

Introduction: The Pursuit of Religious, Racial, and Social Unity in an Early Republic Metropolis

Imagine, for a moment, the scenes that have defined major chapters in American religious history: a Puritan divine delivers rigorous, learned sermons inside whitewashed walls. Lonely backcountry Methodist circuit riders lead boisterous camp meetings and raise rough-hewn chapels. Black Baptists fervently pray as they boycott local businesses in a push for civil rights. A savvy evangelist preaches comfort in the spacious auditorium of a modern suburban megachurch.

None of these settings are necessarily urban. Yet each of these visions connects to metropolitan religious figures in one guise or another: village ministers read sermons from Puritan divines in Boston and London; circuit riders bought books from Methodist publishers in London and New York; civil rights activists drew influence from theology professors in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia; and megachurch pastors in Scottsdale might model their congregational mission plans on those of pastors in Chicago or Seattle.¹

Yet the assumption lingers that cities and religion do not mix. Far-sighted leaders of vital religious movements in America have viewed cities as places where religion dies. When Billy Graham held a revival in Manhattan in 1957, he prepared for spiritual war. Deeming his target “Sodom on the Subway,” Graham rallied large crowds of faithful evangelicals to invade the secular city.² Graham’s sentiments on the spiritual state of New York City were not new. The father of American Methodism, Francis Asbury, traveled nearly continuously throughout the United States and Canada from the 1770s to his death in 1815, observing and

supervising Methodist churches. When he entered the Republic's cities, however, Asbury encountered worldliness and sin. Upon preaching to an unresponsive New York congregation, he bewailed: "[New] York, in all the congregations, is the valley of dry bones. Oh Lord, I will lament the deplorable state of religion in all our towns and cities!"³ Asbury echoed the concerns of many observers who believed that religious faith best incubated in villages and the countryside.

This book begins to explain why Francis Asbury feared the growth of the city, and explores the effect the city had on religion. Historians of early Republic New York have examined how the city's growth affected where people lived, how they worked, what they ate, and even with whom they had sex.⁴ Urban expansion also influenced religious experience. I wanted to determine how the city's churches responded to these changes: how their respective religious traditions shaped the way they reacted to the city, and how changes in the city affected the way they perceived and received religion in these years.

To answer these questions, I examined the creation and growth of four Protestant congregations in early Republic New York: Trinity Episcopal, John Street Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal Zion ("Mother Zion"), and the black congregation of St. Philip's Episcopal. These congregations varied in their wealth and racial makeup. But despite these differences in identity, all four shared a common theological tradition and institutional beginnings in the Anglican Church.

A study of religious experience in New York could pursue any number of religious traditions. The Dutch Reformed Church was central to Manhattan's development from the beginning, and its Calvinist theology and ethnic minority status intersected with American historical themes in unique ways. Moravians and Quakers shared dissenting theological trajectories and had important interactions with multiple races and ethnicities in the polyglot city, including its black population. Presbyterians in the early Republic perhaps best articulated the connections between evangelical religion and reform movements. These groups, and others, provide important illustrations of specific developments in religion, ethnicity, race, and reform in New York.⁵ But all, including the Dutch, were outsiders and minorities in New York City in the late colonial and early Republic eras. None remained central throughout the entire sweep of time that the city grew from several thousand to a half million inhabitants.

In this study, I have focused on churches within the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition, including its Methodist offshoots. Anglican and

Methodist churches were not the first, and were rarely the most successful, religious groups in New York City, but their histories bring the reader close to the main stories of New York's development in the early Republic. The colonial-era British government promoted the Church of England as a model of cultural authority, so from its origins the Anglican Church in New York attempted to draw together different ethnic groups under its oversight. Methodists similarly welcomed different ethnicities, not to support the establishment but rather to create a new holy family in Christ. Both Anglicans and Methodists aspired to be geographically expansive and universally influential. Anglicans and Methodists were therefore well attuned to reflecting and recording the relationship between social and religious change, perhaps better than groups that were more marginal in the early Republic.

Further, both Anglicans and Methodists (at least, the vast majority of them) were Arminian in theology. In the early Republic, increasing numbers of Americans rejected the Calvinism that dominated the early colonial period. This stance placed Anglicans and Methodists in the theological mainstream of American religion for the time, in contrast with either the Calvinist traditionalism of the Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists (themselves soon to be modified from within) or the prophetic but decidedly minority status of Quakers and Moravians.⁶

The similarities between Methodism and Anglicanism help establish a common center of religious affiliation, but their differences ensure breadth to avoid a too-specialized, too-specific reading of any individual group. Methodists and Anglicans generally differed in their support for revivals; prorevival Methodists often gravitated toward evangelical groups, while antirevival Anglicans preferred communion with liturgical groups. They therefore straddled both sides of the most important theological divide in the American early Republic. Finally, the Anglicans and Methodists in these four congregations provide a study of varied social and ethnic populations. These churches contained rich and poor, native and immigrant, white and black, exalted and lowly. Thus the choice of Anglican and Methodist religious traditions allows this study to evaluate big themes in American religious and social history, even as the topic studied is small in scale.⁷

The study of congregations reveals dynamics that larger and more general studies might miss. Because congregations occupy specific geographic locations in the city, and are comprised of an easily identified set of individuals, their connections to the urban environment are clear

and direct. As communal meeting places, congregations occupy public space; as places where individuals regularly experience the sacred, they touch upon private life. As such, a study of congregations allows the historian to bridge the dichotomy of public and private, of sacred and secular. They reconnect religion with social context, to provide a full analysis of individual experience and change.⁸

New Yorkers know these four congregations well. Trinity Episcopal Church was the oldest, formed in 1697, a mother of sorts to the later three groups. At its birth, British monarchs blessed Trinity with vast tracts of land that indicated its privilege and provided it wealth. Throughout the eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth, Trinity represented stability and social significance. It even dominated the physical landscape: not until the dawn of the twentieth century did any New York building rise above Trinity's steeple. Some of the city's most prominent families sat in its pews.

Methodism began as a movement within the Church of England. In 1768, John Street Methodist Chapel formed from members nominally affiliated with Trinity Church. Important English Methodist leaders visited John Street, which was the first permanent Methodist meetinghouse in America. In 1784, American Methodists broke from both Anglicanism and English Methodism, and by that decade's end, John Street was no longer a fledgling chapel, but a church in its own right. Although Methodism often attracted the working poor to its services, John Street housed some of the town's wealthiest Methodists.

The final two churches in this study established their identities on racial difference. Both Episcopal and Methodist churches welcomed blacks to worship, but widespread racism in America made biracial worship difficult. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or Mother Zion, started much like John Street as an informal chapel, where blacks held separate worship services. Over the following two decades, members grew estranged from the white church and established an independent denomination. Mother Zion remains a symbol of the birth of black Methodism, central to African American history. St. Philip's Episcopal Church also had beginnings in informal catechism study groups. In 1819, it erected its first building, but, unlike the African Methodists, its members remained under the white-run Episcopal hierarchy, and for decades remained without a voice or vote in the denomination. St. Philip's long path to recognition within the New York diocese is a dramatic story in its own right.⁹ Mother Zion and St. Philip's were pathbreaking black congregations in New York; elite blacks attended these two churches alongside poorer coreligionists.

These four congregations shared common bonds through their institutional origins and in some of their theological assumptions, but each had a unique geographic location, social makeup, and forward trajectory. The development of these four churches provides a laboratory of sorts to closely observe and test the claims of urban religious transformation. Through them one can measure what role revivals played in an urban setting; when, why, and how black churches split from white bodies; or how urban and economic growth (and decay) affected religious identities.

In the early Republic, New York City underwent a massive transformation, growing from a provincial port town to a major commercial center. In 1790, New York's population stood at just over 30,000 inhabitants; the number doubled to 60,000 in 1800 and doubled again in 1820 to 123,000 inhabitants. This exponential growth accelerated in the following decades, exploding to a half million residents in 1850. New York overtook Philadelphia as the nation's most populous city at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By 1860, New York had become a world city in its influence.¹⁰

Amid all this growth, New York earned a secular reputation as a place where one could advance commercially.¹¹ New York was the financial and cultural center of the expanding nation, and important members of society, including John Jay, James Harper, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth, attended the city's churches.¹² The presence and interaction of these leading figures in a place where religious influence seemed to be dwindling made New York congregations central to developments that did not occur elsewhere until much later.

This study draws together several genres of historical inquiry. As a social history, it studies the interactions and relationships between different groups of New Yorkers in the early Republic. As a religious history, it recognizes that those groups claimed institutional affiliation with specific religious bodies. And as a record of lived experience, it works to combine the social reality and the religious choice of these New Yorkers, to see the city through the eyes of its inhabitants. While geographically precise, it is expansive to the degree that human perceptions are expansive, even messy.

Church history provides a base and a foil for the work. Traditionally, church histories narrated the institutional development of the church. Practicing adherents of the religion—often professional clergy—typically wrote them. Church histories usually privileged the actions of clergy over those of the laity, and theological issues over social and

cultural contexts. While such studies can appear antiquarian or esoteric to those outside the religious tradition, church histories provide an important starting point for this study. For one, church historians often focused on individual congregations. And their emphasis on theology provides a missing ingredient in determining the identity of religious actors. Finally, because church histories provided the earliest narrative of a religious group, they supply clues to the social identities of the historical actors, specifying people and places within a larger religious setting that later scholars have overlooked.¹³

Theologically and institutionally driven church histories have not been in vogue for nearly a century; the second major field used in this study, social history, largely supplanted church history in interpreting religion. Social histories place the religious actors of church history in their local environments, linking them to shared identities involving class, gender, race, and space. The classic models of social history often connected economic development and class identity to religion. A dominant strain of this historiography has suggested that evangelical reformers used a religious vocabulary of conversion to draw together troubled elites and a rising middle class, both of whom embraced religion as a form of social control over unruly laboring orders.¹⁴ Historians of gender have built from, and challenged, this economic base by considering the place of women in evangelical conversion attempts; such studies have pointed out that elite and bourgeois attempts to convert the lower orders often focused on working women, and the transformation of those women into genteel partners in domesticity.¹⁵ Scholars of race and slavery have also connected religion and social experience. Historians have recognized the importance of religion to the slave experience, and of the black church to the formation and defense of the black community throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶

In recent years, other historians of religion have rejected church history as too narrowly defined, but stepped away from the occasionally reductionist claims of social history, to promote the concept of lived religion. Borrowing a page from anthropology, lived religion attempts thick description to uncover the web of symbols and meanings that historical participants experience as their culture.¹⁷ This approach focuses on laity over clergy, and common perceptions over elite; it consequently blurs traditional religious categories such as sacred and secular that high theological studies establish as rigid and distinct.¹⁸ But this approach considers religion as religion, and does not attempt to attribute other, social or historical, factors as primary in considering religious experience. Rather,

religion is a highly individualized concept, molded and shaped for common consumption.

A number of historical works have navigated among these schools. In general, the fault lines have lain between scholars who place religion at the forefront, and those who put greater weight on social factors as causing or determining religious questions. Scholars of Methodism, for example, have either identified the movement as a popular religious expression birthed alongside the American Revolution, or have highlighted the social forces shaping Methodism, thus rendering its religious aspects secondary to tensions of class, race, or gender.¹⁹ Historians of American Episcopalianism have similarly either considered the theological heritage and trajectories of the denomination, or probed the race and gender tensions arising within the church.²⁰ Historians of black religion have more closely blended the two categories, but bemoan the lack of truly biracial studies of religious experience.²¹

My focus on the congregation as a social unit cuts across these historiographical categories. Congregational studies must return, in part, to church history, because the individuals who attended the churches debated, defended, and fought over who led them, and their theologies. But congregations' small scale also allows historians to look closely at the class, gender, and racial identities individuals retained in their churches. A congregation bridges the dichotomy of public and private, or sacred and secular—as a communal meeting place (public) where individuals regularly experience the sacred (private). A congregation's specific geographic location allows the historian to connect religion with social context, to provide a full analysis of experience and change. As such, the congregation is an excellent avenue to combine social and cultural methodologies, and provides an ideal laboratory for this study.

Over the time of this study, the nature of the church, and its expected duty to society, changed dramatically. Before the American Revolution, church leaders held to an organic vision of church and community. As the Crown's spiritual representative, the Church of England linked state and society. Anglican missionaries with their Methodist partners undertook to evangelize all Americans. Under this system, leaders believed social tensions would dissolve in unity, for every person had a place in the church, no matter how lowly. Poor and rich, black and white, male and female could all take part in religious experience and reflect the greater good for both God and city. Although other congregations and other denominations held different institutional commitments, they generally shared this vision of organic community.

Urban development transformed the churches, and the organic vision crumbled. City growth heightened social differences. Rich and poor members lived in different neighborhoods and attended different congregations. The legal end of slavery in New York heightened racial prejudice, as working whites jostled to maintain their dominance over blacks. Whites and blacks segregated in worship as bourgeois blacks sought to create their own spaces of authority. And the number of those indifferent to religion grew too great to comprehend on a local, personal level. By 1850, ministers no longer expected the church to reflect society as a whole. Rather, each church reflected its local environment, its subsection of identity in city life. No longer was the church itself a new family, a separate structure that subsumed others within it. Rather, families became conduits of moral instruction and spiritual presence. Churches privatized their messages to reach individuals and families unconnected by a larger conception of society.

This book contains eight chapters. Each chapter covers a chronological time but also examines a theme, in overlapping segments. The first chapter traces the creations of Trinity Church and John Street Methodist. The colonial-era concept of religious establishment granted Trinity a prominent place in the city, which reinforced congregants' organic conception of society. Churchmen hoped that the Anglican Church would mediate between state and society, upper and lower orders, and different races, uniting them under its spiritual leadership. John Street Methodist Chapel initially shared these assumptions, for while Methodists believed they created a new close-knit family of believers, they accepted nominal oversight and leadership from the established Anglican Church. Both churches ministered to blacks, which made them unique among many of the city's religious groups. For their part, blacks attempted to use religious instruction to their own ends, as race relations in colonial New York were punctuated by periods of outright conflict.

The second chapter discusses the Revolutionary era's challenges to formal, legal establishment, and the persistence after the Revolution of a social vision of unity in both churches. Accusations of loyalism dogged both Anglicans and Methodists, and both groups' connections to blacks heightened such uncertainty, given British-black interaction in New York. During the American Revolution, the State of New York formally disestablished the Episcopal Church, and both churches faced signs of hostility. After the Revolution, however, many assumptions of organic society persisted. Episcopalian and Methodist leaders continued informal associations that promoted a vision of a united society under their

leadership. Both groups included blacks within their communities, but kept them at a distance to conform more clearly to cultural assumptions that many white Americans shared.

The third chapter sketches a social portrait of each congregation during the 1790s. Trinity Episcopal Church retained its colonial-era aura of prestige. Prominent politicians, professionals, and merchants filled its front pews. Yet many from the middling and lower orders attended, and gentlemen who led the church viewed it as a model or reflection of the society at large, a piece of *de facto* establishment continued after the Revolution. In general, Methodism tended to attract artisans and laboring people. But John Street Methodist Chapel's location near merchant and retail centers caused social stratification within the church. As at Trinity, men of wealth and influence occupied positions of leadership at John Street, but the church contained members from all ranks and both genders, thereby illustrating the ideal of an organic society.

In the 1790s, black Methodists and Episcopalians took their first steps toward forming the distinct congregations of Mother Zion and St. Philip's. Many whites refused to worship with black members and attempted to push their black coreligionists to the margins. Consequently, free blacks in both white churches formed separate houses of worship. Black artisans tended to lead the Methodists, whereas black Episcopalians reflected a broader range of occupations. Both groups, however, remained firmly within their respective denominational traditions. While pushing to improve their own status, black churchmen remained theologically close to the white churches. And their early steps were tentative: black Methodists only met at times when white ministers did not offer services, and black Episcopalians delayed holding separate worship for another decade.

Chapter 4 explores the place of women in the churches in the growing city. Women constituted a numerical majority in each congregation. After 1800, wealthy women quietly entered the public sphere. They organized charitable institutions that focused on widows and children. These benevolent societies preserved traditional assumptions about poverty and the organic vision of society of the colonial era. Paradoxically, however, such organizations opened the way for more radical forms of action, as they provided public spaces, however circumscribed, for society's wealthiest women. Many more women in the churches preserved conventional gender roles by choosing private pious contemplation and steady attendance at worship services. The close connection of some of these women to their ministers heightened social tensions in the churches.

The fifth chapter explains the intersections of gender with race in church life. In the larger society, slavery, poverty, and menial status meant that black men risked being labeled feminine and without power. Thus in the black churches men, not women, took primary place, mimicking the white church's example in an exaggerated form. Black women, however, remained numerous in the churches, and supported their leaders through the emergence of auxiliary benevolent societies and in quiet, obedient forms of piety, similar to most white women. Just as white women gained a place in the public sphere through benevolence, so did black men in public processions and benevolent societies. These black men used a universal language of unity, which mirrored colonial-era church language, but like those earlier forms masked the strongly middle-class and masculine identities of the actors.

In chapter 6, to investigate the connections between religious and social experiences, I revisit the well-documented ecclesiastical battles within each congregation during the 1810s and early 1820s. The increased strains of city life frame these disputes, which church historians have long presented largely as internal theological issues. Episcopalians divided over the bishop's authority, and the right to form ecumenical evangelizing societies, but the struggles also represented a clash between competing Anglican forms of social organization within the congregation. Methodists divided over local and lay versus regional and clerical control over their congregations. Black Methodists tangentially entered white Methodists' debate by defining their identity as independent from white schismatics and churchmen alike, while keeping their local independence from other black churches. Black Episcopalians avoided serious battles in this decade, largely because their perilous financial position impelled them to cling to the High Church Party in the Episcopal Church leadership. In all these cases, ecclesiastical disputes had social dimensions. Local congregations' geographic locations helped determine their positions in these clashes.

Chapter 7 illustrates how the tensions of city growth shaped congregational life. After 1820, business and residential districts began to separate as poor and rich increasingly lived in distinct neighborhoods. All four congregations, located downtown, attracted wealthier worshipers than their coreligionists farther uptown. Even the black churches, near poor and crime-ridden areas, aspired to the bourgeois standards of the white leaders at the Trinity and John Street churches. As a result of this domestication, wealth brought greater privatization to church life. At St. Philip's, some service workers attained great prosperity, transforming

the church into a body seeking collective refinement. At Mother Zion, gentility entailed male leadership and preaching bourgeois standards of education, respectability, and rationality. In the white churches, a suburban mentality encouraged some members to flee from the city. Trinity's chapels gained new prominence. Seeing its members less like one large family and more like a grouping of private families, John Street focused on a domesticity that limited the prior aims of Methodism. Education and cultural refinement joined spiritual fervor as paths to leadership.

The eighth chapter examines the full consequences of this domestication of church life in the 1830s and 1840s. Racial fissures grew absolute, and swept the last remains of hope for racial unity from the churches. Yet black churchmen continued to articulate loyalties to denominational traditions that recognized the local relationships fostered in each church. Many white Methodists and Episcopalians embraced nativist politics as a way to re-create the lost world promoted in the colonial era, a truncated version that continued racial separation while promising to soften class conflict among whites. But neither racial separation nor nativist dreams of unity could wind back the clock on the city's economic and demographic growth. Economic slowdowns and the flight of downtown residents caused the churches' once prominent position to decline.

A conclusion extends the narrative to the Civil War. In the 1840s and 1850s, a number of larger developments in American religious and intellectual history suggested that a new unity could be created in New York, whether it lay in evangelical revivalism, Broad Church Episcopalianism, or generalized Romanticism. But the reality of how church members lived highlighted major differences with the colonial era's promotion of organic unity. Social difference, and private religious experience, was the norm for the members of these churches.

In 1860, New York City was the United States' largest city, and a center of finance, fashion, and culture. Regular gridded streets and fine new houses uptown dwarfed the colonial era's small crooked alleys huddled at the south end of the island. The four congregations remained, or became, bastions of respectability. Church leaders could not offer a united vision similar to what their forebears had in the Revolutionary era. Rather, they reached out to individuals on a case-by-case basis, offering not social transformation but personal salvation and public respectability. While some historians note the importance of evangelicalism to nineteenth-century American cultural and political life, the experience of New York's churches suggests that social factors limited whatever influence that the churches and the churches' leaders could claim.

American religious scholars have posited that religion has functioned in a variety of important roles in different settings throughout American history. Paul Johnson, for example, asserted that evangelical religion helped newly bourgeois businessmen to control their laborers, and Nathan Hatch contended that the popularization of revival Christian movements liberated lowly upstarts and outsiders to attack the authority of learned clergymen and church hierarchies. For Johnson, religion was a tool of elite control; for Hatch, a force for popular liberation. In a similar vein, Graham Russell Hodges argued that religion invigorated the New York black community's resistance to white racism.²²

As striking as the works of these scholars are, I found that the churches had a shorter reach in early Republic New York's urban setting. The expansion of the city, and the expansion and contraction of the city economy, battered and buffeted these downtown churches. Congregants paired their religious lives with identities borne of their living and working spaces. Religious groups rarely influenced events as dramatically as their leaders and prominent members initially hoped. Even when individual church members had important roles in their respective communities, their churches often hesitated in matters of social or political importance. Often, social, economic, and racial concerns eclipsed religious motivations. As time passed, religion became a more private, individual affair. While religion was certainly rich in meaning for the individual believer, the city's growth and commercialization meant in practical terms that, over time, the churches grew less relevant to the community as a whole.²³

Even so, the parishioners at Trinity and St. Philip's and the congregants at John Street and Mother Zion chose to identify themselves religiously as well as socially or racially. Religion was significant because the participants deemed it such, not because it provided a functional or measurable tool for them. In an environment that was ultimately uncontrollable even for most elites, these city congregations offered havens where adherents might recapture some control, if only in claiming the option to worship and fellowship with the men and women around them.