerous aspects of the conspiracy he peddled. Morse’s intentions aside, clearly his sermons were carefully created to further the Federalist and the Congregational cause.

In April 1799, Morse seemed particularly concerned with anticlericalism. The Bavarian Illuminati figured prominently in this sermon, including the claim of a McCarthy-esque list of suspected members of the Illuminati in Virginia. His meeting with Wolcott and his reading of Barruel’s book most likely caused the increased paranoid style of this last sermon by Morse addressing the Bavarian Illuminati. His paranoia greatly increased, Morse proclaimed the true reason for American anticlericalism was the influence of French anticlericalism, “No, my brethren, the true ground of opposition to the clergy of America, at the present time is, they are decidedly opposed to the *hostile designs and insidious aim of the French Government.*”¹⁰⁸ At this point Morse may have felt somewhat alone in opposing the French threat, Adams refused to declare war on France and liberal Congregationalists in New England were busily attempting to refute

¹⁰⁷ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 81.

¹⁰⁸ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 21.

the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy. Allowing himself to become caught up in his paranoid ranting, Morse made the astounding announcement,

I have now in my possession complete and indubitable proof that such societies do exist, and have for many years existed, in the United States: I have, my brethren, an official, authenticated list of the names, ages, places of nativity, professions, &c. of the officers and members of a Society of *Illuminati*, (or as they are now more generally and properly styled, *Illuminees*) consisting of *one hundred* members, instituted in Virginia, by the *Grand Orient* of France.¹⁰⁹

Unlike Joseph McCarthy one hundred and fifty years later, Morse actually did possess proof, published later with the fast sermon as part of an extensive appendix. Furthermore, Morse claimed that another Illuminati cell, possibly older and more extensive, existed in New York.

The detailed information concerning the alleged Illuminati members in Virginia and New York very likely came from Federalist leaders, Morse boasted an extensive correspondence, but he did not have the connections to gather such a detailed list. During the 1790s, Morse communicated with several members of the Federalist Party leadership, most notably Secretary of the Treasury and future Governor of Connecticut Oliver Wolcott Jr. and diplomat John Jay. In the April 1799 fast day sermon, one central fact may have reached Morse's ears through Federalist channels. Although Morse accused the French of many heinous crimes, French actions against American shipping was one of the few that provided substantial proof. In this sermon, Morse used the actions of the French navy to illustrate the threat posed by the French nation,

Recent intelligence from the West Indies, which has obtained general credit is, that on of our merchant ships has been taken by several French privateers, and the prisoners, (five or six excepted) consisting of 70 souls, all immediately put to the sword, by the blood thirsty victors.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th*, 1799, 15-16.

¹¹⁰ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th*, 1799, 13.

Despite the story featuring prominently in the news for several weeks, Morse desired more information. In a letter written to Oliver Wolcott on June 11, 1799, Morse included a postscript requesting further news, “Pray, sir, can you trace the origin of the report of the massacre of the crew of the *Ocean*? Was any other ship’s treated in that same inhuman manner? If so, I will thank you to communicate to me the intelligence as soon as you can”¹¹¹ This correspondence suggests that Wolcott and Morse shared growing concerns over the increasing social and political chaos within the United States.

In the same letter, Morse included several copies of the Convention of Massachusetts Congregational Clergy’s 1799 address for Wolcott to distribute amongst the Philadelphia clergy. Morse also assured Wolcott, “You will see by these things that the clergy are not asleep this way. They ought everywhere, indeed, to be awake.”¹¹²

Within the pages of Morse’s correspondence with Federalists leaders the growing concern each group felt is clearly evident. Both the Congregational clergy in New England and the Federalists throughout the nation felt threatened by recent events. In a January 30, 1799 letter to Morse, John Jay expressed the distress felt by many political and social conservatives,

We see many things, my dear sir, which might be altered for the better, and that, I believe, has been the case at all times. But at this period, there certainly are an uncommon number and series of events and circumstances which assume an aspect unusually portentous.¹¹³

No one involved with the new republican government doubted the significance of the present moment, for a generation of men preoccupied with their place in history it was

¹¹¹ George Gibbs, *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams, Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury*, (New York: William Van Norden, 1846), 242.

¹¹² Gibbs, *Memoirs of the Administrations*, 241.

¹¹³ John Jay, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, 1763-1826*, Henry P. Johnston, ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 252.

clear that the development of the United States would reflect upon their memory. Both the Federalists and the Congregational clergy witnessed the demise of their republican utopia; a republic based upon order, leadership by the elite, educated few and a strong, symbiotic relationship between government and religion.

Like other leaders throughout human history who found their power challenged and their status weakened, the conservative forces in early America searched for a scapegoat. The New England Federalists and conservative Congregational clergy, made allies by uncertain times and similar goals, identified two dangers to American republicanism. The first, continuing a theme from the colonial past, was the French nation. In a letter to Oliver Wolcott, Morse described the danger posed by the revolutionary French government. While armed conflict with France could be disastrous, Morse confessed himself, “infinitely more afraid of their *principles* than their arms.”¹¹⁴ Many High Federalists advocated war with France during the late 1790s; this constituted a break with Adam’s peaceful diplomatic overtures to the French government in the wake of well-documented impressments of American sailors and the embarrassment of the XYZ Affair. This division of the Federalist leadership weakened the prospects of Federalist candidates in the upcoming election. His relationship with Jay and Wolcott, and his New England heritage placed Morse in a difficult position. He desperately desired acceptance from the Federalist elites he tried to emulate through his prolific geographies and pulpit politics. However, Morse was also a son of New England, he felt a strong connection to Adams and seems to have genuinely admired the President. He offered unwavering support to Adams throughout the political turmoil of 1799 and 1800, and although he frequently denounced the French nation in sermons, he never advocated war

¹¹⁴ Gibbs, *Memoirs of the Administrations*, 241.

with France. Although the recent actions of the French presented an opportune target, the French provided an imperfect scapegoat.

John Jay's 1799 letter to Jedidiah Morse reflects a continued concern amongst conservatives, about the increase in irreligion. Jay wrote, "Infidelity has become a political engine, alarming both by the force and the extent of its operations."¹¹⁵ The Federalists and the Congregationalists believed themselves to be the true champions of American republicanism, but could not deny that the republicanism espoused by the Democratic-Republicans and the evangelicals appealed more to the average American citizen. Therefore, the rise of evangelicalism and democratic sentiments threatened the religious and the political elites. When Jedidiah Morse climbed into his pulpit in 1799 and declared to his expectant audience, "It has long been suspected that *secret societies*, under the influence and direction of France, holding principles subversive of our religion and government, existed in this country."¹¹⁶ Furthermore, by emphasizing concerns held by both the political and religious leaders in New England, he provided the conservative elements of American politics and religion with an immensely effective scapegoat. The Bavarian Illuminati combined the threats presented by the French and the growing evangelical faiths into one and fashioned a scapegoat New Englanders in particular could identify as the ultimate enemy, the ever-present Anti-Christ of civil millennial discourse.

Although Morse's main source of anxiety remained the condition of New England society and the preservation of Congregationalism, he harnessed the Bavarian Illuminati for political means. The choice of states harboring Illuminati cells were no coincidence, Virginia, of course, was the home state of Thomas Jefferson and New York the home

¹¹⁵ Jay, *The Correspondence and Public Papers*, 252.

¹¹⁶ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th*, 1799, 15.

state of Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton had recently become an enemy of Adams and his loyal supporters, by authoring a villainous letter that relentlessly criticized Adams. Even more suspect were “the not-so-covert efforts of the Hamiltonians to slip Charles Cotesworth Pinckney in ahead” of Adams in the 1800 presidential election.¹¹⁷ By implying a strong Illuminati presence in each of these states, Morse further suggested that they might also have a role in the politics of that particular state. Especially since many charged the Illuminati with endeavoring “to destroy the confidence of the people in the constituted authorities and divide them from government.”¹¹⁸

The conservative clergy in southern New England predicted dire consequences for the American republic if Thomas Jefferson won the presidential election in 1800. Many religiously conservative men throughout the Northeast felt similarly, John Mitchell Mason, a Presbyterian minister in New York, expressed his concern toward the coming election, “I dread the election of Mr. Jefferson, because I believe him to be a confirmed infidel: you desire it, because, while he is politically acceptable, you either doubt this fact, or do not consider it essential.”¹¹⁹ The calm, collected, logical outline of Jefferson’s infidelity written by Mason in 1800 used Jefferson’s published work, *Notes on Virginia*, to demonstrate the potential president’s irrefutable infidelity to the masses. However, the primary spokesmen for the orthodox, Old Calvinist Congregationalist faction in Massachusetts and Connecticut, Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight, did not rely upon such rational arguments.

¹¹⁷ Elkins and McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism*, 692.

¹¹⁸ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 13.

¹¹⁹ John Mitchell Mason, “The Voice of Warning to Christians,” (1800) in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 1453.

Morse's Illuminati sermons of 1798 and 1799 make clear that, only true Christianity can preserve the American republic and only the respect and obedience of the people toward proper elected leaders and the clergy could ensure the creation of a Christian republic. Morse's message became part of a clerical campaign when ministerial colleagues picked up similar themes. Timothy Dwight continued the Illuminati discourse in a sermon given on the Fourth of July, 1798, not quite a month after Morse's original sermon. Dwight echoed similar allegations against the Illuminati. Undeniably a superior orator and writer with a strong background in poetry, Dwight declared, "In the societies of Illuminati doctrines were taught, which strike at the root of human happiness and virtue; and every such doctrine was either expressly or implicitly involved in their system."¹²⁰ In explaining the proper defense against the Illuminati, Dwight used the same method as Morse. Dwight told his listeners,

You already know what is to be done, and the manner in which it is to be done . . . But it may be necessary to remind you, that personal obedience and reformation is the foundation, and the sum, of all national worth and prosperity. If each man conducts himself aright, the community cannot be conducted wrong. If the private life be unblamable, the public state must be commendable and happy.¹²¹

If personal obedience and reformation were the foundation of a prosperous and happy republic, the clergy were irreplaceable. Dwight wrote, "Christianity cannot fall, but by the neglect of the Sabbath" and it was the clergy that reminded the people to partake in weekly worship and facilitated the worship of God.¹²² Like Morse, Dwight believed a proper Christian society could not exist without the clergy.

¹²⁰ Timothy Dwight, "The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis," (1798) in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 1374.

¹²¹ Dwight, "The Duty of Americans," 1378.

¹²² Dwight, "The Duty of Americans," 1380.

On April 25, 1799, the Bavarian Illuminati's clerical opposition experienced a surge in popularity. Many of the clerical members of the orthodox, Old Calvinist Congregational faction referred to the conspiracy in their fast day sermons. Some contained veiled references, others were far more explicit. Ezra Weld assured his Braintree congregation of his personal perusal of the appendix to Morse's thanksgiving sermon and assured them "you will find, I am most confident, abundant reason to alter your opinions relative to France, and the doings of our American government."¹²³ Echoing the opinions of Morse and Dwight, Weld reminded his listeners and readers of the duties of all citizens of a civilized state, "a Constitution, however, which was not only formed by wisdom and prudence, but needs the same for the pillars of its support. It rests upon the shoulders of the people, upon, their cheerful submission to their own laws, and resistance of all foreign influence."¹²⁴ While ministers like Weld, Osgood and Holmes decided not to directly address the troubling claims of the Illuminati's growing power that Morse placed at the center of his fast day sermon, they did emphasize the great importance of public virtue.

The *neglecters* of the public worship of God; the *Sabbath-breakers*, and *gamblers* of the present period; the *profane*, &c. . . . cannot find themselves willing to carry their obedience on to universal submission to the laws of the community. Such licentiousness is indicative of our public unhappiness; for where the laws of a community or State are menaced and violated with boldness and perseverance, and the symptoms of dissolution are visible.¹²⁵

By connecting the success of the republic and public virtue in their fast day sermons, the clergy chose to accentuate their interpretation of republicanism tempered by millennial discourse.

¹²³ Weld, *A Discourse, Delivered April 25, 1799*, vi.

¹²⁴ Weld, *A Discourse, Delivered April 25, 1799*, 12.

¹²⁵ Weld, *A Discourse, Delivered April 25, 1799*, 22.

The orthodox fast day sermons in April 1799 especially warned of the threat posed by “the disorganizers of civil government” who were the “real enemies to all denominations of the *religious*.”¹²⁶ Morse’s ministerial colleagues quickly recognized the power of a threat to both government and religion, this dual threat coupled with the millennial expectations held by New Englanders provided incentive for their listeners to adopt their advice. David Osgood referred to anti-Christian elements and Abiel Holmes quoted John Adams’s fast day proclamation, a document that reiterated the alarmist language used by Morse, “the most precious interests of the people of the United States are still held in jeopardy- by the dissemination among them of those principles subversive of the foundations of all religious, moral and social obligations, that have produced incalculable mischief and misery in other countries.”¹²⁷ These men agreed with Morse and Dwight. Holmes reminded his congregation of the Book of Isaiah and the familiar story of King Hezekiah,

The King of Assyria was a rod in God’s hand for the correction of his covenant people. What the Assyrian was to *them*, the Terrible Republic may be to *us* . . . The great condition of our security is nothing less than national religion: *The Lord is with you while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you.*¹²⁸

The conservative ministers hoped to remind their flocks of their kinship to the Israelites, they too were covenanted people. If they desired a thriving and content republic, they must carry out their part of the bargain as the clergy interpreted it.

The clergy championed republicanism, yet differed greatly from the evangelicals or the Democratic-Republicans. The clergy espoused a form of limited liberty. Their experiences with civil millennialism and their understanding of virtue taught them that

¹²⁶ Weld, *A Discourse, Delivered April 25, 1799*, 29.

¹²⁷ Holmes, *A Sermon Preached at the Brattle Street Church*, 28.

¹²⁸ Holmes, *A Sermon Preached at the Brattle Street Church*, 27.

only religion could motivate people to seek the common good, and they believed the creation of a moral society was essential to successful republicanism. Therefore, the clergy fought to preserve order in society in order to maintain their definition of liberty, Morse desired that “liberty be given the opportunity to flourish *within* the governmental system.”¹²⁹ Morse had personal reasons to maintain the status quo, but he was keenly aware “that liberty could only operate within certain limitations.”¹³⁰ In the minds of Morse, Dwight and their ministerial colleagues traditional religion and a strong social role for the clergy were the only means of preserving American republicanism. Certain that disrespect for the law would result in increased government or the dissolution of government, neither acceptable outcomes, the clergy prepared a campaign to preserve American liberty.

Historian Richard J. Moss believed Morse had aims beyond the conspiracy, “He did not argue that recent events were understandable solely as the product of a diabolical plot; he sought to put these events in a much larger context.”¹³¹ The Illuminati narrative in the hands of the orthodox, Old Calvinists was not a tool for spreading fear and panic, quite the opposite, their arguments “imposed a degree of rationality onto a series of events that otherwise challenged existing categories of thought.”¹³² The Illuminati threat uniquely suited the campaign waged by the conservative clergy; a threat to both government and religion demonstrated their belief in the essential nature of a connection between church and state. Furthermore, the internal threat required citizens’ diligence, and renewed public virtue. The conservative elements of New England

¹²⁹ Snyder, “Foundations of Liberty,” 389.

¹³⁰ Snyder, “Foundations of Liberty,” 389.

¹³¹ Moss, “Jedidiah Morse and the Illuminati Affair,” 142.

¹³² Wells, *The Devil and Doctor Dwight*, 153.

Congregational clergy with their world outlook tinged with civil millennialism, concern over public virtue and status anxiety were predisposed to accept the existence of an Illuminati threat. However, New England citizens were also inclined to believe conspiracy threats because of their ideological and religious backgrounds. In his study of republican religion during the early national period, historian William Gribbin explained the ready acceptance of paranoid style rhetoric in New England,

This was one reason why the attitudes which social scientists call the ‘paranoid style’ flourished among them, for the republican ideology presumed that the continuance of liberty was possible only when the moral fiber of the nation was strong. Hence, any decline from virtue was a political matter; and the toleration of sinful conduct, even private vices causing no immediate disruption to the body politic, endangered the state.¹³³

New Englanders had steeped in the theology of millennial hope, the covenanted community and the cooperation between church and state for generations, therefore, unlike citizens in Virginia or even nearby New York, the propaganda presented by the clergy meshed with their political and religious expectations.

Although Moss criticizes Jedidiah Morse’s Bavarian Illuminati sermons as “poorly written and organized,” in actuality they were finely crafted Federalist propaganda.¹³⁴ A firm believer in Federalist policy, Morse relished the praise his fast day sermons received from the Federalist leadership because “if he could not shape policy, [he] at least wanted to influence public opinion.”¹³⁵ The Federal leadership may have recognized this desire in Morse; evidence suggests that Oliver Wolcott supplied Morse with information pertaining to the existence of Illuminati cells on American soil.

¹³³ Gribbin, *Republican Religion*, 62.

¹³⁴ Moss, “Jedidiah Morse and the Illuminati Affair,” 153.

¹³⁵ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 81.

In times of crisis, individuals often return to the old, the comfortable, and the traditional. Like the clergy, New Englanders with their firm background in Calvinism and New England political thought were preprogrammed to accept the validity of the Bavarian Illuminati threat. Morse thoroughly utilized past experiences in his efforts to demonstrate the danger posed by the Illuminati. In his sermons, Morse often invoked the memory of past generations, “Our pious ancestors saw the hand of God in every thing, more especially in all signal events, such as pestilence, famine, earthquakes, war, and other calamities. But it had become fashionable as of late, to ascribe these feelings to the uncontrolled operations of natural causes, and to keep out of view the Divine agency.”¹³⁶ The conservative clergy called upon New England citizens to follow their ancestors and watch for the hand of God in everyday events. The Bavarian Illuminati posed a grave threat to New England culture, to combat it Morse recommended,

To prevent this as far as in us lies, it behooves us to listen to the voice of providence in the present events, which loudly warns us that loudly warns us to avoid all political connection with those nations which seem devoted to destruction; to watch the movements, and detect and expose the machinations of their numerous emissaries among us; to reject, as we would the most deadly poison, their atheistical and destructive principles in whatever way or shape they may be insinuated among us, to take heed that we partake not of their sins, that we may not receive her plagues.¹³⁷

The Bavarian Illuminati worked perfectly under these conditions, had the clergy attempted to persuade their parishioners to thwart the Illuminati threat in an unconventional manner their campaign would have failed outright. The strength of the clerical campaign lay in the clergy’s proposed solution, a return to traditional religious values and a more stable government structure. This echoed the concerns of influential

¹³⁶ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th*, 1799, 28.

¹³⁷ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th*, 1799, 31.

local Federalists and fit neatly in the New England traditional of holding the French in suspicion.

A strong historical connection allowed the clergy to demonstrate the consequences of ignoring Providence; clergy used both Biblical imagery and familiar historical precedent to illustrate the scope and power of the present crisis. While politicians held forth the Roman Republic as a shining example of America's republican heritage, the clergy saw a solemn lesson in the Roman narrative and urged their congregations to remember, "That like causes produce like effects, and learn wisdom from the fatal experiences of other nations."¹³⁸ In the capable hands of Morse the history of Rome became a cautionary tale exhibiting the importance of religion for a healthy republic. According to Morse while the Roman people followed the great principle of religion,

They were virtuous, free, and invincible. But when the *Atheistical* doctrine of *Epicurus* had insinuated itself among them under the fascinating title of *philosophy*, it by degrees undermined and destroyed this great principle, and with it that 'individual simplicity of manners, and enthusiasm of public virtue . . . and pious attention to the improvement of the morals of the people by religion, which, in all countries are the strong pillars by which every political society is sustained.'¹³⁹

Thus, Rome fell not because of the barbarian invasions, but because of irreligion.

Ominously, Morse predicted the same fate for America because "the same philosophy which ruined Rome has been revived in the present age, and is now widely spreading its desolations over the world. Its contagious influence has reached us, and is visibly marring the foundations of all our most precious interests."¹⁴⁰ Morse and others reckoned the emergence of rational religion, termed deism by most but atheism by the conservative

¹³⁸ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 14.

¹³⁹ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th, 1799*, 29-30.

¹⁴⁰ Morse, *A Sermon . . . April 25th, 1799*, 30.

clergy, symbolized a return of dangerous, incendiary philosophy. The clergy believed the American state was as morally weak as the Roman state had been before its fall.

The clerical concern over social morality is well established, as is the fact that most of the clergy considered vice and irreligion to be on the rise in early national America. Jedidiah Morse defined irreligion as “a contempt of all religion and moral obligation, impiety, and everything that opposes itself to pure Christianity.”¹⁴¹ Drawing upon the lesson provided by the Greek and Roman downfalls, Morse reminded his congregation that only “through the goodness of God, we continue to enjoy Constitutions of Civil Government well calculated to secure and maintain our rights, civil and religious.”¹⁴² Morse believed that freedom was a privilege, not a right and that the success of American government depended upon God’s goodwill. Like other clerical members of the orthodox, Old Calvinist faction, Morse feared the goodwill of God was diminishing because of the rampant spread of immorality, greed and vice. Morse cautioned,

Vice is hostile to freedom. A wicked people cannot long remain a free people. If, as a nation, we progress in impiety, demoralization, and licentiousness, for twenty years to come, as rapidly as we have for twenty years past, this circumstance alone will be sufficient, without the aid of any other cause, to subvert our present form of government.¹⁴³

The clergy felt immense concern about their society because their experiences with civil millennialism and Revolutionary republican rhetoric convinced them that the success of their country depended on the virtue of their fellow citizens. Furthermore, because colonial and Revolutionary New England culture emphasized the social watchmen role of

¹⁴¹ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered . . . May 9th, 1798*, 17.

¹⁴² Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 10.

¹⁴³ Morse, *A Sermon, Preached November 29th, 1798*, 12.

the clergy, these men believed it was their duty to protect and guide society. Thus, the conservative clergy launched the Illuminati conspiracy with the best of intentions

Chapter III
Fall from Grace:
The Bavarian Illuminati Fraud

Ultimately, the clerical campaign failed, surprisingly, because of an internal division in the Congregational Church. The same disunion that had existed since the Great Awakening, the orthodox and the liberal Congregationalists, now threatened in the late 1790s to tear the Church apart. However, the separations within Congregationalism existed below the surface and often went unrecognized, “While from a distance Congregationalism cut an imposing profile, a closer inspection reveals cracks just below the surface. These divisions, which would split the denomination and sap its strength in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, were now mostly latent, but festering.”¹⁴⁴ During the social chaos and political crises between 1760 and 1800, the Congregational Church maintained a veneer of unity; it seemed the clergy could work together for the American cause of liberty despite their theological disagreement. However, at the end of the eighteenth century their relationship changed dramatically.

During the Revolutionary War and Washington administration, New England Congregationalists presented a united front, “They generally stood together in their public pronouncements, although theological segmentation did contribute to a breakdown in consensus regarding the national covenant.”¹⁴⁵ The beginning of serious competition between clergy with different theological loyalties had many causes; one early issue that split the clerical opinion was the Illuminati crisis of 1798 and 1799. Morse and his orthodox, Old Calvinist supporters emphasized the social role of the church, a role they saw diminishing and desperately tried to rescue. The liberal Congregationalists stressed

¹⁴⁴ Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness*, 25.

the importance of theology and dedicated their efforts to maintaining the theological purity of the Congregational Church. Liberal Congregationalists such as William Bentley found the clerical role advocated by Jedidiah Morse unacceptable. While Morse believed he advocated a return to past religious tradition, the liberal Congregationalists felt quite the opposite, they believed his actions polluted the church and altered the role of the minister. For liberals, more engaged with intellectual and theological pursuits than civic involvement, the political scheming of orthodox clergymen was reprehensible.

The public reaction to the Bavarian Illuminati threat is difficult to judge, yet the language of letters in the newspaper war clearly point to embattled liberal and orthodox Congregationalists. The large number of ministers who addressed the Illuminati in fast day sermons on April 25, 1799, the extensive reprinting of Morse's sermon as far as Philadelphia and South Carolina and the ready market for printed copies of Morse's sermon suggests a great deal of acceptance.¹⁴⁶ In an article discussing the clerical opinion of the French Revolution, Gary B. Nash described the response to Morse's 1798 sermon as largely positive, "Already inflamed by the XYZ Affair, newspapers editors, clergymen, politicians, and private citizens echoed the charges, calling for the extermination of the alien influence and affirming the need for social unity, conservative government, and a revival of religion."¹⁴⁷ Despite the anti-elite climate of the 1790s, all of Morse's printed fast day sermons appear with a note of approval from the listeners on the title page. This suggests that the sermons received the endorsement of the influential lay members of the Congregation entrusted with selecting sermons for print. Morse may

¹⁴⁶ For examples see: *Porcupine's Gazette*, 1799-02-25, *Porcupine's Gazette*, 1799-01-03, and *South Carolina Gazette and Timothy's Daily Advertiser*, 1799-02-08.

¹⁴⁷ Gary B. Nash, "The American Clergy and the French Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1965), 392.

also have received the support of local Federalist politicians present in the special occasion audience who found the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy a means of furthering their political goals.

During the fall of 1799, the conflict over the Illuminati threat took center stage in several Massachusetts and Connecticut newspapers, including the *Independent Chronicle*, *the Bee*, *the Massachusetts Spy*, *the Constitutional Telegraph* and *the American Mercury*. It was not the conflict envisioned by Morse, instead of banding together to present a united front against the Illuminati and the possible dangerous outcome of the approaching election, the Congregational Church divided between those who supported Morse and those who did not. The most important factor in determining which members of society would ultimately support Morse and his conservative Congregationalist brethren was their personal political opinions. The New Englanders who challenge Morse in the newspapers all expressed sentiments compatible with Democratic-Republican political doctrine.

The first letters questioning Morse's motives appeared shortly after his April fast day sermon. *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* published a letter from an American citizen concerned with Morse's motives for exposing the Illuminati conspiracy. The writer admitted to being intrigued with the origin and reliability of Morse's principle source, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe*, "Being rather surprised that a publication of the authenticity and consequence which Dr. Morse attached to this, should have so little excited the attention of the public, and that the facts which it presents should not have been more generally

known.”¹⁴⁸ ‘An American’ questioned the authenticity of Robison’s book and included a review published by *The Critical Review or Annals of Literature* a London publication from 1797. The review declared the society innocent of all charges and seriously criticized Robison declaring, “The object of our author seems therefore to be absurd in the extreme, and we should throw aside with the utmost contempt . . . [the Illuminati] is of no more consequence than the history of Old Codgers, Jerusalem Bricks, Merry Boys and similar clubs, which have their meetings in and about London.”¹⁴⁹ The author continued in his letter to question Dr. Morse’s possible motives, “Charity forbids us to suppose that Dr. Morse would hazard his reputation as a Scholar, his character as a Patriot, or his candor as a Christian, by holding up a work, which is ‘calculated to excite alarms in the public,’ without pretty decided proofs of its good authority and correctness . . . But Mr. Morse has in a public and solemn manner, indirectly pledged himself for the authenticity of an extraordinary publication by adopting its sentiments, and recommending it to his countrymen.”¹⁵⁰ This letter identified Morse as the source of the conspiracy and intimately attaches his reputation to the accuracy of the publication.

Three consecutive letters with a similar theme also appeared in the *Independent Chronicle* between May 6 and June 3, 1799. They were each signed, “A Friend to a Real Clergyman, and an Enemy to Bigots,” Like the letter by ‘An American,’ this series questioned Morse’s motives for releasing the Illuminati information, but continued to ask why he would reveal such sensitive information in a public sermon, “How much more patriotic would it have been in you, Doctor, to have communicated these secret plots to the district attorney, the grand jury, or any other body qualified to take cognizance of

¹⁴⁸ *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, Thursday, May 24,- to Monday, May 28, 1798.

¹⁴⁹ *The Independent Chronicle*, Thursday, May 24,- to Monday, May 28, 1798.

¹⁵⁰ *The Independent Chronicle*, Thursday, May 24,- to Monday, May 28, 1798.

such high crimes and misdemeanors, to retail the alarming narrative in nine-penny sermon?”¹⁵¹

Much more damning, the final letter, accused Morse of neglecting his ministerial duties. First, ‘A Friend’ criticized Morse for the content of his fast day and thanksgiving sermons, “On a Thanksgiving of Fast day they [the public] expect to have their hearts enlarged with the most grateful adorations of the Supreme Being; they expect to meet together in love, and to separate in friendship; to contemplate the blessings of Heaven, and to implore its protection.”¹⁵² This criticism probably offended Morse deeply, but the next accusation cut more deeply at his pride and ambition. The writer advised the clergy to look inward for the cause of recent irreligion,

Instead therefore, Doctor, of throwing the odium of the decline of religion, on the Illuminati, you ought to reflect whether you and *a few others*, in the clerical profession have not been the principle cause of its present enfeebled state. You sermons have been wrote with such a spirit pf party rage, that every moderate man condemns them. You have disgusted people with a constant repetition of false alarms, and when they find that your vouchers are as visionary as the fancy of a distempered mind, your predications and sermons are nearly as much unnoticed as the *quack handbills* of a mountebank, or the catchpenny puffs of a strolling player. For when we find that you propagate one falsehood, we naturally suppose the whole subject to be of the same material.¹⁵³

Thus, in the span of a two-column open letter Jedidiah Morse became the parson who cried conspiracy. Numerous letter writers to the various New England papers advised Morse not to be surprised when his congregation stressed because he had gambled his credibility and devoted too much of his time to geography and political intrigue. Morse had advocated a stance for the clergy above the political and social fray. Stressing the watchman role, Morse anticipated the clergy would continue to receive the traditional

¹⁵¹ *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, Monday, May 6, - Thursday, May 9, 1798.

¹⁵² *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, Thursday, May 30, - Monday, June 3.

¹⁵³ *The Independent Chronicle*, Thursday, May 30, - Monday, June 3.

respect and deference, but in his choice of public forum and public motivation, he left himself open for attack.

Morse was not entirely without support, a few community members came to his aid in print. In June 1799, an article appeared in the *Commercial Advertiser* without headline or author that supported Morse's allegations against the Illuminati and condemned the newspapers that criticized him. After a short summary of the Illuminati history the writer expressed certainty that,

This spirit is secretly working night and day, to circulate misrepresentations respecting our government. The *Aurora*, *the Bee* and every lying vehicle of slander, is industriously spread over the country, and put into the hands of credulous, ignorant men, to excite disaffection to our government. The honest men who are thus deceived are to be used hereafter as the instruments of a revolution, which shall exalt atheism and anarchy on the ruins of public peace and established laws.¹⁵⁴

In her examination of the political culture of honor that flourished during the early republic, Joanne Freeman provides a detailed analysis of the art of paper war. "Part of what differentiated weapons of paper war was the presence or absence of a signature. A man who gave information 'with his own signature' staked his reputation on the veracity of his words, thereby giving them weight and power."¹⁵⁵ Many considered the use of pseudonyms in political paper wars cowardly; however, the use of various nom de plumes remained popular because the pseudonym possessed a unique power.

Anonymous print attacks enabled politicians to malign their foes without owning their comments. Often the sting in such attacks lay not in their anonymity but just the opposite: in the insular world of high politics, elite readers often had little difficulty guessing the authors of such pieces, giving them the authority of a reputation without the liability of blame.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ *Commercial Advertiser*, 1799-06-08.

¹⁵⁵ Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 127.

¹⁵⁶ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 128-129.

Although Freeman's writing is devoted to political dealings, her conclusions contain relevance for the paper war between supporters and detractors of Jedidiah Morse. The Puritan legacy left New Englanders with a firm respect for the authority of a name and a genuine concern with maintaining the good reputation attached to their name.

Furthermore, tight-knit and extensive networks of Congregational clergy, usually created around theological and political loyalties as well as region, brought clergy throughout New England into written contact with one another. It is probable that the readers of the time recognized the writing of an ally or foe although these identities remain a mystery to the modern reader.

Democratic-Republican sympathizer, William Bentley became the de facto leader of a paper war against the recent orations of the orthodox, Old Calvinist Congregational clergy, especially Jedidiah Morse. Determined to discredit Morse and Robison, Bentley utilized three mediums. During the late eighteenth century, there were several politically acceptable means of publicizing a political message; politicians wrote letters, pamphlets, broadsides and newspapers with strategic purposes and for an intended audience. The clergy were no exception and William Bentley utilized the full range written communication in his quest to bring into disrepute Morse and his allies. Bentley's first written opposition appeared in the form of a private address before the Morning Star Lodge in Worcester, Massachusetts, which was later printed at the request of the lodge. Delivered a few months after Morse's initial introduction of the Bavarian Illuminati, the author defends Masonry.

The Free Masons were a widespread and venerated institution in early America; several national leaders were members of Masonic lodges including former President

George Washington and diplomat Benjamin Franklin. The importance and influence of this society are reflected national symbols and the prevalence of Masons on the national, regional and local political stages. In his June 1798, address before the Worcester lodge Bentley emphasized the role of Masonry in local society,

At present, the number of Brethren in Boston is greater than in any place throughout the Union . . . The spirit of the people, among whom early associations appeared, has formed an habitual inclination. Their political clubs, their mechanic societies, their marine society, their private clubs for friendship, for religion, for letters and humanity: All their social institutions flourish together . . . Hardly any man of rank, or reputation is to be found, who has not had his club nights.¹⁵⁷

Bentley paints a picture of New England life where clubs are a necessary and well-established part of society. Any complaints regarding the power or goals of the Free Masons appear absurd and Bentley works tirelessly to forge a connection between those who oppose Masonry and absurdity.

Bentley identified three groups in American society that posed a threat to Masonry and devoted most of his discourse to the clergy. A clergyman himself, Bentley differentiated between differing clerical opinions, “When we speak of the clergy, we intend not the order, but certain men in it. And we regard not these men, so much as the age in which they have lived, and the prejudices they have entertained.”¹⁵⁸ At this juncture in the clerical campaign, Bentley expressed no harsh feelings toward the clergy he believed had been misled by ignorance and the present cultural climate. Bentley believed a few bad apples influenced the orthodox Congregationalists, “But into this order men will intrude, who have studied their Bible, and not mankind for whom it was written. Who know more of their own opinions from dogmas, than from history and

¹⁵⁷ William Bentley, *A Charge Delivered before the Morning Star Lodge*, (Worcester: Thomas, 1798), 5-6; Evans Imprint No. 33405.

¹⁵⁸ Bentley, *A Charge Delivered before the Morning Star Lodge*, 8.

investigation.”¹⁵⁹ Bentley believed the clergy suffered undue influence from unscrupulous and ambitious individuals as well as their own personal ignorance and intolerance. He remained hopeful that “the scandal will be removed, when the order becomes enlightened.”¹⁶⁰

In closing Bentley offered forgiveness to Morse’s, whom he believed had not willfully misled the public. “We must leave Robison to an inquisitive public, and forgive a worthy divine who noticed the book, and has made our order ridiculous, even by applause on such an occasion. May the fate of Zimmerman be never the fate of Robison, or the American Geographer!”¹⁶¹ In June 1798, Bentley believed responsible scholarship and shared morals would quickly prove the Bavarian Illuminati a false threat, but the increased accusations held in Morse’s Thanksgiving sermon and the lack of inquiries from the public into the validity of Morse’s claims proved him mistaken.

One month after Morse’s Thanksgiving sermon, Bentley delivered an address before the Essex Lodge, of which he was a member, and again defended Masonry. Using subtle language, Bentley declared Robison a fraud, “a late Scottish professor had thrown out his charges in an artful confusion, so as to prove nothing, and yet imply everything; to engage the public suspicions, and yet not suffer every man to see that his design was ungenerous, and political, and his work destitute of truth.”¹⁶² Extremely cautious not to make the same mistakes as Robison, Bentley carefully documented his arguments against the professor and provided opinions from Europe. “What say men abroad? That it is a

¹⁵⁹ Bentley, *A Charge Delivered before the Morning Star Lodge*, 8-9.

¹⁶⁰ Bentley, *A Charge Delivered before the Morning Star Lodge*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Bentley, *A Charge Delivered before the Morning Star Lodge*, 31.

¹⁶² William Bentley, *An Address, Delivered in the Essex Lodge Upon the Festival of Saint John the Evangelist at the Induction of the Officers*, (Salem: Cushing, 1799), 11: Evans Imprint No. 35180.

pernicious work, without proper documents, and just evidence.”¹⁶³ According to Bentley, the present situation demonstrated the dangers of clerical involvement in politics and government. Contrary to Morse, Bentley claimed Masonry provided a safe environment for democracy to flourish. In the conclusion of his December 27th address Bentley called upon his colleagues saying, “Let us venerate our ancient institution: Our consent in this simple form, unites us with all nations. Our hearts are here prepared for the noblest of duties. We can assist the world in its best hopes, and certainly concur in the best ends of civil society.”¹⁶⁴ Bentley first addressed the Masonic community, but in his next publication, he reached for a wider audience.

In early 1799, a pamphlet entitled *Extracts from Professor Robinson’s “Proofs of Conspiracy” with Brief Reflections* appeared in New England. The author, neglecting to provide his own name, instead provided a pseudonym claiming, “It is not from a reluctance in the writer against being known, but from a consciousness that his name would add nothing to the weight of the foregoing remarks, that instead of his real, he has chosen to subscribe the fictitious, name of . . . CORNELIUS.”¹⁶⁵ By removing his name from the conclusion of the pamphlet, the author reserved the power of anonymity, but undoubtedly, the majority of his intended audience recognized the writing of William Bentley, and if they did not, a footnote advised that they question the printer to satisfy their curiosity. Thus, Bentley also placed the influence of his name behind this second anti-Illuminati publication because he intended very specific audience would read his opinions and recognize his voice in his writing.

¹⁶³ Bentley, *An Address, Delivered in the Essex Lodge*, 21.

¹⁶⁴ Bentley, *An Address, Delivered in the Essex Lodge*, 30.

¹⁶⁵ William Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson’s “Proofs of Conspiracy” with Brief Reflections on the Charges he has Exhibited, the Evidence he has Produced, and the Merit of his Performance*, (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1799), 30; Evans Imprint No. 35181.

The pamphlet was a popular means of distributing information in the eighteenth century. Patriots and Loyalists successfully utilized pamphlets during the Revolutionary War and before to express their political viewpoints. Using the pamphlet for theological and political means, Bentley aimed at a similar, influential audience. “Political pamphlets aimed at wider circles of elite leaders – ‘the thinking part of the nation’ who could ‘set the people to rights’ as Jefferson put it or, as Hamilton phrased it, men of the ‘first’ and ‘second class.’ Usually dignified in tone and length, they were ideal platforms for presenting a detailed argument.”¹⁶⁶ This second attempt with its scholarly detail was intended for the elite leaders of New England society, perhaps even the very men who joined Morse in the clerical campaign.

To guarantee his readers did not misconstrue his intentions, Bentley stated his purpose for examining Robison’s text and publishing his findings on the first page,

Had it not been for the unusual ardor and zeal that appears in a certain description of men to improve the matters contained in this book for the purpose of alarming the minds of our citizens, and affecting the principles of our own government, the following strictures would never have been made upon it; and probably, little notice would ever have been taken of it in this country.¹⁶⁷

Bentley attributed the popularity of Robison’s book in America to the clergy who promoted it. Therefore, Bentley questioned if the book had any value outside the purpose assigned to it by a group of clergymen. Although the majority of the pamphlet refuted Robison, Bentley devoted some space to maligning clerical participation in politics. True to his liberal Congregationalist faction, he expressed the belief that no minister should participate in politics coupled with a criticism of Thomas Paine,

But, I have often thought, that some of our Clergy who put themselves forward as the political Champions of the day, make nearly the same figure, as Politicians,

¹⁶⁶ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 116.

¹⁶⁷ Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson’s “Proofs of Conspiracy,”* 3.

which Thomas Paine does, as a Divine. Had they both, in their public performances, confined themselves more to subjects that they better understood, it might have been more happy for the people at large: it certainly would have been much more reputable for themselves.¹⁶⁸

After his examination of Professor Robison's *Proofs of Conspiracy*, Bentley seems to have determined that Robison also should have stuck to what he knew best.

In this pamphlet, Bentley appealed to the intellectual elite by questioning the validity of Robison's scholarship. Bentley praised Robison for not possessing "any undue prejudices against any particular denomination of Christians."¹⁶⁹ After painstakingly reviewing Robison's statements in *Proofs of Conspiracy* Bentley isolated several inconsistencies in the text. Most of these were related to the size of the Bavarian Illuminati membership, "When, at one time, his immediate object is to excite alarm, the Illuminati are represented as being *exceedingly numerous and powerful* . . . At another time, as in p. 176, when he has a different object in view, he represents them as low, mean, and insignificant figures."¹⁷⁰ After isolating this inaccuracy, Bentley asked the logical question, "It is hard to conceive how such *mean and obscure men*, while they continue to be of that description, should, at the same time, have such extensive influence, and fill so many of the *most important offices and places of public trust* in Germany."¹⁷¹

Reverend Bentley determined that the many inconsistencies and illogical arguments crippled Robison's text, damaged his credibility and therefore concluded that no anti-religion society posed a threat to American government or religion,

¹⁶⁸ Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson's "Proofs of Conspiracy,"* 9.

¹⁶⁹ Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson's "Proofs of Conspiracy,"* 19.

¹⁷⁰ Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson's "Proofs of Conspiracy,"* 26.

¹⁷¹ Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson's "Proofs of Conspiracy,"* 27.

That there have been Infidels in all ages of the world- that there have been men of licentious principles and immoral conduct in most societies that were considerably numerous- that obscene, irreligious, and deistical writings abound, and do still abound, was known, and lamented by all good men, long before Mr. Robison published his [book].¹⁷²

In this polite pamphlet, Bentley refrains from criticizing the character of Robison or the orthodox clergy. Hoping to influence his audience Bentley used reason and intellect to refute Robison and hoped that his readers would in turn shape public opinion. However, the large number of fast day sermons discussing the dangers of the Illuminati proved Bentley wrong. His next attempt to discredit Robison and Morse would not be as civil or pleasant.

In the conclusion of his *Extracts*, Bentley determined the duty of the people of New England was two-fold. First, they must determine for themselves the accuracy of the orthodox clergy's claims and if they believed them to be false to remove the clergy from their influential role. In *Extracts*, Bentley advised the public, "If on the other hand, they are in their nature, fatal to the happiness and equal rights of men, it is still for the people in the same peaceable and Constitutional way, to check their influence before the object is effected, when it will be too late to attempt it."¹⁷³ Bentley placed great importance in the public to police public figures, but until midway through 1799, all his publications questioning the Illuminati appeared in print mediums not intended for public perusal. By using newspapers, Bentley increased his audience tremendously, "By linking regions together with bonds of political consciousness, interconnected partisan newspapers were a nationalizing influence, a literal arm of government connecting the extended republic

¹⁷² Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson's "Proofs of Conspiracy,"* 21.

¹⁷³ Bentley, *Extracts from Professor Robinson's "Proofs of Conspiracy,"* 29.

through chains of information.”¹⁷⁴ The “chains of information” provided by newspapers allowed Bentley to expand his audience beyond local Masons and the elite networks of clergy and politicians. Newspapers provided Bentley with a nearly limitless audience as evidenced by the appearance of reprinted articles discussing the Illuminati appearing in papers throughout the country despite the Illuminatism remaining a localized New England concern.

On January 8, 1799 the following notice appeared on the second page of

Massachusetts Mercury,

Dr. Morse’s Sermon on the day of the late Thanksgiving, with an Appendix designed to illustrate some parts of the Discourse, ‘exhibiting proofs of the early existence, progress and [illegible] effects of the French intrigue and influence in the U.S.’ will be published in a few days.¹⁷⁵

Orthodox clergy and supporters of the clerical campaign claimed this appendix would provide indisputable proof of the existence of the Bavarian Illuminati and their dangerous plots. A correspondent for *Russell’s Gazette* assured local readers that the appendix of Dr. Morse’s sermon contains information not yet available to the public. Having perused an early copy, the correspondent expressed confidence that the readers would find the appendix “completely demonstrative of the baseness and perfidy of *French* measures political, civil, and ecclesiastical.”¹⁷⁶ Throughout much of the year, attacks upon Jedidiah Morse and the Bavarian Illuminati continued to appear in the local newspapers of Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Community members continued to submit anonymous letters criticizing the actions of Morse and his clerical supporters and William Bentley supplied local papers

¹⁷⁴ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 123.

¹⁷⁵ *Massachusetts Mercury*, 1799-01-08.

¹⁷⁶ *Russell’s Gazette*, 1799-01-21.

with review articles from the British press denouncing Robison. Morse responded to Bentley's attacks by sending reviews praising *Proofs of Conspiracy* to the Boston papers. Feeling this tactic insufficient to vindicate his reputation and his actions Morse began to submit open letters to various Boston papers defending himself and Robison. This paper war continued without resolution until July 1799, while unbeknownst to Morse and William Bentley, both corresponded with the German geographer Christoph Ebeling. In March of the same year, Ebeling wrote them similar letters explaining the existence of the Bavarian Illuminati. According to Ebeling, the Illuminati had been formed several decades earlier to oppose the Jesuits. Confident the order was now defunct; Ebeling claimed their only goals had been liberalization in church and state. Ebeling also addressed Robison's text, "Ebeling ridiculed *Proofs of Conspiracy* for its many erroneous statements about the men whom it described, and he even charged that it was written as propaganda at the behest of officials in the British government."¹⁷⁷ In July, following the practice of reading letters aloud, Morse shared his letter from Ebeling with a fellow minister when Morse's Yale classmate, Samuel Huntington, overheard the contents. Huntington was both a Mason and Democratic-Republican and shortly after he overheard the letter, rumors began to circulate about its contents.

Some of the more outrageous rumors claimed that charges of forgery and insanity forced Robison to flee Britain. None of these rumors contained any truth, but public curiosity had been piqued. In response to letters questioning Ebeling's statements, Morse wrote that, "Though Ebeling indeed had ridiculed and rejected both Robison's and Barruel's representations of the Illuminati, his letter had actually supported their charges.

¹⁷⁷ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 86.

Ebeling had said that the Illuminati did exist.”¹⁷⁸ Morse managed to stretch the truth regarding the Ebeling letter until an alleged extract, that was in fact a fraud, appeared in the *American Mercury*. The extract claimed to contain snippets of the letter written by Ebeling to “an eagle-eyed detector of *Illuminatism*” in America.¹⁷⁹ Not unlike the legitimate British reviews that had appeared in American newspapers for over a year the extract of the alleged Ebeling letter referred to *Proofs of Conspiracy* as a “catch-penny production, and the facts alleged in it unknown to any body besides the author.”¹⁸⁰ The remainder of the article was devoted to idle gossip concerning Robison’s character. A few highlights include Ebeling’s claims that, “Robison had lived to fast for his income, and to supply deficiencies had undertaken to later a bank bill” and “Robison’s friends gave out that he was insane, and had taken the tour of Europe for his health; choosing rather to sacrifice him to the shrine of misfortune, than to that of infamy.”¹⁸¹ The printing of the alleged letter extract may have been harmless, except William Bentley was among the paper’s readership and he seized the ultimate opportunity to embarrass Morse and prove him wrong.

There had been many public calls for Morse to publish his letter from Ebeling, including one in the September 26 edition of the *American Mercury*, “Many people wonder why the Rev. *Granny*, who has officiated at the birth of so many *Mice*, (when Mountains have travailed) has not published the letter he has lately received from Professor Ebeling: many others suppose he will publish it is an Appendix to his next

¹⁷⁸ Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 87.

¹⁷⁹ *American Mercury*, 1799-09-26.

¹⁸⁰ *American Mercury*, 1799-09-26.

¹⁸¹ *American Mercury*, 1799-09-26.

Fast-Day Sermon.”¹⁸² Morse ignored the taunts and steadfastly refused to allow the letter to be printed. Extremely proud of his extensive correspondence, Morse, like others of his day believed “a correspondence was a mutual exchange of respect and trust” and maintained that he did not have Ebeling’s permission to print his letter.¹⁸³ Such niceties, however, did not stop Bentley. In October, Bentley sent his letter from Ebeling to the *Massachusetts Spy*. The letter appeared in early October with the following vague introduction, “A Gentleman in this State, who has a literary Correspondent in Germany, has lately received the following Letter from his friend in that Country, on the subject of Robison’s Book of Illuminati, &c. As that book has been such much the subject of conversation, the Letter may be interesting to some of our Readers.”¹⁸⁴ Although purposefully misleading, the introduction was not technically a lie. Bentley was indeed a correspondent of Ebeling and had received such a letter. The contents were particularly damaging to Morse, as a reading of the letter demonstrated that Ebeling most certainly did not support Robison’s claims and he claimed Bavarian government had suppressed and extinguished the Illuminati many years before.

The letter placed Morse in a very difficult position, he still refused to send his personal letter to the press and many accepted his refusal as a sign of defeat. Morse received the belated support of one anonymous New Englander after the publication of Morse’s original letter from Professor Ebeling. This contributor, signed ‘a Correspondent,’ intended to preserve the reputation of the clergyman now under a great deal of suspicion, “The doctor, however zealous he may be in hunting up and making the most of every thing that looks like evidence in support of his favorite dogmas, would not,

¹⁸² *American Mercury*, 1799-09-26.

¹⁸³ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 141.

¹⁸⁴ *Massachusetts Spy, or Worcester Gazette*, 1799-10-09.

I believe, commit so gross an aberration from truth as to forge so malicious a calumny.

His informant in this case, I am well informed, was *Oliver Wolcott, esq.*”¹⁸⁵

Unfortunately for Morse, this appears to be the extent of his supporters, whether his orthodox colleagues recognized the futility of the fight because of the rabid enthusiasm of the detractors or knowledge of the falsity of the claims or, and perhaps most likely, an attempt to preserve their own reputations remains hidden.

Bentley’s letter, still attributed to Morse, appeared in papers up and down the Atlantic seaboard, including in Philadelphia’s pernicious Democratic-Republican *Aurora*. Within the span of a few weeks, Morse became an object of national ridicule. The clerical campaign in shambles and his supporters absent, Morse finally conceded to print his letter. William Bentley celebrated Morse’s complete defeat in his diary,

In yesterday’s gazette we had the last roar of poor Morse. His only fort was in recourse to vulgar prejudice. He did not dare to meet the argument fairly. He ranted upon the zeal of Masons in his old Copie [sic] of Robison, then condemned all Secret Societies, & after saying that 3/4s of what had been said was nothing to the point, he ended by saying nothing was understood.¹⁸⁶

The printing of the Ebeling letter would be Morse’s final reference to the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy; the last public letters supporting his position had appeared in newspapers the previous summer. The clergy that had supported his desperate attempt to cling to the status quo, even Dwight, had deserted him. The clerical campaign was effectively over in December 1799, Bentley and his Masonic, Democratic-Republican, liberal Congregationalists allies had won the paper war.

¹⁸⁵ *The Bee*, 1799-12-11.

¹⁸⁶ William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D. Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts, Volume II, January 1793- December 1802*, (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1962), 291.

Conclusion The Americanization of Calvinism

The results of conspiracy theories are often unexpected; when Jedidiah Morse first embarked on the clerical campaign of 1798-1799, he anticipated a very different outcome. The revelation of the Bavarian Illuminati as a false threat had significant and lasting consequences for the American Congregational church. Changes in leadership, organization and social involvement characterized the church of the nineteenth century. Most significantly, the theology of the Congregational church fundamentally changed in the nineteenth century to reflect the evangelical and democratic enthusiasm of the early nineteenth century. The failure of the clerical campaign to preserve the status quo forced the Congregational Church to adapt to an evangelical and democratic environment. The adoption of evangelical principles during this period resulted in the Americanization of Calvinism.

The animosities generated by the paper war between Morse and Bentley resulted in a decade of exacerbated tensions between the liberal and orthodox Congregationalist leaders. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, the liberals achieved several victories over the orthodox clergy including the appointment of liberal theologian Henry Ware to the position of Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard College in 1804. Adding insult to injury, a few years later the liberals managed to elect another liberal Congregationalist to the presidency of Harvard. The orthodox clergy along with Morse had campaigned tirelessly to avoid both these appointments, but their efforts proved immaterial. The backlash from the clerical campaign had seemingly empowered the liberal faction and the founding of competing theological publications further increased the hostilities.

The orthodox clergy were not without triumphs during the first decade of the new century, the founding of Andover Seminary filled many with the hope of creating a new brand of minister. Previously, ministerial candidates had studied separately under the direction of one man, resulting in most of them becoming disciples of their instructor. Morse anticipated that studying communally under several professors would create a foundation of common knowledge and heal the divisions between the Congregational factions. Although divisions continued to persist, the seminaries did create a new brand of Congregational minister by implementing selected evangelical and democratic principles. This first generation of seminary graduates deserves the credit for adapting the Church to the evangelical spirit of nineteenth century America.

The first method of adapting to evangelical and democratic society was the increased importance placed on benevolent societies by Congregational clergy. An American society devoted to benevolent concerns emerged in the second decade of the nineteenth century. After the disastrous conclusion of the clerical campaign in 1800, even strict orthodox leaders such as Dwight and Morse became heavily involved in the new trend in Congregational ministry: missionary work and social reform. In the Northeast, the social reform movements concerned with intemperance, abolition, and missionary work with Native populations gained enormous popular support and the Congregational Church became an active participant in each of these causes. Massachusetts and Connecticut quickly established temperance societies, the Massachusetts Society of the Suppression of Intemperance and the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Good Morals, respectively, the second with Timothy Dwight as a founding member. Jedidiah Morse followed the benevolent spirit of the age and became involved with the Society of

the Propagation of the Gospel in North America, founded in the 1790s and very actively involved with Indian conversion and U.S. policy affecting Native American groups. These benevolent societies proved immensely influential and allowed the clergy a new means of reducing irreligion. Furthermore, the American public proved more receptive to the work of benevolent societies than the jeremiads and theological diatribes used during the clerical campaign. By joining the bandwagon of social reform, the Congregational Church survived the tumultuous religious climate created in the midst of the Second Great Awakening.

The second method of incorporating evangelical principles into the Congregational church fundamentally altered the doctrines of Calvinism. Most significantly, this Americanization of Calvinism resulted in the rejection of the doctrine of predestination early in the nineteenth century. Disengaging from the theologies of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and other prominent figures, the nineteenth century Church removed the emphases upon original sin, election and actual sin. Over the course of the century, New England clergy emphasized a changed meaning of sin, defining sin as a result of human action. The importance of public virtue, removed from the protective system of establishment, acquired a new significance. Recalling John Winthrop's *City upon a Hill* address, the new wave of Congregational ministers encouraged their parishioners to "build a world for God."¹⁸⁷ When Jedidiah Morse died in 1826, the majority of Congregational clergy were only nominally Calvinist, and in a short time, the theology associated with Congregationalism changed so completely as to be nearly unrecognizable to earlier generations. Considerably less harsh and stern, the liberal and

¹⁸⁷ Noll, *America's God*, 274.

forgiving nature of the modern Congregational church was apparent in early nineteenth century developments.

Likewise, changes in church structure were forthcoming. The governing structure of the Church transformed to incorporate the democratic ideals so prevalent in the new nation. Umbrella governing structures encompassing many parishes developed over the course of the nineteenth century, including the General Council of Congregational Churches (1828-1959) and the United Church of Christ (1958 to the present). Beginning as regional governing bodies encompassing a county or a state, over time these organizations grew to include all the Congregational Churches nationwide in the General Synod. The governing structure of individual churches also experienced changes; annual popular elections selected a core group of officers to oversee church business and work in conjunction with committees formed from church membership. The minister retained an influence over church business, but held a role similar to that of an advisor or counselor. These changes were not unique to the Congregational Church but as many American sects implemented similar changes.

In 1800, the New England Congregational Church appeared to be a dying institution, the clerical campaign of 1798 and 1799 the actions of a desperate clergy. In 1799, the Congregational clergy perceived a threat to the social, religious and political status quo that had allowed them to secure positions of power and prestige in their communities. Whether the clergy willfully misled the public remains uncertain, however, the later action of the Congregational leaders leaves no question as to their intent to preserve of public virtue through their involvement with various benevolent societies. Finally abandoning the didactic, stern and patronizing strategies used by previous

generations, the Congregational clergy ultimately were forced to embrace evangelical and democratic principles present in American society. Ultimately, the Americanization of Calvinism and the ability of the orthodox leadership to accept the evangelical and democratic spirit of the age preserved the existence and successful functioning of the Congregational Church to the present day. From rocky beginnings in Massachusetts Colony to its modern manifestation, Congregationalism has proved exceptionally adaptive. The tenacious spirit of the Congregational Church is beautifully expressed in the words spoken by church members at the Centennial Celebration of a local Congregational Church:

‘Churches may be built and burn, ministers may come and go, members be born and die,’ leaders arise and retire, programs succeed and fail, while the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Wiscasset goes on from generation to generation under the guidance and empowerment of God’s Holy Spirit. ‘Crowned as she is with the grace and glory of’ 225 years ‘may she ever be a power for good in the religious, moral, and aesthetical future of Wiscasset.’¹⁸⁸

The adaptability and persistence of the Congregational Church made it truly an American institution. The aftermath of the clerical campaign of 1798-1799 and the disastrous consequences of the falsity of the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy ultimately pushed the Congregational Church into its modern form and furthered the Americanization of Calvinism.

¹⁸⁸ Vivian Wright Dunn and Dr. A.S. Packard quoted in Harold W. Tucker, *Ye Olde First Parish: The Story of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Wiscasset, Maine*, (Private Printing, 1998). Note: The words outside the single quotations were added by Dr. Tucker in 1998 to reflect 125 years of subsequent history. The words spoken by Dunn and Packard were part of a Centennial Celebration Commencement Address delivered Wednesday, August 6, 1873.

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