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AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY AND THE CLASSICS (1776–1861)

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Abstract: *Historians have long recognized the unique synthesis of Christianity and republicanism that prospered among Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, little attention has been paid to the way Americans justified such a marriage between two seemingly incompatible systems of thought. How did these Christians reconcile their biblical faith with classical literature? Though Mark A. Noll has spent considerable effort explaining the "republican Christian Enlightenment" and "Christian republicanism" that flourished in the Revolutionary era, he has not committed any significant treatment to the complex relationship between Christian and classical literature during this period and beyond. This article seeks to elucidate how this synthesis took place in the Christian republican mind, identifying the four primary ways Americans explained the similarity and compatibility between Christianity and classical thought: (1) historically, (2) conceptually, (3) morally, and (4) supernaturally. Ultimately, the relationship between Christianity and the classics determined the viability of the entire Christian republican project in the early United States.*

Key words: *American Christianity, classics, classical, republics, republicanism, Greece, Rome*

When Princeton theologian Samuel Miller wrote a series of letters to his sons in college in the early 1840s, he offered a trove of fatherly advice on topics ranging from patriotism to dress code to friendship. Miller even taught his sons how to spend money and keep their rooms clean. Like many of his enlightened generation, he also encouraged his children to read often and widely. But Miller commended one subject of study more than the rest. "Whatever may be your contemplated pursuit in life, make a point of gaining as much classic literature as you can," he nudged. "It will be an ornament and a gratification to you as long as you live. It will enlarge your views, discipline your mind, augment your moral and intellectual power, and prepare you for more extensive and elevated usefulness."[1] As a Presbyterian and professor of ecclesiastical history, Miller realized the importance of historical texts and the mastery of ancient languages. After all, the Bible itself was written in both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the Holy Scriptures, "being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore

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[1] Samuel Miller, *Letters from a Father to His Sons in College* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1843), 192.

authentical."[2] As a Protestant, Miller understood that many theological disputations since the Reformation had been conducted solely in Latin, not in German or French or English. However, in his mind, the study of Greek and Roman literature was not simply an academic or intellectual exercise. It helped form the *whole* Christian, developing the "moral and intellectual power" of the student.

For Miller, without the classics, education itself seemed like a hollow term. "When colleges cease to make the study of Greek and Latin a necessary and a prominent part of their plan of instruction, I hope they will abandon their charters, and no longer perpetrate the mockery of conferring degrees," he scoffed. Miller desired his children to receive an education that would improve not only their minds, but their morals as well. As a result, with a nagging fatherly insistence, he relentlessly hammered into his sons the idea that there was wisdom to be gained from the ancient republics. Miller even urged his sons to start a study group. "If I had my collegial life to live over again," he speculated, "I would certainly make a point of forming such an association, and of being one of its members. Its members should spend an hour together at least once a week; and one of its strictest rules should be not to utter a single word in conversation, when together, in any other language than Greek or Latin."[3] Whether his sons ever took their father's advice and began a study group is unknown. Regardless, the republican values of the Revolutionary generation were being passed onto the next.

Historians have long recognized the unique synthesis of Christianity and republicanism that prospered in the early American republic.[4] However, little attention has been paid to how Americans justified such a marriage between two seemingly incompatible systems of thought. For instance, how could a Presbyterian theologian like Samuel Miller recommend the works of "pagans" to his Christian sons? How did Christians reconcile their biblical faith with classical literature? Though Mark A. Noll has spent considerable effort explaining the "republican Christian Enlightenment" at Miller's Princeton and the so-called "Christian republicanism" that flourished in the Revolutionary era, he has not committed any significant treatment to the relationship between Christian and classical literature during this period.[5] The following article seeks to elucidate how this synthesis took place in the Christian republican mind and how Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries understood the compatibility between biblical and classical thought. Ulti-

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[2] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.8.

[3] Miller, *Letters from a Father to His Sons*, 192, 200.

[4] Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 210–17; William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 233; James P. Byrd, *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 11; Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 49–53, 57, 67–72.

[5] Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768–1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1989), 189. Noll, *America's God*, 54, 57, 73–92.

mately, the relationship between Christianity and the classics determined the viability of the entire Christian republican project in the early United States.[6]

I. RAISED ON THE REPUBLICS

Beginning at an early age, Christians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries lived in much closer proximity to the ancient world than they do today. Northerners and Southerners, evangelicals and non-evangelicals, whites and some blacks were inculcated in classic literature of all kinds. In 1824, as part of his application to West Point, Episcopalian Robert E. Lee included his extensive reading at Alexandria Academy in Virginia, where he attended for free because his father was a veteran of the Revolutionary War. In his earliest surviving letter, Lee listed Latin works by "Caesar, Sallust, Virgil, Cicero, Horace, and Tacitus" and Greek authors like Xenophon and Homer.[7] Farther south, in the upcountry of South Carolina, Richard Furman did not have access to formal schooling, yet the voracious Baptist still managed to cultivate a taste for the classic works of Homer, Longinus, and Quintilian.[8] In established and non-established churches alike, the pursuit of classical knowledge typified the standard for Christian education. In New England, the expectation was especially high. In Braintree, Massachusetts, a young John Adams defiantly announced to his father that he would no longer study Latin. His father, a Congregationalist deacon who expected his son to attend Harvard and become a minister, responded by making John dig ditches for two days! Adams later reflected at the end of his life, "If I have gained any distinction, it has been owing to the two days' labor in that abominable ditch."[9] Adams eventually attended Harvard, but the future President would choose another path than the one his father expected. In fact, Adams's Unitarian beliefs were a departure from his father's liberal Congregationalism. Nevertheless, his love for the classics never waned. In the Northeast, even women were occasionally taught Latin. As a young woman raised inside a pious home in early nineteenth-century New York, Phoebe Palmer, the so-called "Mother of the Holiness Movement," was somewhat proficient in Latin works.[10]

Though slaves were unable to read such works and denied any kind of sophisticated learning (though they were sometimes named after Greek heroes), free and indentured blacks in both the North and South attempted to educate themselves in

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[6] Indeed, the classics contributed to the nation's founding. Carl J. Richard posits, "It is clear that the classics exerted a formative influence upon the founders. Classical ideas provided the basis for their theories of government form, social responsibility, human nature, and virtue." Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 232.

[7] Allen C. Guelzo, *Robert E. Lee: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 35.

[8] Thomas Armitage, "Dr. Richard Furman," in *Life and Works of Dr. Richard Furman, D.D.*, ed. G. William Foster Jr. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 2004), 9.

[9] Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 11; Gordon S. Wood, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 27–28.

[10] Nancy Hardesty, *Great Women of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 88–89; Phoebe Palmer, *Phoebe Palmer: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (New York: Paulist, 1988), 50.

Greek and Roman literature.[11] In a 1775 poem that one scholar has called a "republican hymn," a young Lemuel Haynes commemorated the heroes of the Battle of Lexington by comparing patriots to the Greek warriors in Herodotus's *Histories*.[12] Haynes was himself a minuteman and eventually served as a Congregationalist minister in Rutland, Vermont, for thirty years. Ancient histories helped ministers like Haynes envision the ideal American and introduced them to republican virtues like freedom, dignity, and temperance. At the Minors' Moralist Society in Charleston, South Carolina (established in 1803), seven free black men—James Mitchell, Joseph Humphries, William Cooper, Carlos Huger, Thomas S. Bonneau, William Clark, and Richard Holloway—educated poor and orphaned blacks in the antebellum South. At the school, "the chief books used for reading were monographs of the histories of Greece, Rome, and England."[13] Among the students in Charleston was a young Daniel Alexander Payne, future co-founder of Wilberforce University, the first college in America owned and operated by African Americans. Years later, as president of Wilberforce, Payne resisted calls for vocational training by establishing classic literature as one of the chief components of Christian black education.[14]

Indeed, the classics were imbibed by all manner of Christians, pro-slavery and abolitionist alike. However, not all abolitionists received the ancient histories in the same way. For instance, when Frederick Douglass reflected on the slavery of ancient Greece and Rome, he thought of Revelation 13:10: "He that leadeth into captivity, shall go into captivity."[15] On the other hand, for Presbyterian Henry Highland Garnet, even an empire constructed on the backs of slaves offered some usefulness to the anti-slavery cause. In his 1844 report to the New York State Convention of Colored Citizens, Garnet, an early rival of Douglass, described the classic pastoral ideal when he emphasized the benefits of an agrarian life, boasting, "In the proudest days of Rome, when she stretched out her sceptre over a subjugated world, she called her favorite from the furrowed field. Her legislators encouraged her farmers, nor did the sun of her glory begin to set, until her fields were neglected, and her sons exchanged that honorable labor for the luxury and licentiousness of cities and camps."[16]

With such familiarity with the ancient literature, preachers across the United States quite naturally cited authors from the Greek and Roman republics to lend

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[11] Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D.*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 1:28.

[12] John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes 1753–1833* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51–52. Herodotus wrote the first great narrative history in the ancient world, earning him the title "the father of history."

[13] Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888), 15.

[14] Paul R. Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation of Three Methodist Colleges: The Educational Views and Labors of Daniel Payne, Joseph Price, Isaac Lane* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 95. Also see Christopher Sarver, "Socially Derived or Studiously Prosecuted? God, Revelation, Education, and Daniel A. Payne," *JETS* 65.1 (2022): 25, 32.

[15] In David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 183.

[16] Henry Highland Garnet, *A Memorial Discourse* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1865), 38.

wisdom and credibility to their gospel message. When Baptist Jeremiah Bell Jeter sought to define a "Christian," he referred back to Acts 11 in the city of Antioch, when Christians were first called by the name. "The admirers and pupils of distinguished teachers were called after their names," Jeter said. "The disciples of Plato were called Platonists—those of Aristotle were called Aristotelians—and those of Pythagoras were called Pythagoreans. The disciples of Christ were early styled Christians. A Christian is a follower of Christ—one who receives the Word, trusts in the atonement, imbibes the Spirit, imitates the example, obeys the precepts, espouses the cause, and honors the name of Christ."[17] In this sense, the ancient Greeks even helped Christians understand the nature of Christianity, or at least what they meant by the term. From the pulpit, learned clergymen also invoked Greek and Roman authors for a host of moral, social, and political causes. They cited them to condemn vices like theater and drinking.[18] They used them to warn their congregations against the ills of slavery.[19] When clergymen waded into the realm of politics, they sometimes compared the politicians of their age to famous Greek statesmen. For Baptist Jonathan Maxcy, Patrick Henry was the "Virginia Demosthenes," after the famous fourth-century Greek orator. For Philip Schaff, Daniel Webster was the "American Demosthenes."[20] Conversely, as Carl J. Richard has shown, "although many of the founders held unorthodox religious views, they sometimes interpreted classical virtue in a Christian light."[21]

At the college level, presidents and professors commended the classics as a tutor in the school of Christ.[22] In 1802, President Jonathan Maxcy explained to his students at Rhode Island College, "Of course when you attempt to perform works of genius, the fire of ancient times will kindle within you. The spirit of Homer and Demosthenes, of Cicero and Virgil, will thrill through every fibre of the soul. These Sons of Minerva, will rise from the dead, and appear in bodies new and incorruptible." In a uniquely Christian analogy, Maxcy applied the language of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 to the Greek and Roman authors. In Maxcy's view, the wisdom of

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[17] J. B. Jeter, *The Mirror; Or, A Delineation of Different Classes of Christians, in a Series of Lectures* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport & Blakeman, 1855), 21.

[18] Samuel Miller, *A Sermon, Delivered January 19, 1812, at the Request of a Number of Young Gentlemen of the City of New-York, who had Assembled to Express their Condolence with the Inhabitants of Richmond on the Late Mournful Dispensation of Providence in that City* (New York: Whiting & Watson, 1812), 31–32. In the sermon, Miller cites Plato, Aristotle, and Ovid in their opposition to corrupt amusements.

[19] Samuel Miller, *A Discourse, Delivered April 12, 1797, at the Request of and Before the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been or May Be Liberated* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1797), 23. According to Miller, it is a "well known fact, that, after the introduction of this religion into the Roman Empire, every successive law that was made relating to slaves, was more and more in their favour, abating the rigours of servitude, until, at last, all the subjects of the empire were declared equally free."

[20] Jonathan Maxcy, "A Discourse, Delivered in the Chapel of South Carolina College, July 4th, 1819," in *The Literary Remains of the Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D.D.*, ed. Romeo Elton (New York: A. V. Blake, 1844), 283; Schaff, *America*, 35.

[21] Richard, *The Founders and the Classics,* 7.

[22] Richard also explains, "The eighteenth-century educational system was the institution most responsible for the classical conditioning of the founders. It was mostly in the schools that the founders learned to venerate the classics" (*The Founders and the Classics,* 12).

the classics lived in perpetuity through its students. Like the Holy Spirit that indwelled believers, the "spirit" of the ancient writers possessed and "thrilled" men of knowledge. Incredibly, Maxcy sometimes spoke of the classics with near-biblical significance. Warning his students against the dangers of "metaphysical speculations," he claimed that the "philosophy of Socrates" could "be brought down from heaven and established in cities and families." For Maxcy, Greek thought had been delivered directly from God himself. He continued, "It is no small recommendation to the ancient languages, that those who have been most thoroughly acquainted with them, have generally been most eminent in other branches of learning." Maxcy appeared nearly incapable of conceiving of an educated person who had *not* studied the classics. "Scarcely can you find an eminent man in modern times," he declared, "who has not formed his genius, and acquired his taste and talents for executing works of immortal renown by a thorough study of the Greek and Roman classics."[23] With such high praise from erudite professors such as Miller and particularly Maxcy, it is little wonder that pastors across America consumed a steady diet of Greek and Latin classics along with the Bible itself. Students also met together and studied the ancient texts. At Amherst College in the 1830s, the two main literary societies were the Athenians and the Alexandrians.[24]

Ancient literature was not just the substance of nineteenth-century education; sometimes it was also the requirement. In 1829, when sixteen-year-old Presbyterian James Henley Thornwell requested to be admitted into the junior class at South Carolina College, he was apparently grilled on the classics. He wrote to a friend, "My Dear Sir: I applied for admission into the Junior Class this morning, and was rejected. On Graeca Minora, Xenophon, the Odes of Horace, and Cicero, I was admitted, and on part of Mathematics. Homer, and the Art of Poetry, I was rejected on."[25] The synthesis of Christian and classical thought in the American mind occurred primarily through formal education, shaping future clergymen from all denominations. According to Princeton President John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, "The remains of the ancients are the standard of taste."[26] During Witherspoon's tenure, the freshman year at Princeton was almost entirely dedicated to study of the classics.[27]

In Connecticut, the president of Yale and chief clergyman of the Standing Order, Timothy Dwight, was also the leading voice of Christian republicanism in

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[23] Jonathan Maxcy, "An Address, Delivered to the Graduates of Rhode Island College, at the Public Commencement, September 1, 1802," in *The Literary Remains of the Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D.D.*, ed. Romeo Elton (New York: A. V. Blake, 1844), 332, 333, 336.

[24] Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Three Leaves, 2006), 91.

[25] James Henley Thornwell, in *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell: Ex-President of the South Carolina College*, ed. Benjamin Morgan Palmer (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), 54–55.

[26] John Witherspoon, "Introductory Lectures on Divinity," in *The Works of the Reverend John Witherspoon*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802), 4:20.

[27] Noll, *Princeton and the Republic*, 100.

New England.[28] His *Greenfield Hill* (1788), dedicated to John Adams, has been described by one scholar as "a pastoral description of the godly community within a divinely blessed republic."[29] And yet, even Dwight's New England utopian vision of a godly republic still included classical curriculum. In Part II, "The Flourishing Village," Dwight muses,

> Some half-grown sprigs of learning grac'd his brow:
> Little he knew, though much he wish'd to know,
> Inchanted hung o'er Virgil's honey'd lay,
> And smil'd, to see desipient Horace play;
> Glean'd scraps of Greek; and, curious, trac'd afar,
> Through Pope's clear glass, the bright Maeonian star.

Alluding to Alexander Pope's famous translation of the *Iliad*, Dwight celebrated both Greek and Roman literature in his vision for learning that fostered "love to God, and friendship to mankind."[30] Republicanism was not some speculative point of philosophy to be debated merely in his classrooms at Yale, but essential to God's design for the American people, demanding a synthesis of biblical and classic literature.

But how could American Christians so easily reconcile the moral philosophy of polytheists with biblical thought? Were these two systems of thinking not contradictory? Had not the Apostle Paul defended the Christian gospel against the skepticism of the Athenians (Acts 17)? The New Testament was filled with instances of early Christians refuting Greek beliefs. How could men who did *not* know Christ help those who *did* to know him more? Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were not the first in the history of the church to attempt to answer these kinds of questions.

II. CLASSICAL THOUGHT AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The question of Christianity's relationship to Greek thought had in fact existed since the early church. North African bishop Tertullian (155–220 AD) had once asked, "What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[31] According to most church fathers, the answer was: very much in fact. For instance, the Neoplatonist books that shaped Augustine, the father of the Western church, were actually from Athens. In his *Confessions*, Augustine acknowledged that the "books of the Platonists that I had read prompted me to seek an immaterial truth," preparing his mind and heart for

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[28] The so-called "Standing Order" was the alliance between Congregationalist clergymen and local and state governments in New England in the early United States until 1833, when the last state church was abolished in Massachusetts. These clergymen were affiliated strongly with the Federalist party, seeking to defend religion as the necessary basis for good government against the likes of Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans.

[29] John R. Fitzmier, *New England's Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752–1817* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 43.

[30] Timothy Dwight, *Greenfield Hill: A Poem, in Seven Parts* (New York: Childs and Swaine, 1794), 41–42.

[31] Tertullian, *Praescr.* 7.9.

Holy Scripture.[32] Patristic thought was so dominated by Platonic ideas that one historian has called the triumph of orthodox Christian doctrine over classical thought "a Pyrrhic victory."[33]

For hundreds of years, Protestants in Europe had wrestled with the historical and philosophical enigma of Greeks and Romans who explicitly rejected Judeo-Christian beliefs yet who embodied so many Judeo-Christian principles. In fact, Protestantism itself had emerged in the midst of humanism, an intellectual and literary movement on the continent that sought to return "*ad fontes*," or "to the sources" of classic literature. As Martin Luther and John Calvin were seeking to reform the Catholic Church, it had become somewhat fashionable among Europe's literati to retrieve and translate ancient texts. The "prince of humanists," Desiderius Erasmus, even engaged Martin Luther on the freedom of the will.[34] John Calvin's first published book was a commentary on *De Clementia* by the Roman philosopher and statesman Seneca. Geneva, Switzerland, where Calvin lived, was itself a republic, a relatively novel form of civil government in medieval Europe, but one drawn from ancient Greece and Rome. Indeed, the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, the so-called "third man of the Reformation," was so impressed by the wisdom of the Greek classics that he was convinced that Plato must have been saved.[35] In many ways, without a return to the original biblical languages and to ancient Latin texts in the early church, Protestantism would have looked much different.

In America, the synthesis of Christian and non-Christian thought was established by the Puritans, who cultivated a taste for classic literature. At Cambridge in England, aspiring ministers like John Cotton were schooled in Platonic thought and Aristotelian (Thomistic) logic.[36] Before emigrating to Boston, for example, Cotton consumed the works of Plato and other classic texts while a student at Trinity Col-

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[32] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 149, 155.

[33] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 44. Even Tertullian was influenced greatly by Greek thought. Pelikan explains, "Tertullian's explanation of the presence of noble and good elements in paganism employed the idea of natural law rather than that of the seminal Logos. For him these elements included knowledge of the existence, the goodness, and the justice of God, but especially the moral precepts flowing from that knowledge. This law of nature agreed with Christian revelation in its condemnation of moral evil" (32).

[34] J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston frame Erasmus's renown and influence in Europe: "No man in Europe could rival him in reading and writing the classical tongues. No man had such mastery of the treasures of ancient literature, both secular and patristic. No man commanded the ear of Pope, cardinal and king as did Erasmus." J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "Historical and Theological Introduction," in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 17.

[35] Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 123. Zwingli, who revered Erasmus, was well-known for his ability as a humanist, particularly his proficiency in Greek. Also see Myron P. Gilmore, *The World of Humanism, 1453–1517* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962).

[36] Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe pushed back against Perry Miller's assertion that Anglicans were much more influenced by Thomism and the scholastic tradition than their Puritan counterparts. According to Hambrick-Stowe, "Catholics and Puritans alike could be spiritless Scholastics, but the search for religious experience more truly dominated the religious movements of the period." Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 27.

lege in the first decade of the seventeenth century.[37] Second and third generation Puritans were likewise steeped in the ancient literature. John Cotton's grandson, Cotton Mather, was familiar with classical authors of all kinds, including Aristotle, Cato, Livy, Homer, Ovid, Plutarch, Virgil, and Tacitus.[38] In his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Mather reflected upon the founding of Harvard College—a training school for ministers—and recorded its rigorous academic standards: "When scholars had so far profited at the grammar schools, that they could read any classical author into English, and readily make and speak true Latin, and write it in verse as well as prose; and perfectly decline the paradigms of nouns and verbs in the Greek tongue, they were judged capable of admission in Harvard College."[39] The classics were the standard for both Old *and* New England education. Though the accusation of heathenism was sometimes charged against the colleges, as Perry Miller has shown, intellectuals replied that the "amiable moral Vertues of *Heathen* men" were still worthy of emulation.[40] If there was indeed a "New England mind" in the colonial period, it was partly a Greek and Roman mind, as colonial ministers were well-versed in classic literature.[41] Christian republicanism took embryonic form long before 1776.[42] Protestants had been imbibing the classics for centuries, and early American Christians continued that tradition.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, as one historian has observed, "'Education' without Aristotle was almost unthinkable." Even though Harvard and Yale were slow to integrate certain ideas like the new moral philosophy, Latin works and theology still composed the heart of their curricula, "based on centuries of medieval assumptions as to what education should be."[43] In the 1730s and 1740s, ironically, as America was experiencing a spiritual revival in the Great Awakening, the colonies were also encountering a "revival of natural morality" that "depended to

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[37] Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 14.

[38] Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 165. John Lowe has noted, "Not only did Mather engage with contemporary historical, philosophical, and theological works, but he frequently cited the Patristic, medieval commentaries, Jewish literature, the Reformers, Post-Reformation Protestant theology and Roman Catholics." John T. Lowe, "Cotton Mather," in *American Religious History: Belief and Society through Time,* vol. 1: *Colonial Era to the Civil War*, ed. Gary Scott Smith (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2021), 208–10.

[39] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Volume II* (London, 1702; repr., New Haven: S. Converse, 1820), 9.

[40] Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1982), 82.

[41] Perry Miller concludes, "Regarded in this light, whatever mastery of logical methods the heathens, Plato and Aristotle, had achieved resulted in simply from God's being graciously willing that a few individuals recover certain elements of the pristine rectitude in order that the whole race might not be devastated" (*The New England Mind*, 111–12).

[42] In Virginia, Thomas Jefferson was inspired by Algernon Sidney in his writing of the *Declaration of Independence.* Along with John Milton, Sidney was "one of the chief promoters of 'Hebraic republicanism,' the idea that ancient Israel was originally a kingless republic led by God alone.… Thomas Paine reinvigorated Hebraic republican thought in *Common Sense*, which depended on the same reading of 1 Samuel as Sidney's." Thomas S. Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 51.

[43] George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 61.

some extent on the authority and cogency of the ancient moralists."[44] Jonathan Edwards, one of the chief apologists of the revivals and one of the primary critics of the new moral philosophers (i.e., Samuel Clarke, the third earl of Shaftesbury, William Wollaston, Francis Hutcheson, Bishop Joseph Butler, David Hume, etc.), still had such a high view of certain Greek philosophers that he believed their writings had come straight from the Almighty. Though he conceded the "defects of heathen morality,"[45] Edwards pondered around 1750 "whether or no some of the heathen philosophers had not, with regard to some things, some degree of inspiration of the Spirit of God."[46] As the so-called "Apostle to the Enlightenment," Edwards had certainly critiqued, but not dismissed, classical thinking.[47] (He had also been deeply influenced by the Cambridge Platonists during his youth.[48]) In *Charity and Its Fruits*, an ambivalent Edwards wrote, "Many of the heathen have been eminent for their great performances; some for their integrity, or for their justice, and others for their good deeds done for the public good.… Many have done great things from fear of hell … many have done great things from pride, and from a desire for reputation and honor among men.… It is hard to say how far such natural principles may carry men in particular duties and performances."[49] At the very least, it appeared that Edwards respected the ancient politicians, philosophers, and poets for their introduction to certain biblical concepts and for their impetus toward civil servanthood, albeit with their deep moral imperfections. After all, he too prized things like honor and virtue and the public good.

With Edwards's penchant for theological innovation, it comes as little surprise that his theological successors were distinguished by their willingness to integrate republican ideas into a Calvinist faith.[50] In one of the most controversial sermons in New England in the early national period, called *Concio ad Clerum* (Latin for "sermon to the clergy"), Nathaniel William Taylor appealed to Edwards in order to critique the traditional notion of original sin. Though Edwards would almost certainly have balked at Taylor's novel interpretation of human ability, his ideas were being co-opted in 1828 to propound a new brand of New England Theology called

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[44] Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 175.

[45] Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*, 107.

[46] Jonathan Edwards, "The 'Miscellanies,' no. 1162," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, vol. 23: *The "Miscellanies," 1153–1360*, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney (Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 84.

[47] Sydney Ahlstrom called Edwards "possibly the Church's greatest apostle to the Enlightenment." Sydney Ahlstrom, "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," in *The Shaping of American Religion*, ed. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Johnson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 245.

[48] According to Oliver D. Crisp and Kyle C. Strobel, Edwards was "deeply influenced as a young man by the Cambridge Platonists, particularly the work of John Smith, traces of whose idealism can be found in Edwards's early scientific and philosophical works, such as '*The Mind*.'" Oliver D. Crisp and Kyle C. Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to His Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 23.

[49] Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1852), 77–78.

[50] To be more exact, Edwards renovated confessional Calvinist doctrines with Enlightenment ideas. He was a thinker as well as a theologian. As a result, "Edwards left behind a complex theological legacy." Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 601.

"New Haven Theology," a school of Calvinism with what one historian has called a "new republican mentality."[51] Though Taylor proudly claimed the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, his republicanism and his affinity for classical literature were more akin to that of his teacher at Yale, Timothy Dwight. For example, Edwards's grandson was one of the chief developers of the concept of moral government, which became Taylor's "favorite theme."[52] Even though moral government found its basis partly in Edwards's ideas, it was Dwight who offered the most robust articulation of the doctrine, drawing his inspiration from the republican discourse of the age. And just as Dwight had venerated the classics, so did his protégé. In his *Lectures on the Moral Government of God*, Taylor appealed to Greek and Roman authors dozens of times. On one occasion, Taylor asked,

> What reason or shadow of reason is there to believe that modern deists, or any other men, or any individual man, under the mere light of nature, and to the end of time, would have become wiser or better than Socrates, Plato, Seneca, or Cicero? When or where has human genius shone more brightly, or the power and majesty of the human intellect more excited our admiration and wonder than in the poets, the orators, the legislators, the philosophers of antiquity? And when, to the end of the world, could we hope for better results in the discovery of moral truth in the formation of moral character?[53]

Indeed, what distinguished Christian republicanism from its Puritan antecedents was not the mere acknowledgement of certain non-Christian virtues. Even the Holy Scriptures had identified a kind of pagan wisdom (Acts 7:22). Rather, Christian republicanism in the early national period was characterized by an increasing willingness to ascribe some degree of "moral character" to the ancient Greeks and Romans despite a lack of saving knowledge of biblical truth. Not surprisingly, as Calvinists began recognizing more "natural ability" in sinners, they also began viewing the ancient pagans in a more virtuous light.

III. "A REMARKABLE RESEMBLANCE"

Even with a rich Protestant tradition that extolled the wisdom of classic literature and a Puritan heritage that coincided with so many republican ideals, Christians in the early United States were still forced to confront the fact that the ancient republics fell short of the one requirement for godliness in the Christian mind: faith in Yahweh. Though Greek and Roman philosophers and poets had written many wise sayings and many lived in the days of the Old Testament, they did not believe in the God of the Bible and therefore did not possess knowledge unto salvation.

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[51] Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 100.

[52] Noll, *America's God*, 290. In the introduction to Taylor's *Lectures on the Moral Government of God* (1859), Noah Porter calls moral government "the favorite theme of [Taylor's] instructions in theology." Nathaniel William Taylor, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God* (New York: Clark, Austin, & Smith, 1859), iii.

[53] Taylor, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God*, 361.

How then could such men bestow wisdom on the people of God? As Norman Fiering explains, the synthesis of biblical and classical thought was

> continuously controversial, as might be expected, and various forms of reconciliation were devised. It was said, for example, that pagan ethics remained useful in preparing people for civil life and external behavior; but the guidance of Holy Scripture was essential for leading mankind to salvation and for developing a sanctified interior life. Yet this kind of uneasy peace between the secular and the religious realms, based upon specious reasoning, was inherently unstable.[54]

Due to the challenge of synthesizing these different ideologies, American Christians in the revolutionary and antebellum years had four primary ways of explaining the similarities between Christianity and classical thought: (1) historically, (2) conceptually, (3) morally, and (4) supernaturally. These were not always mutually exclusive, and Christians often employed more than one argument in elucidating the complex relationship between biblical and classical thinking. But each line of reasoning could be found prominently between the American Revolution and the Civil War, when Christians attempted to reconcile their own beliefs with those of the ancient Greeks and Romans for the sake of the republican project.

The challenge of reconciling Christian and classical thought was first and foremost historical. The ancient Greeks had lived centuries before Jesus Christ and knew nothing of the Christian religion. If their teachings had been delivered *before* the New Testament, how could they come so close to those in the Bible? And there were other historical challenges. Medieval Christianity had developed rather well within monarchial societies. Even after the fall of Rome in AD 395, bishops were still forced to try to exonerate Christianity from the charge that Christian beliefs had somehow weakened the effete republic.[55] What could the Bible teach Christians about republicanism that the ancient republicans could not? These questions went to the very heart of America's identity and purpose.

One way of reconciling the historical enigma between Christianity and Greek and Roman beliefs was by looking at the Old Testament itself. Technically speaking, the ancient thinkers had not invented republicanism, or so many American Christians believed. Just as the Old Testament had become an example for prior generations of Americans who believed that God made covenants with modern kingdoms, so the Old Testament also served as a blueprint for the ideal republic. Preaching from 2 Chronicles 15:7 ("Be ye strong therefore, and let not your hands be weak; for your work shall be rewarded"), Nathanael Emmons began his sermon before the Massachusetts Missionary Society in 1800 with these words: "There was such a

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[54] Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 3.

[55] According to Vernon Bourke, "one persistent rumor was that Christianity had sapped the strength of Rome. The officials and citizenry of Rome were still divided into Christian and pagan groups. It takes no powers of imagination to picture the situation. A Roman official in North Africa, the Christian Marcellinus, wrote to Augustine, telling him about this charge against Christianity and asking him to refute it. This was the setting, then, which occasioned the writing of the *City of God*." Vernon J. Bourke, "Introduction," in Augustine, *City of God*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Image, 2014), viii.

peculiar and intimate connection between the civil and religious institutions in the Hebrew republic, that the cause of religion was necessarily and deeply affected, by both the good and bad administration of government."[56] In Emmons's mind, the first true republic of the people was born at Mount Sinai, not at Mount Olympus.

Scholars have demonstrated how the notion of "Hebraic Republicanism" shaped "an American national and political culture from the Revolution to the Civil War."[57] According to this tradition, the Hebrew republic antedated the Greek and Roman republics. As a result, in their approach to politics, Standing Order clergymen like Emmons considered the Israelite government as somewhat paradigmatic for their own, conjoining church and state in a holy union. The difference was that the *American* republic was established by God to "gospelize" the entire world. Emmons concluded, "We were, there is reason to believe, raised up and formed into a civil and religious community, to perform this service for God, in grateful return for his distinguishing and protecting mercy."[58] New England Congregationalists were not the only Christians to see their own complexion in the Old Testament. In the South, a Presbyterian called the Israelite nation a "Hebrew commonwealth" while a Baptist conceived of the Jewish government as a "republican theocracy."[59] So determined was Lyman Beecher (who was influenced by the New Haven Theology) to republicanize the Old Testament that he delivered a lecture titled "The Republican Elements of the Old Testament." Beecher began the lecture by stating, "It is not uncommon for infidels to insist that the Old Testament is unfriendly to the liberty and equality of man." He then posited that the political administration of Moses was in fact "a federal national republican government, more resembling our own than any government *on earth* ever did, or now does."[60]

Another answer to the historical question of virtuous non-Christians was to conclude that the ancient Greeks and Romans had been seeking after God with all their natural faculties and that the Bible is something they would gladly have welcomed if indeed they had lived to see it. In an 1802 baccalaureate address, after quoting the Roman philosopher Cicero (in Latin) and emphasizing the necessity of the Bible, Jonathan Maxcy exclaimed,

> Here is a religion, plain, intelligent in all its practical truths, accommodated to all classes of mankind, to every capacity, revealing the true God not only to the in-

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[56] Nathanael Emmons, *A Sermon, Delivered Before the Massachusetts Missionary Society* (Charlestown: Samuel Etheridge, 1800), 3.

[57] Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2–3, 8. See Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), chaps. 2–3.

[58] Emmons, *A Sermon, Delivered Before the Massachusetts Missionary Society*, 30–31, 32.

[59] Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War*, 41; Jonathan Maxcy, "A Discourse, Designed to Explain the Doctrine of Atonement," in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks*, ed. Edwards A. Park (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1863), 92.

[60] Lyman Beecher, "The Republican Elements of the Old Testament," in *Lectures on Political Atheism* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1852), 176. During the Civil War, Robert L. Dabney contended for Christian households led by white male masters in something he called "Bible Republicanism." Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2005), 181.

> tellect but to the heart. What would have been the language and conduct of Socrates and Cicero, if in the midst of their anxious researches after God, they had suddenly been favored with the bible? They would have clasped it to their hearts and wet it with their tears. Like Archimedes, when he discovered a geometrical truth, they would have run into the streets of Athens and Rome, exclaiming with gratitude and joy, "I have found it! I have found it!"—I am persuaded, you can neither be willing to live or die without the knowledge of the true God; and I am equally persuaded that you can obtain this knowledge no where except in the scriptures.[61]

Socrates and Cicero, men who searched for truth their entire lives and were graced with unparalleled intelligence, were still not blessed with the supreme revelation of God's holy word. They had simply been historical precursors to the biblical authors. According to Maxcy, these men would have relished the oracles of God. Maxcy's point to his students was clear: as those who had been chosen and gifted with such timeless wisdom, how could American Christians not read and obey the Bible? If the great men of old had rejoiced at their philosophical and scientific discoveries, how could God's people not cherish the apex of divine revelation? In this sense, the ancients were a source of motivation to Christians to take advantage of the time and place in which they lived. In the Christian view, the Greeks and Romans were suited to teach them much about how to live inside a republic, but only the Bible supplied the *ultimate* source of knowledge and wisdom. In the words of Episcopal priest Samuel Magaw, to the Christian, the books of the Bible were "in preference to all other writings, *his* Classics."[62]

The second way that Americans in the early republic explained the similarities between Christian and classic thinking was to concede that certain concepts or categories or themes existed in both forms of literature, albeit not identically. For some theologians, these concepts were almost *too* similar. Virginia Episcopal bishop William Meade took on the issue on the eve of the Civil War in *The Bible and the Classics* (1861). On one hand, in the preface, Meade admitted that as a young man in the early nineteenth century he had wandered from the faith due to his reading of the classics. He recounted,

> Having been instructed in the Sacred Scriptures from a child, and continually hearing or reading the same, at home or in church, I could not but observe the strong resemblance between some of these fables in the ancient poets and certain things in the Old and New Testaments,—such as the formation of man; the garden of Eden; God's visits to that place; the long lives of men before the flood; the flood itself; the mission of angels to men afterwards; and, above all, the incarnation of Christ, and the miracles wrought by himself and his apostles. While noticing this resemblance, I well remember that unbelieving thoughts

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[61] Jonathan Maxcy, "An Address, Delivered to the Candidates for the Baccalaureate of Rhode Island College, at the Anniversary Commencement, September 2, 1801," in *The Literary Remains of the Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D.D.*, ed. Romeo Elton (New York: A. V. Blake, 1844), 324.

[62] Samuel Magaw, *A Sermon Delivered in Christ-Church, Philadelphia, on Monday in Whitsun-Weeks, the 28th of May, 1787, at the First Ordination Held by the Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the State of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Prichard & Hall, 1787), 16.

> would sometimes enter my mind, in opposition to the faith in which I had been trained, and that I was tempted to say, perhaps all these marvelous things in the Bible and in the heathen mythology are alike false. To the blessing of God on a religious education I owe it, that this temptation was not more effectual, and that the impression was not an abiding one, as I fear had been the case with thousands of the young who have not enjoyed the same religious advantages, and even with some who have been instructed in the scriptures of truth.

According to Meade, the reason that the classics proved supplementary to the lessons of the Scriptures is the same reason they were so spiritually dangerous: they bore a "strong resemblance." Many of the stories and lessons from the Greek and Roman authors mirrored those of Christianity. For that reason, instead of complementing the Bible, the classics could sometimes undermine its believability. (This, he warned, occurred with "thousands of the young.") Samuel Miller seemed to acknowledge this danger when he derided Unitarian ministers who did not read the Bible "as they would take up a Greek or Latin classick."[63]

As a result of reading the classics, for a time, William Meade "began to dread the effects of a classical education, and to think that more harm than good resulted therefrom." In Meade's view, the classics were a Siren's song to the Christian, luring believers with the appearance of similar wisdom but distancing them from the faith. However, he eventually changed course. At a certain point, Meade saw the "resemblance" between classic wisdom and biblical wisdom as a pedagogical tool for the Christian faith instead of a roadblock against it. He went on,

> But on continuing and enlarging my course of reading with a view to the ministry, and carefully examining the Sacred Scriptures, and the heathen poets and mythologists, my mind was relieved of this apprehension, and I became satisfied that a candid study and comparison of the same with the Bible would produce quite a different result. All my subsequent examinations of this subject have only confirmed me in the conviction, that one of the strongest arguments in favor of all that seems marvelous in the Bible may be drawn from the remarkable resemblance between the marvelous in it and the marvelous in the religious history and systems of the ancient heathen world; much of which is to be seen, even at the present day, in the idolatries of the unchristianized world.[64]

Whereas Meade formerly viewed the classics as a distraction from the uniqueness of the Bible, he now viewed them as a pathway to belief in Christ. Furthermore, the "resemblance" he once feared between Christianity and pagan religions had become a form of Christian apologetics to defend the faith itself. Meade did not believe that all religions were true, but he did believe that many Greek and Roman "fables" pointed to universal truths that highlighted the supremacy of the Christian religion and could even be used to argue for the gospel. In his mind, "the various religions of earth point to some early facts common to them all" and must be elucidated for young people to help them appreciate God's revelation to man-

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[63] Samuel Miller, *Letters on Unitarianism* (Trenton: George Sherman, 1821), 232.

[64] William Meade, *The Bible and the Classics* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1861), 3–5.

kind and to distinguish the Christian religion from counterfeits.[65] Meade wrote *The Bible and the Classics* for this purpose.

But the Bible and the classics did not simply share similar stories; they also shared moral categories like justice and duty and the public good. This was the third and most common way that Americans explained the relationship between Christianity and the ancient Greeks and Romans. For Horace Bushnell, for example, there was continuity between the Christian concept of justice and the Roman concept. They were similar, but not the same. In *A Discourse on the Moral Tendencies and Results of Human History*, delivered at Yale in 1843, he explained, "The ideal of the Greeks was beauty, that of the Romans law and scientific justice." The Romans were scientists of law and justice, and Bushnell praised the ancient Romans for both their public justice and their public virtue. On one hand, Bushnell greatly admired the severity and the rigidity of Roman justice:

> Inexorable, in whatever relates to public justice, inflexibly rigid in the execution of his orders, he will make history confess, that the Roman government had never before appeared, either so awful or so amiable. Roman virtue, therefore, became a proverb, to denote that strength of principle, which can bend to no outward obstacle or seduction. And the pitch of public virtue displayed by this people, especially in the days of the ancient republic, is one of the greatest moral phenomena of history.

The Romans had engineered a moral system that prized and produced a "stern ideal law of virtue." On the other hand, this was also the problem with Roman justice. Something was missing. True justice could not be reduced to mere law and order. Therefore, Bushnell concluded that Christianity did not merely replace Roman justice, but it "revised" it, suffusing it with love:

> We perceive that the internal law of the conscience includes not only justice but love. The spirit of Christianity, as revealed in the life of Jesus, has so far infused itself into human bosoms, that we feel bound to act, not as fellow men but as brothers to the race. We propose what is useful, we reason of what is beneficent. Government, we claim, is a trust for the equal benefit of subjects. As individuals we are concluded, in all matters, by the necessities of public virtue and happiness. All the old rules of morality, which hung upon the older principle of justice, are suffering a revision to execute the principle of love, and every thing in public law and private duty is coming to the one test of beneficence.[66]

The fundamental difference was love. Christianity did not so much do away with the Roman understanding of justice, but rather completed it in love. Justice and love could not be placed in opposite corners of the moral spectrum, so to speak. In Bushnell's view, Christian love *included* justice. Just "as the ideal of the Greeks was beauty, and that of the Romans law, so this new age shall embrace an ideal more

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[65] Meade, *The Bible and the Classics*, 5.

[66] Horace Bushnell, *A Discourse on the Moral Tendencies and Results of Human History* (New York: M. Y. Beach, 1843), 23, 25, 28.

comprehensive, as it is higher than all, namely, Love."[67] By loving sinners disinterestedly by the shedding of his own blood, Christ had also come to show the world *true* justice. This idea had obvious significance for anti-slavery evangelicals like Bushnell who believed that emancipation and justice for slaves was the will of God according to the natural flow of human history. The classics were a handmaiden to the gospel, but they were not its substitute.

The fourth way that Americans synthesized Christian and classical thought was with the element of the supernatural. Most clergymen, particularly evangelicals, preached to lay audiences who did not possess the kind of formal education that would have acquainted them with Greek and Roman antiquity. Thus, aside from published treatises and books, references to figures like Tacitus and Sallust and Cicero were usually found only in ordination sermons or lectures. When pastors did mention classical literature to their congregations, it was usually to highlight the nonsaving nature of Greek and Roman wisdom. For instance, when Rev. R. B. C. Howell preached on the resurrection of the dead from Acts 24:15 at First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tennessee, he began the sermon by declaring, "The resurrection of the dead, is an event which never would have suggested itself to the mind of man, unenlightened from on high. All the appearances in nature are against its truth. It found a place, therefore, in none of the systems of Greek or Roman philosophy, nor in the theology of ancient paganism. It was reserved for the *Bible*."[68] Americans could draw from pagan wisdom to confirm their understanding of political science and ethics, but only the Scriptures could reveal God's plan of salvation. After all, despite their "learning and refinement," reasoned Samuel Stillman at First Baptist Church of Boston, the Greeks and Romans "were gross idolaters; and many of their sentiments and practices were shocking to decency and common sense."[69]

The issue was one of divine revelation. Whereas the Greeks and Romans had possessed a high level of natural human reason, only Christians had received the supernatural light of *biblical* revelation directly from the finger of the Almighty. When Rev. Hezekiah N. Woodruff preached at the execution of John Delaware, a Native American who was convicted of murder in 1804, Woodruff reminded his audience that not every group in the history of the world had been graced with the divine light of more "civilized nations." He exclaimed,

> Did I say that all mankind were by nature exposed to this darkness and error? Yes, I did! And still say, if there is any difference among the nations of the earth, every degree of it is owing to the light of revealed religion. That light has, at different times, been so generally diffused among the civilized nations that it is incorporated into their very systems of morality, and has been a great mean of supporting their civilization. A general belief of this truth will lead me … to appreciate the privilege of being under the influence of the gospel. The very out-

[67] Bushnell, *Moral Tendencies and Results of Human History*, 30.
[68] Robert Boyte C. Howell, "The Resurrection of the Dead," *The Baptist Preacher* 4 (1845): 224–25.
[69] Samuel Stillman, *Apostolic Preaching Considered* (Boston: B. Edes and Son, 1791), 5.

> ward and common advantage of which tend to the highest rational and moral improvement.[70]

In other words, if white Americans could claim any sense of moral superiority over Native Americans, it was due to divine revelation and not to their own inherent wisdom. The "light of revealed religion" was the great divider of nations. By referring to "civilized nations" and "systems of morality," Woodruff was almost certainly alluding to the Greek and Roman republics, as they had helped European kingdoms define the very meaning of "civilized."

Ultimately, however, Woodruff elevated Christian nations to the highest form of civilization because they possessed "the privilege of being under the influence of the gospel." The preacher chose as his text Acts 26:18: "Unto whom I now send thee—to open their eyes—and to turn them from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified through faith that is in me." According to Woodruff, it was not the duty of the American to wonder why all people were not "civilized." Rather, it was their responsibility to civilize them by making them Christians. The question for most American Christians did not seem to be whether Greeks and Romans were saved apart from faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The question was whether they as a people would walk in the "light of revealed religion," that is, biblical religion. The ancient voices were friends of religion insofar as they helped believers in this walk.

Most American Christians thus viewed the classic works similarly to the way that the Apostle Paul appeared to view Greek wisdom when he visited the Areopagus in Athens in Acts 17. The "Apostle to the Gentiles" perceived that the Athenians were "very religious" because they acknowledged and worshiped an "unknown god." Upon delivering the gospel, he even quoted from their own philosopher, Epimenides, and a Greek poet, Aratus, to demonstrate the existence of a Creator God (17:22–28). Greek conceptions of deity and humanity were apparently close enough to Christian beliefs that Paul used one to prove and defend the other. In terms of the American mind, this similarity was significant because it gave Christians license to seek wisdom—but not saving wisdom—from the ancients.

IV. CONCLUSION

Not every Christian in the early republic was convinced that the classics needed defending. Those with less formal education simply questioned whether classical learning and the ancient languages were even necessary for godliness. Isaac Backus, a former Congregationalist who joined a "Separate" church, attributed the lack of moral purity and spiritual fervor in the established church to those "corrupt ministers" who devoted more attention to the ancient languages than they did the Scriptures. "If we cannot know certainly that the Bible is true without understanding of

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[70] Hezekiah N. Woodruff, *A Sermon, Preached at Scipio, N.Y. at the Execution of John Delaware, a Native; for the Murder of Ezekiel Crane. August 17, 1804* (Albany: Charles R. and George Webster, 1804), 15.

Hebrew, Greek, and Latin," he jabbed, "then alas! we are in a woeful case indeed, for (according to this) if we hear a man preach that says he knows not only them tongues but twenty more beside, and he tells us that this or that is truth, we have only a man's testimony for it. And God says we worship Him in vain when our fear is taught by the precepts of men." According to Backus, it was much more practical to learn the languages of the Native Americans than any ancient tongue.[71] In his mind, the classics were of relatively little spiritual value.

With the emergence of the Second Great Awakening, revivalism and grassroots religion did not coalesce well with the highbrowed learning of classical education. Homespun revivalists approached the classics much like Charles Finney, who mocked seminary-trained ministers who "know the dead languages, and possess all learning" and yet are not "*wise* in relation to the great end about which they are chiefly employed." Finney was not against colleges and seminaries (he was president of Oberlin College from 1851 to 1866), but against dead religion, making a hard distinction between learning and wisdom. "A minister may be *very wise*, though he is *not learned*," Finney charged. "He may not understand the dead languages, or theology in its common acceptation; and yet he may know just what a minister of the Gospel wants most to know, without knowing many other things. A learned minister, and a wise minister, are different things."[72] The rise of evangelical anti-intellectualism in the early nineteenth century began to relegate the classics to the classroom, viewing the ancient works as impractical for the true mission of saving souls. The relationship between the Bible and the classics did not remain static in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though Greek and Roman literature were important in developing the mind, their immediate importance for the *church* was slowly overshadowed by more evangelistic concerns. However, in some ways, America's Christian-classical project had already begun to lay the groundwork for a more secular nation. As the classics were removed from the public mind, Christian republicanism became more Americanized and more hewn to documents like the Declaration of Independence instead of the moral philosophy of ancient republics.

After all, Christians in the new American nation were not called simply to imitate the Greek and Roman republics, but to improve upon them. In a sermon in Baltimore in 1820 titled *The Difficulties and Temptations which Attend the Preaching of the Gospel in Great Cities*, an ambivalent Samuel Miller took stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the city of Rome during the days of the Apostle Paul. Nevertheless, he concluded, "Had Rome been faithful to its privileges, it had retained its glory to this day. But it became corrupt and corrupting; and the righteous Governor of the world brought upon it his destroying judgments."[73] As a Christian, Miller eschewed the godlessness and infidelity of Rome. As an American, he lamented the demise of

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[71] Isaac Backus, *A Discourse Showing the Nature and Necessity of an Internal Call to Preach the Everlasting Gospel* (Boston, 1754), in *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1968), 94, 103–104.

[72] Finney, *Revival Lectures*, 207.

[73] Samuel Miller, *The Difficulties and Temptations which Attend the Preaching of the Gospel in Great Cities* (Baltimore: J. Robinson, 1820), 42.

something so glorious and republican. Without a distinctly Christian ethic, Miller argued, the Roman Empire had inevitably fallen. God had judged the Romans for their unbelief.[74] Christians in the early United States were a Janus-faced people, looking back to the Greeks and Romans for inspiration but looking forward to their own superior, Christian republic. This project could not have been possible without the traditions of their spiritual forebears and the reconciling of Christian and classic thought in the American mind.

[74] For Richard Furman, the lesson for American was not to descend into party politics: "The Republican form of government, though the best for an enlightened, virtuous people; has, like all other human institutions, its imperfections. The influence of demagogues, and the artifice, or fury of party, too often mislead and convulse governments of this form; and sometimes, as in the case of the Roman, and more antient republicks of Greece, overwhelm them in final ruin." Richard Furman, *America's Deliverance and Duty* (Charleston: W. P. Young, 1802), in *Life and Works of Dr. Richard Furman, D.D.*, ed. G. William Foster Jr. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 2004), 405.