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Church–State Relations in Nineteenth Century America : A Study in the Political Thought of Charles Hodge¹

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Discussions of church–state separation in nineteenth century America emerged out of a colonial background that was heavily influenced by its historical proximity to the established church of its European heritage. Whereas certain of the colonies, e.g., Connecticut and New Haven, were more closely related to the established church and less vocal concerning the virtues of separation, others from European backgrounds that were hostile to the idea of an established, state church, e.g., Rhode Island, were stout advocates of separation. Even in colonial Massachusetts, the movement away from a church-dominated state began early. Encouraged by this antipathy toward European-styled establishmentarianism, formal incarnation of the principles of religious liberty and separation of church and state within the American social and legal structure was accomplished by the creation of the Constitution and, more specifically, by the adoption of the First Amendment in the final quarter of the eighteenth century. Completion of the legal process of separating church and state in America was finally accomplished with the passage of the eleventh amendment to the Massachusetts state constitution in 1833.

Nineteenth century separationist views were motivated less by the desire to repudiate the established church than by the more positive and constructive attitudes which marked the genesis of what John F. Wilson has denoted the “era of republican protestantism” (1820–60).² The state, though separated legally and institutionally from the church, had not been separated from religion. Protestants in particular generally accepted the separation of

¹ A prominent source for determining Hodge’s views on church–state relations would appear to be a work entitled “A Nation’s Right to Worship God”, published in Edinburgh, under the name of Charles Hodge, by Andrew Elliot in 1874. However, the attribution of this article to Hodge is probably erroneous, since the same work was published (anonymously) in the *Princeton Review* in 1859, and was not attributed to Hodge in the *Princeton Review Index* volume published in 1871. Since Hodge was editor of the *Princeton Review* when the *Index* was written, it is doubtful that this article would not have been attributed to him, had he actually written it. However, for a different opinion on this problem of authorship, see James Macgregor, “Dr. Charles Hodge and the Princeton School”. *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* 23 [1874] : 459–60.

² John F. Wilson, ed., *Church and State in American History*, in series—Studies in History and Politics (Boston : D.C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. 88.

church and state ; however, they firmly believed in a close connection between religion, morals, and the well-being of the public. They felt that the framers of the early federal and state constitutions had hardly intended to separate the state from religion.

The expansion of Protestant influence in America received special impetus from a combination of voluntarism and evangelical concern for individual salvation. Since the actual forms of American religion did not carry the authority of an *established* church, attempts to Christianize the nation were made in a more indirect manner.³ Though the nation had no formally established religion, Protestant Christians sought to make the nation Protestant in fact. This great effort of “republican protestantism” was rooted in

a vision of the United States as a protestant Christian nation conformed to the divine will, not through a formal—even a “theocratic”—establishment of religion, but through a common life renewed by evangelical religion and thus spontaneously God-oriented. The “Churches” and the “governments” might be independent but the common subject of both was that individual whose conversion the revivalistic system was designed to effect.⁴

The alliance between the voluntary and separation principles is clearly illustrated in the following quotation from an 1828 sermon by the Reverend Ezra Stiles Ely :

Let Christianity by the spirit of Christ in her members support herself : let Church and State be for ever distinct : but, still, let the doctrines and precepts of Christ govern all men, in all their relations and employments. If a ruler is not a Christian he ought to be one, in this land of evangelical light, without delay . . .⁵

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Philip Schaff could speak of the nation being *Christian* in the sense that Christianity was “the prevailing religious sentiment and profession.”⁶

Opposition to pressure from nineteenth century evangelicals came from both political and religious sources. Richard M. Johnson, U.S. Senator and later vice-president under Martin Van Buren wrote, in a Senate report on Sunday mail delivery, of the danger of the “religious despotism” posed by this evangelical pressure :

Extensive religious combinations, to effect a political object, are, in the opinion of the [Senate] committee, always dangerous . . . All religious despotism commences by combination and influence ; and when that influence begins to operate upon the political institutions of a country, the civil power soon bends under it ; and the catastrophe of other nations furnishes an awful warning of the consequence.⁷

³ For an extended discussion of the “Christian America” issue, cf., David Murchie, [Religious Roots of American Chauvinism : Charles Hodge (1797-1878) and the *Christian America*] *ヨーロッパ・グローバルゼーションと諸文化圏の変容II* : 東北学院大学オープン・リサーチ・センター (平成 21 年 3 月) 347~391 頁.

⁴ Wilson, *Church and State in American History*, p. 89.

⁵ From excerpt in *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

⁶ Philip Schaff, *Church and State in the United States* (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), p. 54.

⁷ From excerpt in Wilson, *Church and State in American History*, p. 101.

William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister, expressed a similar anxiety in his critique of the influence exerted on society by large associations :

They [great associations] are a kind of irregular government created within our constitutional government. Let them be watched closely. As soon as we find them resolved or disposed to bear down a respectable man or set of men, or to force on the community measures about which wise and good men differ, let us feel that a dangerous engine is at work among us, and oppose to it our steady and stern disapprobation.⁸

In spite of minority opposition, however, this *republican protestantism* prevailed, providing an optimistic backdrop against which a *separated* church might influence a nation in spite of the church's independence from the nation's government. It was within this optimistic context that Princeton professor and Presbyterian churchman Charles Hodge (1797-1878), a generation or so removed from the Constitutional Convention, developed his views on the relationship between church and state. Though aware of the problem posed by *establishment*, Hodge was more concerned with the survival of the *separated* American church than with what he saw as an increasingly unnecessary battle to separate the church from state control. Early in his academic career, Hodge spoke glowingly of the success of the American experiment in religion, particularly as it proceeded without the state aid it would have received as an *established* church :

The great question whether the church can sustain itself without the aid of the state, has never perhaps been subjected to so fair and extended a trial since the fourth century as at present in our own country. As far as the experiment has hitherto been made, the result is as favorable as the friends of religious liberty could reasonably expect.⁹

Institutional Distinctions between Church and State

Hodge's thoughts on the church added up to an interesting American variation on the seventeenth century doctrine of the church as outlined in the Westminster Confession. Though the early Confession had originally been formulated in England for the kind of church establishment that would be rejected in America, its positing of an *invisible* and *visible* church, both of which are "catholic or universal", provided the basis for an unofficial spiritual and cultural establishment of Christianity in America in the form of a kingdom made up of all believers in Jesus Christ, regardless of denomination. This broadly con-

⁸ From excerpt in *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁹ Hodge, "Introductory Lecture," PR (1846) : 80. Between 1825 and 1884, the title of the Princeton Review varied as follows : Biblical Repertory (1829), The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review (1830-36), The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review (1837-71), The Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review (1872-77), and The Princeton Review (1878-84). For purposes of this article, when citing any of the above issues, the title, Princeton Review, or the abbreviation "PR" followed by the year of issue will be used, e.g., PR (1829)=Biblical Repertory (1829).

ceived, cross-denominational concept of the *visible* church may well have been the stimulation behind Hodge's exegetically based insistence on the highly spiritual nature of the kingdom of God :

[The kingdom of God] is not of this world. It is not analogous to the kingdoms which exist among men. It is not a kingdom of earthly splendor, wealth, or power. It does not concern the civil or political affairs of men, except in their moral relations. Its rewards and enjoyments are not the good things of this world. It is said to consist in "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." (Rom. xiv. 17.)¹⁰

In Hodge's view, the internal or spiritual nature of the kingdom is distinguished from theocratic concepts of the kingdom in that the spiritual kingdom includes all professing Christians ; it is, in a sense, a *spiritual theocracy* : "The theocracy of the Old Testament was ceremonial and ritual ; that of the New is *inward* and *spiritual* [italics added]. Christianity, as we should say, does not consist in things external."¹¹

Though Hodge's emphasis on the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God was primarily the result of his study of Scripture, his concern for the personal, spiritual nature of religion had undoubtedly also been influenced by the increasing historical prominence of individualism, as the latter had developed out of the Renaissance, reaching a climax of sorts on the American frontier. Even Locke, whose social contract theory Hodge explicitly rejected,¹² was careful to recognize the inviolability of the natural, personal right of religion. In his first Letter Concerning Toleration, Locke wrote that the care of souls was not within the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate, because God never gave one person the authority to compel another person in the area of religion. Furthermore, the care of souls cannot be the proper duty of the magistrate, because the magistrate's power is a matter of external force, and "true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind . . . [n]"¹³

Hodge's concept of an inward, spiritual kingdom was not, however, an unrestricted personalism, for the ultimate authority of the kingdom was not the individual's inner convictions, but Christ : in Calvin's words, *Solus Dominus et Magister* :

¹⁰ Hodge, ST III, p. 857. In Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (New York : Charles Scribner and Company, 1871 (vols. 1-2) ; Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1872 (vol. 3) ; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan : Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977). Hereinafter cited as ST I, ST II, and ST III.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, New Edition, Revised and in Great Measure Rewritten (Philadelphia : W.S. & A. Martien, 1864 : reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan : Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 424-25, hereinafter referred to as Hodge, Romans.

¹² See Hodge, "The Fugitive Slave Law," in Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments, edited by E. N. Elliott. Augusta, Georgia : Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860, p. 823. This is a condensed and slightly revised version of Hodge's 1851 Princeton Review article on "Civil Government," and Hodge, "Civil Government," PR (1851) : 133.

¹³ John Locke, Letter Concerning Toleration, as quoted in Leo Pfeffer, Church, State, and Freedom, (Boston : The Beacon Press, 1953), p. 90-91.

He [Christ] is our supreme Lord and possessor. We belong to him, and his authority over us is absolute, extending to the heart and conscience as well as to the outward conduct ; and to him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹⁴

The allegiance of church members terminates on Christ, and obedience to any other is binding only so far as it constitutes obedience to Christ. Hodge's emphasis on an internalized, though no less real and authoritative, kingdom, was quite compatible with Locke's natural rights interpretation of religion as a very personal matter.

Hodge saw the visible church as an external manifestation of the spiritual kingdom of God, a kingdom that takes the form of believers who are made visible "by their profession and fruits"¹⁵ Though Christ's kingdom is "not of this world," in this visible dimension it constitutes "a self-existent and independent society, and as such has all the rights of self-government."¹⁶ Furthermore, since it is an extension of the *spiritual* kingdom, the visible church does not conflict with civil government : "Every form or claim of the Church . . . which is incompatible with the legitimate authority of the State, is inconsistent with the nature of Christ's kingdom as declared by Himself."¹⁷ In other words, the kingdom of Christ is intended intrinsically to *coexist* with the various kingdoms or governments of the world.¹⁸

The distinction between the institutions of church and state was powerfully present in Hodge's 1861 plea for the church to remain united in spite of national, or political, disunion. In Hodge's view, the church remained an indivisible unity in spite of the dissolution of the Union through secession : "We remain substantially one people in despite of the disruption of the Union Should, therefore, our country be divided into separate, independent confederacies, there is no consequent necessity for a corresponding division of the church."¹⁹ Despite the maelstrom of diverse opinions within the Presbyterian church of the period, to Hodge, church union was imperative : "The grounds of difference, important as they are, do not relate to the divinely appointed terms of Christian or ministerial communion."²⁰ In other words, the institutional nature of the church is such that the church should persevere in spite of any civil and political dissolution which may exist all around it.

Though Hodge affirmed the imperative nature of this perseverance in unity, he was realistic and conceded that church division would probably be one consequence of national dissolution, compromising the national church's power to do good. On the other hand, a

¹⁴ Hodge, *Romans*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, "Theories of the Church", PR (1846) : 142. Hodge makes the same point in ST II, p. 604.

¹⁶ Hodge, "Introductory Lecture," p. 77.

¹⁷ Hodge, ST II, p. 605.

¹⁸ Charles Hodge, Lectures on theology copied by Charles Hodge Scott, Vol. 1, Princeton University Library.

¹⁹ Hodge, "The Church and the Country," PR (1861) : 323.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

church that remained united in the face of such a divisive force, would powerfully proclaim its true nature :

It would . . . be a new revelation of the power of God's Spirit in the hearts of his people, a new exhibition of the true nature of the church, should it remain united in the midst of civil commotions and the disruption of political bonds. It would be seen more clearly than before, that Christ's kingdom is not of this world ; that the church has a life independent of that of the state ; that it can continue to live and act as one body, in despite of the separation of all other ties. To our minds, therefore, it seems clear that God has called our church to a new trial ; he is putting the fidelity of its members to the test, to determine whether principle is with them more powerful than passion. He may be calling her to perform a great work in the history of the country, in holding united in the bonds of ecclesiastical communion and Christian brotherhood, the dissevered members of our political union ; thus making us still one, and preserving for better times the basis of national union.²¹

Hodge also expressed his hope that theology would be a decisive force in resisting the disintegrating sociological forces present in the church during this period.

For Hodge, the distinction between church and state could also be seen in the proper functioning of the two institutions. Hodge argued from Scripture for the Reformation principle that the church and the state each has a legitimate sphere in which it can properly function. This idea, of course, also had secular roots, e.g., in Locke's emphasis on the distinct and exclusive jurisdictions of church and state, though, of course, within a contractual framework. Richard Johnson similarly maintained that "the Constitution has wisely withheld from our government the power of defining the Divine Law,"²² and by 1888, Philip Schaff could describe American Christianity as "a FREE CHURCH IN A FREE STATE, or a SELF-SUPPORTING AND SELF-GOVERNING CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT BUT FRIENDLY RELATION TO THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT."²³

In spite of the friendly relationship between the two institutions, however, the independence of the two spheres needed to be respected ; indeed, Hodge spoke of the dangers of intermingling these jurisdictional spheres. Though this fear never assumed the formidable dimensions in Hodge that it had among disestablishmentarians of the Revolution, it did come to the fore in Hodge's early writings, where he warned that state support of the church leads to state governance of the church, and that when church and state become united, the church becomes a tool of the state. Hodge favored the American ideal of church-state separation over the establishmentarian arrangements enjoyed by European and Scottish Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Influenced as they were by nineteenth century individualism and their own minority status, American Presbyterians found a great deal of appeal in the doctrine of the separation of church and state.

²¹ Hodge, "The Church and the Country," p. 326.

²² From an excerpt in Wilson, *Church and State in American History*, p. 101.

²³ Schaff, *Church and State in the United States*, p. 9.

Other potentially invidious consequences of church-state union included the secularization of the church, an increasing worldliness of the clergy, and the inevitable injustice resulting from the transmutation of ecclesiastical discipline into secular punishment when carried out by civil rulers. Indeed, church-state union engendered a deterioration of the church's characteristically voluntaristic individuality :

When the church is so united to the state as to lose this individuality of character, and resign the rights of self-government, it becomes a mere branch of a secular system. The head of the state is the head of the church, and exercises, as such, either directly or indirectly, the governing power.²⁴

Furthermore, Hodge saw the establishment of an *infallible church* as a clear violation of the separation principle and a contribution to the erosion of civil and religious liberties :

If the Church be infallible, its authority is no less absolute in the sphere of social and political life [than it is in regard to religious life] It is obvious, therefore, that where this doctrine is held there can be no liberty of opinion, no freedom of conscience, no civil or political freedom.²⁵

Hodge did not seem to think the problem of church authority in secular affairs was as serious in the case of the Puritan theocratic ideal as it was in the case of the *infallible church*, by which, of course, he meant the Roman Catholic Church. Though in the case of the Puritans, their *theocracy* would have involved "practical injustice," Hodge felt that the idea was "beautiful."²⁶ Civil and religious liberty were connected, the former following upon the latter :

The theory that all Church power vests in a divinely constituted hierarchy, begets the theory that all civil power vests, of divine right, in kings and nobles. And the theory that Church power vests in the Church itself, and all Church officers are servants of the Church, of necessity begets the theory that civil power vests in the people, and that civil magistrates are servants of the people. These theories God has joined together, and no man can put them asunder.²⁷

Hodge based his separation doctrine on four distinct theological points. In the first place, the church, like the state and the family, is a divine institution of no less significance than the other two, and each divine institution has its own legitimate sphere of activity. Second, the relative duties of these institutions are not to be determined from the Old Testament economy which was temporary, but from the New Testament, where Christ instituted a church that is separate from the state, and which has separate laws and separate offi-

²⁴ Hodge, "Introductory Lecture," p. 77.

²⁵ Hodge, ST I, p. 150.

²⁶ Charles Hodge, The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia : William S. Martien, 1839-40), pp. 131-32.

²⁷ Charles Hodge, What is Presbyterianism? An address delivered before the Presbyterian Historical Society at their anniversary meeting in Philadelphia, on Tuesday evening, May 1, 1855. Philadelphia : Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1855, p. 11.

cers. To the church, not the state, Christ gave the responsibility of judging the qualifications of its potential officers, and of determining who is to be admitted to or excluded from the church. Third, the New Testament silence regarding any official religious duties of magistrates conflicted with Lutheran and Reformed suggestions to the contrary :

The New Testament, when speaking of the immediate design of the state, and the official duties of the magistrate, never intimates that he has those functions which the common doctrine of the Lutheran and Reformed churches assign him. This silence, together with the fact that those functions are assigned to the church and church officers, is proof that it is not the will of God that they should be assumed by the state.²⁸

Fourth, the nature of the means by which the state executes its purposes in some cases conflicts with Christian principles :

The only means which the state can employ to accomplish many of the objects said to belong to it, viz., pains and penalties, are inconsistent with the example and commands of Christ ; with the rights of private Christians, guaranteed [sic] in the word of God, (i.e., to serve God according to the dictates of his conscience,) are ineffectual to the true end of religion, which is voluntary obedience to the truth, and productive of incalculable evil.²⁹

In Hodge's view, the magistrate is especially unfit to discharge the duties of the church. Historically, when the magistrate had attempted to do so, those attempts had "been injurious to religion, and inimical to the rights of conscience." Hence, Hodge rejoiced in a "recently discovered truth," viz., that "the church is independent of the state, and . . . the state best promotes her interests by letting her alone."³⁰ Just as the church acts outside of its jurisdictional sphere when it attempts to make authoritative decisions on matters of pure science, political economy, or civil law, so the civil courts act illegitimately when they seek to determine the standards of morality and orthodoxy in the Christian church.

The Practical Relationship between Governmental and Church Responsibilities

Formal separation of church and state in nineteenth century America should not be seen to imply that hostility existed between the two institutions. Quite to the contrary, the middle years of the nineteenth century were characterized by what James F. Maclear has called an "invisible union of church and state."³¹ Though Hodge had rejected the validity of the theocratic principle, both in the pure Old Testament sense and in the Puritan ideal,

²⁸ Charles Hodge, "Relation of the Church and the State," PR (1863) : 693.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ James Fulton Maclear, "'The True American Union' of Church and State : The Reconstruction of the Theocratic Tradition", Church History 28 (March 1959) : 56.

he was in basic sympathy with a prevailing reformulation of the Puritan tradition which was less provincial and no longer defensive concerning the theocratic features of the Puritan heritage. With the rejection of European unity of church and state, a “true American union” developed between the church and the people, accompanied by an increasing concern for the proclamation of the Gospel across denominational lines. The essentials of the Puritan commonwealth idea were maintained, though the relation between the state and the church had become one of tacit reciprocity between separate and equal institutions. The country had not, in fact, relinquished “the organic union and interdependence of church and state,” for, with some allowance for Constitutional adjustments, the state was still responsible for supporting the country’s Christian faith, thereby assuring that the United States would remain a Christian nation. The constitutional adjustments to the Puritan tradition provided for an indirect influence of religion on government, for though rulers could no longer call councils, etc., they still had duties in regard to the Gospel. The government was still a divine institution, not a civil compact, and government leaders were still responsible for giving support to the cause of Christianity, even if this meant certain limitations on civil freedom. By 1888, Schaff could speak of the “friendly separation” between church and state as one whereby the church strengthened the moral foundations of the state, and the state protected the liberty and property of the church, being “equally just to all forms of belief and unbelief which do not endanger the public safety.”³² Separation of church and state was not to be construed as a separation of the American nation from Christianity.

In general, Hodge was comfortable with this idea of the church and state as two independent equals in friendly cooperation. As might be expected, however, his understanding of the boundary between the spheres of influence was not always clear. For example, according to Hodge’s reading of the *establishment of religion* and *free exercise* clauses of the First Amendment, though Congress could not legitimately pass laws supporting religion, neither could it legitimately make laws which interfere with religion. Religion was constitutionally beyond the jurisdiction of the state, but the state had no right to produce legislation as if the people of the country had no religion. Hodge’s position here represents a crucial element of nineteenth century church-state relations, for it went beyond the contention of many that the state should not meddle in the affairs of the church. According to Hodge, though the state was prohibited from taking direct action in matters properly within the sphere of the church, the state was nevertheless also bound to take religion into account when making legislation, to make certain that the religion of the people was not undermined.

In its increasingly complementary relationship with the state, the church came functionally to resemble, at certain points, the church of Calvin’s Geneva. Hodge even argued that civil interference in religion and morality could be legitimate in certain situations. Governmental interference in religious affairs could be justified on the basis of certain criteria :

It must be shown that an opinion or a religion is not only false, but that its prevalence is

³² Schaff, Church and State in the United States, p. 10.

incompatible with the rights of those members of the community who are not embraced within its communion, before the civil authority can be authorized to interfere for its suppression. It is then to be suppressed, not as a religion, but as a public nuisance.³³

The idea that the state was indirectly obligated to support the religion of the nation was also expressed by certain government officials of the period. Joseph Story, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court and colleague of John Marshall, argued from an establishmentarian position that government could be justified in interfering, in a limited fashion, in matters of religion :

Indeed, the right of a society or government to interfere in matters of religion will hardly be contested by any persons, who believe that piety, religion, and morality are intimately connected with the well being of the state, and indispensable to the administration of civil justice. The promulgation of the great doctrines of religion . . . never can be a matter of indifference in any well ordered community. It is, indeed, difficult to conceive, how any civilized society can well exist without them. And at all events, it is impossible for those, who believe in the truth of Christianity, as a divine revelation, to doubt, that it is the especial duty of government to foster, and encourage it among all the citizens and subjects. This is a point wholly distinct from that of the right of private judgment in matters of religion, and of the freedom of public worship according to the dictates of one's conscience.³⁴

In Hodge's writings, the blurring of these jurisdictional distinctions increased with the approach of the Civil War. This was due, however, not to uncritical political commitments on Hodge's part, but rather to his realistic recognition of the ambiguity inherent within situations that are both moral and political. Hodge attempted to take a median position between those who saw the church's function as solely spiritual and those who placed few or no limits on the sphere of church concern. In his report on the 1859 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, Hodge affirmed the fundamentally spiritual nature of the church, while recognizing that political and moral concerns might well converge in some issues :

If at any time, as may well happen, a given question assumes both a moral and political bearing, as for example, the slave-trade, then the duty of the church is limited to setting forth the law of God on the subject. It is not her office to argue the question in its bearing on the civil or secular interests of the community, but simply to declare in her official capacity what God has said on the subject.³⁵

³³ Hodge, *Romans*, p. 414. There is an interesting inconsistency here between this statement and the general thrust of Hodge's opinion that government is unqualified to judge of matters within the jurisdiction of religion. A government unqualified in such matters would hardly be capable of passing judgment on a religion's truth or falsity. Nevertheless, Hodge was undoubtedly speaking here of religious opinions false in the extreme, since the eventual rejection of them was to be on the basis of their being a "public nuisance." Perhaps if pressed, Hodge would have offered a Scottish appeal to the universal opinion of all men, who could be expected clearly to recognize religious opinions that were blatantly false.

³⁴ From an excerpt in Wilson, *Church and State in American History*, p. 90.

³⁵ Hodge, "The General Assembly", PR (1859) : 617.

Hodge's rejection of the "spirituality of the church" position (which claimed that the church should concern itself exclusively with "spiritual" as opposed to political matters)³⁶ was followed by his opposition to the Gardiner Spring Resolutions (1861) which, Hodge claimed, "completely disregarded the fact that the church did have limits to the sphere in which she could rightfully operate."³⁷ Of chief concern to Hodge here was the second resolution of Dr. Gardiner Spring's motion (which finally carried 156 to 66). The Resolution read as follows :

That this General Assembly, in the spirit of that Christian patriotism which the Scriptures enjoin, and which has always characterized this Church, do hereby acknowledge and declare our obligations to promote and perpetuate, so far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage, the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions under our noble Constitution : and to this Constitution in all its provisions, requirements, and principles, we profess our unabated loyalty.

And to avoid all misconception, the Assembly declare that by the terms "Federal Government," as here used, is not meant any particular administration, or the peculiar opinions of any particular party, but that central administration, which being at any time appointed and inaugurated according to the forms prescribed in the Constitution of the United States, is the visible representative of our national existence. ("Minutes of the B.A., 1861, 329.")³⁸

Hodge felt strongly that the General Assembly had no right to decide such strictly political questions and that the majority paper adopted by the 1861 General Assembly did precisely this by attempting to settle the question, "whether the allegiance of our citizens is primarily to the State or to the Union ?" Hodge thus dissented from the opinion of the majority report.³⁹

Hodge's reaction to these two specific issues was indicative of his view on the larger issue of the relation between church and state. Hodge believed that though the nature of the church is, broadly considered, spiritual, this spirituality does not remove the church from the realities of the world. God's message to people concerns not only matters of soteriology but also how things ought to be in the world inhabited by Christians. Indeed, at times, the church's obedience to God necessarily involves her in discussions of political issues, since the question of whether to obey God or the state, in conflicting situations, is a moral one. But Hodge considered questions such as whether allegiance is due the state or federal

³⁶ For a short but helpful description of the Thornwell-Hodge debate on this, see Lefferts A. Loetscher, A Brief History of the Presbyterians (Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 108-109.

³⁷ Wallace Eugene March, "Charles Hodge on Schism and Civil Strife", Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society 39 (1961) : 94-95. March is here quoting Hodge from the General Assembly report in PR (1861).

³⁸ Maurice W. Armstrong, Lefferts A. Loetscher, and Charles A. Anderson, eds., The Presbyterian Enterprise (Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 211-212.

³⁹ Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly," PR (1861) : 549.

government (Gardiner Spring Resolution) to be outside the jurisdiction of the church, and properly left to the decision of the individual conscience.

As editor of the Princeton Review, Hodge recognized that historical contingencies could endue political issues with moral significance, in which case a religious journal like the Princeton Review was duty-bound to deal with secular issues. At the beginning of the Civil War, the potential dissolution of the Union constituted one such contingency :

There are periods in the history of every nation when its destiny for ages may be determined by the events of an hour. There are occasions when political questions rise into the sphere of morals and religion ; when the rule for political action is to be sought, not in considerations of state policy, but in the law of God. On such occasions the distinction between secular and religious journals is obliterated. When the question to be decided turns on moral principles, when reason, conscience, and religious sentiment are to be addressed, it is the privilege and duty of all who have access in any way to the public ear, to endeavor to allay unholy feeling, and to bring truth to bear on the minds of their fellow-citizens. If any other consideration be needed to justify the discussion, in these pages, of the disruption of this great confederacy, it may be found, not only in the portentous consequences of such disruption to the welfare and happiness of the country and to the general interests of the world, but also in its bearing on the church of Christ and the progress of his kingdom.⁴⁰

Coming as they did at the time of the North-South split in the Presbyterian church, Hodge's remarks attracted opposition from the South. John H. Rice, in The Southern Presbyterian Review, took exception to these comments (cited immediately above), preferring to maintain a sharp distinction between the religious and the secular :

But the distinction between things religious and things secular exists in the very nature of each, and can, therefore, never be obliterated, nor even forgotten, without injury Occasions never do, and never can occur, where political questions rise into the sphere of religion. They always belong to the sphere of ethics.⁴¹

In spite of the Southern opposition, however, Hodge continued to write on political issues, on the grounds that such concern was justified when historical factors caused a blurring of the distinction between the religious and the secular. Later in 1861, Hodge reiterated his conviction that though the church has no authority in matters purely secular nor the state in matters purely spiritual, the two "provinces in some cases overlie each other" and "civil rights and religious duties may be involved in the same question." For example, though slavery was a civil institution, the church was responsible for proclaiming "the relative duties of masters and slaves," for such was a religious issue.⁴² By 1863, the war, too, had become for Hodge, a matter of increasingly severe moral consequence :

⁴⁰ Charles Hodge, "The State of the Country," PR (1861) : 1.

⁴¹ John H. Rice, "The Princeton Review on the State of the Country," The Southern Presbyterian Review 14 (1861) : 2-3.

⁴² Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly," PR (1861) : 557.

This war touches the conscience in too many points to render silence on the part of religious men either allowable or possible. There never was a time when the public conscience was more disturbed, or when it was more necessary that moral principles in their bearing on national conduct should be clearly presented.⁴³

In this time of historical crisis, Hodge's views were very much in harmony with the general feeling in the nation that government and church affairs were interrelated at various points of moral and political convergence. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Schaff could write that in America, though state and church represented distinct institutional and jurisdictional categories, the voluntaristic nature of the people demanded that, from a practical perspective, the function of the state and the morality of the people were in many ways dependent upon each other :

The state can never be indifferent to the morals of the people ; it can never prosper without education and public virtue. Nevertheless its direct and chief concern in our country is with the political, civil, and secular affairs ; while the literary, moral, and religious interests are left to the voluntary agency of individuals, societies, and churches, under the protection of the laws. In Europe the people look to the government for taking the initiative ; in America they help themselves and go ahead.⁴⁴

Church Responsibility for Political Morality

Hodge, then, refused consistently to separate the jurisdictions of the church and the state. He felt that when an issue is of both political and moral significance, it may be necessary for the church to risk acting outside her normal area of concern, and to comment on the issue from a moral and religious perspective. Reacting against what he referred to as "the free-thinker's idea of liberty"⁴⁵ (e.g., as seen in the work of Auguste Comte), Hodge suggested : "If, therefore, any man wishes to antedate perdition, he has nothing to do but to become a free-thinker and join in the shout, 'Civil government has nothing to do with religion ; and religion has nothing to do with civil government.'"⁴⁶ For Hodge, the church was duty-bound to serve the country by fostering in its people the morality necessary to the preservation of the free republic. This idea had made a significant impression on American religious thought by the time of the Civil War.

The war years pushed Hodge toward a more critical evaluation of issues of national concern. His earlier, and somewhat passively expressed conviction that moral guidance should be offered to the state, began to take the form of well-reasoned, though heavily abstract, arguments, such as those offered in "Slavery" (1836) and "Abolitionism" (1844), or

⁴³ Charles Hodge, "The War," PR (1863) : 141.

⁴⁴ Schaff, *Church and State in the United States*, p. 54.

⁴⁵ In this context, Hodge defined a "free-thinker" as "a man whose understanding is emancipated from his conscience. It is therefore natural for him to wish to see civil government emancipated from religion." (Hodge, ST III, p. 346.)

⁴⁶ Hodge, ST III, p. 346.

the form of admonitions that government ought to be supportive of the cause of religion, e.g., “Sunday Mails” (1831). He began to concentrate not only on the analysis of the issues involved, but also on the application of Christian truth to affairs both public and private. Stimulated by the “spirituality of the church” argument presented by James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862) at the 1859 General Assembly, Hodge expressed the increasingly prominent conviction that the church had a social and political responsibility to the country. Even though he still felt that ministers “profane the pulpit when they preach politics, or turn the sacred desk into a rostrum for lectures on secular affairs,” he maintained that these same preachers were “only faithful to their vows when they [proclaimed] the truth of God and [applied] his law to all matters whether of private manners or laws of the state.”⁴⁷ For the glory of Christ, the church might legitimately transgress the boundaries of her normal jurisdiction :

Presbyterians have always held that the church is bound to hold forth in the face of all men the truth and law of God, to testify against all infractions of that law by rulers or people, to lend her countenance and support to all means, within and without her jurisdiction, which she believes to be designed and wisely adapted to promote the glory and kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. This our church has always done, and we pray God, she may continue to do even to the end.⁴⁸

The church is “God’s witness on earth,” and it has “the right to bear testimony against all error in doctrine and all sin in practice, whether in magistrate or people.” When a question is “to be decided by the teachings of the word of God,” the church can make her decision, being bound thereby “to urge or enforce that decision by her spiritual authority.”⁴⁹ Hodge offered historical examples of the church’s legitimate incursion into the secular sphere ; for example, he spoke with pride of American Presbyterians who had

remonstrated with the Government of this country on the laws enjoining the carrying and distribution of the mails on Sunday. While admitting that the Bible does not forbid slaveholding, it has borne its testimony in the most explicit terms against the iniquity of many slave laws. It has many times enjoined on the conscience of the people the duty of instructing the coloured population of our land, and patronized the establishment of schools for that purpose. It has never been afraid to denounce what God forbids, or to proclaim in all ears what God commands. This is her prerogative and this is her duty.⁵⁰

More specifics were offered in the context of distinguishing between questions of litigation and matters of moral and religious truth :

The plain principle which determines the legitimate sphere of the action of the church, is, that it is limited to teaching and enforcing moral and religious truth ; and

⁴⁷ Charles Hodge, “The General Assembly,” PR (1859) : 617.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 618.

⁴⁹ Charles Hodge, “The General Assembly,” PR (1862) : 522-23.

⁵⁰ Charles Hodge, “The General Assembly,” PR (1859) : 617-18.

to such truths as revealed and determined by the sacred Scriptures. The Bible gives us no rule for deciding the litigated questions about public improvements, a national bank, or a protective tariff, or state-rights. But it does give us rules for pronouncing about slave-laws, the slave-trade, obedience to magistrates, treason, rebellion, and revolution. To shut her mouth on these questions, is to make her unfaithful to her high vocation.⁵¹

Though politics *qua* politics was beyond the jurisdiction of the church, politics that affected Christian faith and living was a legitimate object of concerned church discussion. Hodge had certainly not relinquished his commitment to the separation of church and state ; however, during the war years, he was convinced that the church, in order to enforce her decisions, could pursue her commitment to social involvement aggressively, using her spiritual authority to go beyond mere theoretical evaluation of the merits of the case.

Hodge's willingness to recognize the interrelation of the two spheres of church and state has not been fully appreciated by those who have, through overgeneralization, described Hodge's position as one of disassociating the church from any political concern in the interest of maintaining the *status quo*. Raleigh Don Scovel, for example, failed sufficiently to recognize that, in fact, Hodge did see the church as properly dealing with selected political issues, though Hodge's concern was not for politics *qua* politics, but politics *qua* morality. As we have seen, this was particularly evident in Hodge's Princeton Review articles just prior to and at the beginning of the Civil War. Scovel's conclusion, that for Hodge the church had little to do with politics, appears to rest too heavily on Hodge's 1851 article on "Civil Government." Scovel remarks :

In his 1851 article Hodge did not even mention the church as having a place in political life, and in his papers on slavery he stated clearly that the church had nothing to do with politics except insofar as its members, individually, were citizens. Again, one finds a basic dualism in Hodge's views : the church has other and better things to do than to meddle in politics. It is difficult to comprehend a theocratic state in which the church has no part.⁵²

In fact, a subtle, though important shift took place in Hodge's views between his 1851 article on "Civil Government" and his 1859 report on the General Assembly. While the general principles of church-state separation were sustained in both articles, the 1859 report contained a slight change of emphasis in the direction of advocating an increased social responsibility for the church. The earlier article, concerned as it was with ameliorating North-South relations⁵³ and developing a proper response to the fugitive slave law, offered a

⁵¹ Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly," PR (1864) : 562.

⁵² Raleigh Don Scovel, Orthodoxy in Princeton : A Social and Intellectual History of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1812-1860, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1970), p. 327.

⁵³ Hodge wrote : "There is no more obvious duty, at the present time, resting on American Christians, ministers and people, than to endeavour to promote kind feelings between the South and the North." (Hodge, "Civil Government," p. 127)

theoretical discussion of the proper jurisdictions of church and state as divine institutions, and of the conditions under which Christians could refuse conscientiously to obey governmental law. The main point here is that this earlier article treated the issue of the *individual's* response to oppressive governmental policies rather than that of the church's broad, corporate role in assessing social issues. On the other hand, the 1859 report on the General Assembly spoke much more of the critical function of the church as a whole, as it passed judgment on the morality of governmental laws and practices. Though this later article represented only a slight shift in emphasis, it is nonetheless significant that by 1859 Hodge saw the church's task to include "[lending] her countenance and support to all means, within and without her jurisdiction" for witnessing against any infractions of laws.⁵⁴ Though Hodge was still arguing within the principles of a strict biblicism, a more positive assessment of the church's social responsibility emerged in the 1859 report, a nuance that had not been present in the 1851 article. By 1859, Hodge was clearly affirming the right of the church as a whole, i.e., as an institution, to provide moral guidance to the state, a subtle but significant shift from his earlier emphasis on the conscientious response of *individual* Christians to unjust governmental laws.

As discussed earlier, Scovel also failed to recognize that though Hodge's view of the state incorporated certain elements of the Puritan commonwealth ideal as reformulated along American lines, Hodge's *state* was far from theocratic. Hodge's expression of the church's need to influence governmental policy testified implicitly to his affirmation of the separate natures and jurisdictions of the two institutions; in the exceptional situations in which politics acquire a moral character, the church can act as the judge of the state and attempt to influence public opinion by marshaling massive public support for legislation that best serves the Christian majority. Hodge opposed the Gardiner Spring resolutions, but he also opposed the "spirituality of the church" proposal, the purpose of which was to separate the church from politics completely. Scovel is right to call attention to Hodge's interest in maintaining the *status quo*, for indeed, this was a major element of Hodge's Whiggish political orientation. But to hold that, for Hodge, maintenance of the *status quo* was such an inflexible priority as to militate effectively against virtually all protest and confrontation, is to miss an important dimension of Hodge's theological world view. Scovel appears to have missed this dimension in the following characterizations of Hodge's political thought:

The consistency of Hodge's [political] position is not to be found in its logic, but rather in its function. The intent of these ideas is to protect things as they are, to prevent protest, civil dis-obedience and confrontation over the issue of slavery. In the final analysis Hodge preached submission: all the avenues of change, except those allowed by the state, are closed.⁵⁵

And in regard to the church's activities as an institution, according to Scovel:

⁵⁴ Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly," PR (1859): 618.

⁵⁵ Scovel, *Orthodoxy in Princeton*, p. 327.

[Hodge] could find no place for the church, acting as a community, within the broader social-political framework. (Here too, in one sense, he was merely extending an enlightened principle—the separation of church and state.) The tendency at Princeton was to view society mostly in terms of individual achievement and interaction rather than in terms of groups and factions.⁵⁶

In fact, it was Hodge's willingness to deal with issues not "purely spiritual" (e.g., in his opposition to the "spirituality of the church" position) that occasioned, at least in part, the North-South split in the Presbyterian church in 1861. When Scovel remarked that "voluntarism at Princeton could and usually did mean that religion could divorce itself from politics or could avoid acting where action was full of risks,"⁵⁷ he neglected to acknowledge that when Hodge refused to endorse the non-political "spirituality of the church" position, he was supporting a position which risked (and indeed, eventually forfeited) church unity, in the interest of offering a moral critique of political affairs that were considered by many (e.g., Thornwell) to be outside of the church's jurisdiction.⁵⁸ Regardless of one's opinion of Hodge's political philosophy or views on specific issues, it can hardly be said with legitimacy that his religion was divorced from his politics. Quite to the contrary, on this subject, Hodge was very much a *child of his times*.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 331.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 332.

⁵⁸ More specifically, for example, Hodge supported the education of slaves (cf., p. 28). Though this was hardly a revolutionary stance in New Jersey at the time (the education of all slaves born after 1788 was legally required in New Jersey by a 1788 statute), this sentiment was hardly national. For example, as Charles Cobb, Jr. of Brown University has recently pointed out, with the demise of the *Reconstruction* period following the Civil War and the corresponding rise of the white supremacist instituted *Redemption* period, in the South, hostility to black empowerment led to prohibitions on black education. In Cobb's words, "[b]y the end of the century, many of the whites in power [in Mississippi] were seeking the complete elimination of any kind of education for blacks, even a segregated and inferior education. In a June 30, 1899, editorial, the *Greenwood Commonwealth* newspaper opposed tax-supported black schools: 'Their education,' this Mississippi Delta newspaper editorialized, 'only spoils a good field hand and makes a shyster lawyer or a fourth-rate teacher. It is money thrown away.'" Charles Cobb, Jr., "Freedom's Struggle and Freedom Schools," *Monthly Review* Vol. 63, No. 3 (July-August 2011): 106-07.