

## *J. H. C. Helmuth, Evangelical Charity, and the Public Sphere in Pennsylvania, 1793–1800*

**F**EW STUDENTS OF NORTH AMERICAN RELIGION have even heard of Justus Heinrich Christian Helmuth. If he is recognized, it is for a pamphlet written after this German Lutheran pastor stayed with his parishioners at St. Michael's and Zion parish during the yellow fever epidemic that devastated Philadelphia in 1793. Upon his death, he was eulogized for this heroic service, his successor reminding mourners how Helmuth announced from the pulpit his intention to stay by proclaiming: "You see before you today a dead man." By the time the epidemic ran its course, he had buried 625 members of his parish. Helmuth survived, and his erroneous prophesy of his demise pointed instead to another epitaph. Despite his efforts, he lived to see Americans reject his vision that right doctrine should inform social conscience, which in turn should bestir itself on behalf of a just social and political order. Education and relief of society's marginalized population did not necessitate a formal religious establishment. Helmuth nevertheless believed that public policy and monies could only construct a just social order in a republic if guided by or through the efforts of Protestant churches.

Instead, by his death, "Protestant benevolence" had become "privatized" and divorced from the public sphere. This divorce represented in Helmuth's mind the worst aspect of the "democratization" of American Christianity. The subsequent near-stranglehold upon its historiography by the descendants of "evangelicalism" has worked to obscure both Helmuth and the high

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stakes of the debate over doctrine, social conscience, and politics. Helmuth's loss of that debate ended any chance that Pennsylvania, or any state, could legitimately be described as a "Christian republic."<sup>1</sup>

Historians of American Christianity—Jon Butler, Mark Noll, and Mark Hanley to name but three—have all called for reassessments of whether an "evangelical" ethos really dominated late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Christianity. Proper attention occasionally illuminates Roman Catholic history, non-evangelical forms of Protestant, non-Christian religion, and confessionalist elements within Protestant traditions. Noll, in particular, does not doubt the rise of evangelicalism beginning in the 1790s. But he does remind the incautious that evangelicals included not just "populist" types, but "a generation of evangelical minister-professors [who] adroitly combined themes of republican politics, common-sense moral reasoning, and scientific Baconianism to provide 'the first new nation' with a sophisticated Christian rationale for social order, political stability, and intellectual self-confidence."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term "democratization" is associated largely with Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989); Hatch has since suggested that "populism" is a more accurate term for what he intended to describe. Helmuth's importance in privately educating young men for the Lutheran ministry is summarized in Benjamin Sadtler, "The Education of Ministers by Private Tutors, Before the Establishment of Theological Seminaries," *Lutheran Church Review* 13 (1894), 167-83; see also Frederick G. Gotwald, "Theological Education in the Lutheran Church in the United States Prior to the Founding of Wittenberg College and Seminary in 1845," *Lutheran Quarterly* 46 (1916), 82-100; various biographies of Helmuth's students (e.g., Jacob Goering) in J. C. Jenson, *American Lutheran Biographies* (Milwaukee, Wis., 1890), 257-58. For Helmuth's own reflections on the epidemic, see *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia for the Reflecting Christian* (Philadelphia, 1794), 18; on the founding of the seminary, see Abdel Ross Wentz, *History of the Gettysburg Theological Seminary . . . 1826-1926* (Philadelphia, 1926); E. Clifford Nelson et al., eds., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia, 1975), 128-33. Helmuth's successor in Philadelphia, Carl Rudolph Demme, in memorializing the deceased man, singled out Helmuth's service during the 1793 epidemic as the incident that brought him renown and respect; see Demme, *Die letzte Ehre des christlichen Predigers in einer christlichen Gemein . . .* (Philadelphia, 1825). On the later Lutheran confessional renewal, Mercersburg, and Anglicanism in America, see Walter H. Conser, Jr., *Church and Confession: Conservative Theologians in Germany, England, and America, 1815-1866* (Macon, Ga., 1984), 257-329; on the Presbyterians, see Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith* (Princeton, 1989); on the New School, see George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Movement* (New Haven, 1970); Lefferts A. Loetscher, *Facing the Enlightenment and Pietism: Archibald Alexander and the Founding of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Westport, Conn., 1983).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jon Butler, "Coercion, Miracle, Reason: Rethinking the American Religious Experience in the Revolutionary Age," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Religion in a Revolutionary Age* (Charlottesville, 1994), 1-30; Mark A. Noll, "Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical

Helmuth belonged to this tradition. Trained at Halle's Francke Foundations in Prussia, Helmuth's pietism reflected the Halle fathers' emphasis on education for useful labor in secular callings and devout, if somewhat legalistic shunning of secular amusements as signs of "reborn" Christians. He began his pastoral career by emphasizing what later "evangelicals" found useful in his pietist tradition: individual conversion, experiential religion, and dismissal of the dogmatic, liturgical, and confessional dimensions of Lutheranism. But as he encouraged small revivals in his Lancaster, Pennsylvania, congregation, Helmuth discovered a pragmatic, utilitarian view of "experiential religion" beyond horizons anyone in Europe could have imagined. By the 1780s he had redefined his pastoral vocation: avoiding extremes of populist rhetoric, he hoped effective proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament would inspire ordinary people to become devout Lutherans and loyal citizens who would support institutional charity for society's marginalized.<sup>3</sup>

After a decade in Lancaster, Helmuth was called in 1779 to the largest and most influential pulpit in North American Lutheranism: the combined parish of St. Michael's and Zion in Philadelphia. By the 1790s a rhetoric of democratic populism assaulted his efforts to construct a systematic education and charity scheme. Helmuth discovered that wealthier and more acculturated German Americans eagerly seized the symbolic issue of English-language worship and education to advance their own agenda, which increasingly emphasized a purely individual understanding of social conscience, divorced from any connection to pastoral authority or discussions of a just state and society. Helmuth became convinced that the social and economic ambitions of these opponents appeared hypocritically disguised in "democratic" rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

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Social Influence in North Atlantic Societies" in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1900* (New York, 1994), 113-36, quotation at 118-19; Mark Y. Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830-1860* (Chapel Hill, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Trinity Lutheran Church Archives, Lancaster, Pa.; Trustees' Minutes reveal that Helmuth introduced the first service of confession and absolution prior to communion in 1773.

<sup>4</sup> For similar tensions in the Reformed tradition, contemporaneous with Helmuth's dilemma, see James E. Bradley, "English Practical Theology and the Widening Gulf Between Piety and Learning in Nineteenth-Century Theological Education," and David W. Kling, "Schools of the Prophets (1726-1808): An Overlooked Chapter in the History of American Evangelical Theological Education," both in R. Albert Mohler and Darryl Hart, eds., *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition* (forthcoming, 1997).

Lutheran historians have conventionally dismissed Helmuth as a defender of the German language, a representative of "elite" European educational standards. In fact, the collapse of Helmuth's vision began in long-standing tensions (since the 1760s) that pitted a small group of lay trustees, elders, and local worthies against poorer, more recent German immigrants in his Philadelphia parish. The renewed outbreak of these tensions in the 1790s, however, was no mere repeat of old squabbles. Instead, the current debate revealed a seismic shift in North American thinking. Following European leads, North Americans had largely assumed that the nature of a good society could not be divorced from its religious and political character. Now, in an increasingly acrimonious political climate, between 1793 and 1800, sectarian polemics in Pennsylvania made many doubt whether a common definition of the public good could be articulated, and whether ties linking specific religious beliefs to social conscience and the republic's larger purposes could be sustained.

Helmuth's struggles fit awkwardly into the larger patterns historians have suggested for explaining ethnic-religious identity within the broader political and socioeconomic alliances of Pennsylvania. The most provocative attempt at building such a synthesis suggests, for example, that Pennsylvania Republicans, composed of Anglicans, Lutherans, and Quakers, generally reacted against the dominance of the new state's Constitutionals. Loyalists, neutrals, or pacifists, these religious groups loathed the Test Acts passed by a unicameral legislature; they also regarded with abhorrence the transformation of the former College of Philadelphia into the University of Pennsylvania. But Helmuth was an ardent patriot, composing for his choirs a celebratory ode for July 4, 1785, to hail the independence of the new confederation.<sup>5</sup> He favored the creation of a German college within the new University of Pennsylvania. He was indifferent to a bicameral as opposed to a unicameral legislature. He made clear in diary entries and published work that he disliked Quakers and was not overly fond of Anglicans.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Auf den Tag der Unabhängigkeit . . .*, Broadside, copy Lutheran Archives Center, Philadelphia (hereafter, LAC), H10/P5G3/7.

<sup>6</sup> On Pennsylvania and the religious and political postures of German-speakers in the 1790s, see Kenneth W. Keller, *Rural Politics and the Collapse of Pennsylvania Federalism* (Philadelphia, 1982), 15-23; Owen S. Ireland, "The Crux of Politics: Religion and Party in Pennsylvania, 1778-1789," *William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (1985), 453-75; Ireland, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Ratifying the Constitution in Pennsylvania* (University Park, Pa., 1995), xvi-xvii; Wolfgang M. Splitter, "'A Free People in the American Air': The Evolution of German Lutherans from British Subjects to Pennsylvania Citizens,

Helmuth's true profile, as opposed to the one constructed by his victorious enemies, substantially alters the conventional picture historians have limned of evangelicalism, German-speakers, and charity in post-1783 Pennsylvania. Restoring to that picture the pastor who preached in the largest church building in North America clarifies the formidable task of reassessment now incumbent on historians of religion in the early republic. For, not merely in Helmuth's case, many of the "elite" evangelicals whose perspective came to be marginalized in the early nineteenth century believed that an intimate connection bound right doctrine and practice to a growing social concern: the education and relief of society's marginalized working poor. The failure of Noll's "minister-professors" led to the permanent severance of religious bases from policies addressing the problem of charity, poverty, and social marginalization. Few of the combatants at the time recognized these implications, but Helmuth did. In a depressing letter to Halle on July 28, 1800, he wrote that Germans who migrated to America were once greeted as honorable people who had been well catechized and who would labor hard in a free country.

Since then, however, as in various parts of Germany they have begun to "enlighten" on a massive scale, and this cheating ethos has taken in the common man, the trust that formerly one had for newly-arrived Germans no longer exists, because these have shown themselves in part no longer to be the dependable people they once were, but more and more approach the character of the Irish. The present so-called "enlightenment" has in my experience driven out much good fortune and blessing and in their stead set up indifference with its saddest consequences—common people have, at least, won nothing therefrom, and their conditions as a whole have not been improved.<sup>7</sup>

The educational world at Halle rescued Helmuth from the ranks of the marginalized in the Holy Roman Empire. The plight of the working poor from whose ranks he sprang was not remarkably different from that of their counterparts (including the Irish) in Britain's empire. The untimely death of

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1740-1790," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1993; the earlier social tensions within Helmuth's parish are examined in A. G. Roeber, *Palatines, Liberty, and Property: German Lutherans in Colonial British America* (Baltimore, 1993), 243-82.

<sup>7</sup> Mission Archive of the Francke Foundations (hereafter, AFRSt), 4D5 #77 24-26; the tendency of German-speakers to compare their own habits favorably over Irish immigrants had prerevolutionary roots partly traceable to the timing of arrival and competition between both.

his father, a baker, in 1759 qualified Helmuth as a "half-orphan." Helmuth had been plucked from poverty by the intervention of a patron, the Count von Boetticher of Braunschweig. The youngster was accounted a good student but later described as *leichtsinnig* or "flighty" as he transferred from the Latin school to the boy's school and then the academy. Employed in the early 1760s as an *Informator* or teacher's helper, he got room and board while pursuing one of Halle's chief pedagogical objectives: learning by doing. He intended to devote himself to teaching at Halle after having attended the university, but instead accepted a call to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He was ordained at Wernigerode, as were most candidates for service in North America, and left in the fall of 1768.<sup>8</sup>

The Francke Foundations that began in the 1690s had developed a system of education tailored to the social status and future calling of the students. The orphanage included the charity school into which Helmuth was accepted. Basic literacy and trade skills trained those intended for guilds and (briefly, for women) household economy. The servants of the Prussian state received instruction in the bureaucratic skills essential to their calling at the *Pädagogium*; the *Latium Regium* or *Praeceptorium* provided sons of the nobility with a standard *Gymnasium* education to prepare them for the university.

The pedagogical theories behind these institutions held that knowledge formerly "hidden" or "secret" in the hands of only the learned could be made available to ordinary people. Potentially revolutionary in their implications, these theories remained channeled within the political and social conventions of the Prussian state. Empirical observation, systematic study, combined with a rigorous use of time allowed little freedom for idleness, dissipation, or recreation.

Justus Helmuth assumed that theological education crowned such a system. His initial reluctance to accept a call to North America sprang from his reluctance to leave his young students, as he later admitted in a letter to Gotthilf August Francke. In Pennsylvania, education, especially of the young who came from the ranks of the working poor—his own experience after the death of his own father—defined the center and purpose of his ordained ministry.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Album Schol. latinae Ophan. continuatum anno 1756–67 Nr. 8475*, L4, AFrSt. Helmuth recounts some of these details in a biographical sketch (never completed) at the beginning of his diaries kept from 1769 to 1810, PH 48/A 1767–69, unpaginated, LAC.

<sup>9</sup> On Halle's educational theory and institutions, see Franz Hofmann, "Zur Stellung des Pietismus

The early, abortive attempt by Helmuth's contemporary Johann Christoph Kunze to establish a seminary in Philadelphia in 1773 reflected demands by growing numbers of Lutherans in North America for pastoral care. Gotthilf August Francke doubted the financial ability of North American Lutherans to sustain such an undertaking. Despite subscription to a lottery and early, promising support, the project collapsed in the confusion of the American Revolution. Helmuth, Kunze, and Helmuth's traveling companion to North America, Johann Friedrich Schmidt, refused to abandon the idea. Helmuth and Kunze began to lay plans in 1780 to revive the idea within the newly emerging University of Pennsylvania. Helmuth disagreed with Kunze's optimism that a confessional, emotive Lutheranism could be conveyed in the dominant English language and thereby prevent younger German Americans from abandoning the faith of their parents.<sup>10</sup>

Helmuth's congregation had weathered severe internal storms in the 1760s over control of the church properties. St. Michael's church, dedicated in 1748, had erected a second building, Zion, by 1768; the combined parish school oversaw some 300 children. Efforts had already been implemented to stave off studying English at the expense of German by increasing the stipend paid to the instructors who taught in German. Helmuth, like the

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in der Geschichte der pädagogischen Theorie," and Klaus Schaller, "Pietismus und moderne pädagogik," both in Kurt Aland, ed., *Pietismus und moderne Welt* (Wittenberg, 1974), 75-85, 161-75; Paul Mensch, *Die Pädagogik A.H. Franckes* (Wuppertal, 1969); Rosemarie Ahrbeck, "Zur Dialektik von Ziel und Methode in Franckes Pädagogik," in Ahrbeck and Burchard Thaler, eds., *August Hermann Francke 1663-1727* (Halle/Saale, 1977), 37-44; Anthony J. La Vopa, *Grace, Talent, and Merit* (New York, 1988), 140-55; Wolf Woschlies, *Die Arbeits- und Berufspädagogik August Hermann Franckes* (Witten-Ruhr, 1969), 137-40. Helmuth to Francke, Aug. 22, 1769; Wernigerode to Halle, Aug. 5, 1768; 4A8, AFrSt. On the education of women, see Ulrike Witt, "Wie soll ich zu solchem herrlichen Durchbruch aber kommen? Frauen im Unkreis des Halleschen Pietismus," Ph.D. diss., University of Göttingen, 1992, 118-65, 329-30. Helmuth's diary, begun on his journey to America, reveals the harrowing quality of his family life. He noted the forced sale of house and garden, his sister who had been born mentally retarded, and the financial straits of his mother, to whom he remained devoted via correspondence. At her death in 1794 he made a financial bequest in her memory to Halle. See PH48/A 1767-69, LAC.

<sup>10</sup> See A. G. Roeber, "The von Mosheim Society and the Preservation of German Education and Culture in the New Republic, 1789-1813," in Henry Geitz, Jürgen Heideking, and Jürgen Herbst, eds., *German Influences on Education in the United States to 1917* (Cambridge and New York, 1995), 157-76; the standard work on Kunze's experiment is Carl F. Haussmann, *Kunze's Seminarium and the Society for the Propagation of Christianity and Useful Knowledge Among the Germans in America* (Philadelphia, 1971). Kunze was the first to translate Luther's Small Catechism into English (1781) and to provide a hymnal and prayer book for English-speakers (1786). See the entries in Karl John Richard Arndt and Reimer C. Eck, eds., *The First Century of German Language Printing in the United States of America* (2 vols., Göttingen, 1989), 1: entries 556, 632.

Lutheran patriarch Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, became convinced that the youth of Philadelphia and America could only be saved from the corruptions of English-language street toughs and the allures of urban society by training them in both English and German.<sup>11</sup>

But Helmuth never intended to concentrate solely upon parish schools. St. Michael's and Zion's school provided merely the core of a grander scheme for systemic education and charity. Helmuth at first devoted himself to the task of children's education, as revealed in his correspondence, printed pamphlets, and hymn compositions. Particularly gifted young men from the parish school would be sent to an academy attached to the University of Pennsylvania. The fledgling university approved of this scheme to revive the aborted 1773 seminary, creating a professorship of philology to promote the study of Greek and Latin. Study would be conducted in German. The official title, "Professor of the German and Oriental Languages," was formally given in 1780 to Kunze and, upon his call to a pastorate in New York, to Helmuth, who served until 1796. The German Society of Pennsylvania created scholarships for four students. Conceived of as a separate "college" or residence hall based on the use of German, the academy prepared students in Latin, the Greek Testament, German grammar, history, geography, and vocal music. English reading, mathematics, writing, and bookkeeping composed the practical subjects. Subsequently, students could take advantage of further study within the university proper.

Helmuth never regarded this initiative for educating a talented meritocracy to be divorced from his broader social vision. In 1785 he organized the first Lutheran poor relief society for St. Michael's and Zion. Helmuth had labored with other German-speakers in 1781 to secure a charter from the commonwealth for the German Society of Pennsylvania, which contributed to the relief of distressed Germans. He quickly realized, however, that the society's charter restricted its benevolence to relieving only immigrant suffering. Out of dissatisfaction with this limited charity that overlooked the indigenous needy arose Helmuth's Society for the Relief of the Needy Poor.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For details, see Roeber, *Palatines, Liberty, and Property*, 272-82, 404n.54.

<sup>12</sup> This summarizes "Kurze Geschichte der Männlichen Wohlthätigkeits Gesellschaft," H10/ P5 M6/L5, LAC; the published rules, *Die Gesellschaft für Unterstützung der redlichen Halbsbedürftigen Haus-Armen* . . . (Philadelphia, 1790); for the financial records of the society, see H10/P5 M6/F61, LAC; *Geschichte des Maenner Wohltaerigkeits-Vereins der Deutschen Ev. Luth. Zions-Kirche Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1915).



Helmuth knew of the aged Mühlenberg's own initial visit in 1757 to the Bettering House in Philadelphia, where at that time only nine Germans were housed among the 400 residents. But upon arriving in Philadelphia in 1779, Helmuth could not have missed noting a shift in poor relief patterns that had begun in the 1760s, shortly before he arrived in North America. The prior patterns of almsgiving to women who needed seasonal relief had been eclipsed by a new emphasis on training and encouragement of able-bodied males. In one sense, this shift in the objective and mechanism of charitable relief fit well with Halle's own theories of making the working poor devout and loyal members of the state. But the shift was accomplished at the expense of the widows, single mothers, and poor single women who had been the traditional recipients of Philadelphia poor relief. Helmuth's own plan envisioned providing education and relief for pastors, teachers, and their widows, and training a future generation of teachers and pastors largely drawn from the ranks of the German-American working poor who would work in free poor schools open to the entire Pennsylvania population.<sup>13</sup>

With lay leaders, the pastor first organized a system to collect approximately twenty dollars per week for the new Society for the Relief of the Needy Poor. Highly informal at first, the society must have relied on Helmuth to keep track of donations. Official financial records were in place by 1790, and Helmuth secured incorporation in 1796, a decade after the society's birth. Anonymous contributions and bequests allowed the trustees to invest in funds and use the interest to buy food, winter fuel, and clothing for distressed widows, orphans, the mentally ill, and other male and female exemplars of the "worthy poor." Helmuth had grander plans, however. He now urged the construction of a combination orphanage-poor house, and as late as 1809 a testamentary gift of a thousand dollars led to an attempt to purchase the recently vacated Philadelphia Masonic lodge. That building proved too expensive an acquisition. Helmuth's hand can be seen in the articles of incorporation which stipulated that the capital acquired must be

<sup>13</sup> For a summary of a vast literature on poor relief efforts (which omits the German religious group evidence) and the shift in Pennsylvania patterns, see Karin Anne Wulf, "A Marginal Independence: Unmarried Women in Colonial Philadelphia," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1993, 147-98; on Mühlenberg's report of the 1757 visit, see W. J. Mann, B. M. Schmucker, and W. Germann, eds., *Nachrichten von den vereinigten Deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden in Nord-America, absonderlich in Pennsylvanien . . . (the Hallelische Nachrichten)* (2 vols., Allentown, 1886, Philadelphia, 1895), 1:1208-10; see also the useful summary of issues in Billy G. Smith, ed., *Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods* (University Park, Pa., 1995), 29-56.

reinvested in the poor school run by his parish, again underscoring his Halle-inspired conviction that relief of physical needs and education in a proper religious context for the working poor had to proceed hand in hand.

Helmuth was no stranger to making and investing money and no more embarrassed by riches than were his mentors in Halle. A shrewd investor, he supported his own son Henry's merchant ventures. Having himself married Barbara Keppele—daughter of Heinrich Keppele, a wealthy merchant and the first German Lutheran elected to the assembly (1764)—Helmuth dispensed pharmaceuticals and books imported from Halle to clients in North America.

By 1791 the University of Pennsylvania approached Helmuth to assess the viability of the "German School" in its midst. Helmuth believed the Philadelphia scheme would secure the future of American Lutheran theological education, bind ordinary sons of farmers and artisans to the church, and plant a version of Francke's Foundations in America's premier city. Four years earlier, in 1787, a plan to erect Franklin College in Lancaster, intended to act as a feeder school to the German academy within the university, failed to provoke the hoped-for response. Frederick Valentine Melsheimer (1749-1814), hired as professor of Latin and Greek, which were to be taught in German, struggled for two years before abandoning the college for a pastorate in Hanover and his further studies in entymology, for which he was later elected to the American Philosophical Society. Helmuth believed all the more thereafter, that Philadelphia provided the only defensible center for his vision of education and charity. Although Helmuth was among those responsible for promoting the college at Lancaster, he believed it would function only as a quasi-Gymnasium, funneling serious students to Philadelphia. Benjamin Rush's own idea for a satellite system of feeder schools for the University of Pennsylvania must have affirmed for Helmuth that his scheme was regarded at the time as neither unique nor odd.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For details, see J. P. Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania* (1886; reprint, New York, 1969), 143-47. The American Philosophical Society elected Kunze to membership in 1780 and Helmuth in 1784. Some sixty students began at the academy in Philadelphia in 1785, but the numbers dropped quickly, apparently since many of the young men could obtain the same instruction in classics in English. The fact that the German academy classes met at 6:00 a.m. and the other scholars began at 8:00 does not strike one as insignificant. Commencements in 1789 and 1790 were held at Zion Church. See also James Mulhern, *A History of Secondary Education in Pennsylvania* (New York, 1969), 11-14, 182-99; Edward Potts Cheyney, *History of the University of Pennsylvania 1740-1940* (Philadelphia, 1940), 132-33, 150-62, 176-83. On Melsheimer, see Charles H. Glatfelter, *Pastors and People: German Lutheran and Reformed*

Conventional wisdom has dismissed Helmuth and his plan by emphasizing the impractical expectations of European-trained clerics. The sluggish response of Pennsylvania's rural inhabitants reflected modest educational abilities and capacities for vision. Helmuth, Melsheimer, and Kunze did lament the lack of interest among rural Pennsylvanians in education and their reluctance to allow their sons to become pastors. Yet the pastors' complaints and the supposed impracticability of Helmuth's ambitions must be viewed with some scepticism if one is to avoid a back-handed condescension toward what ordinary people might have accomplished in such a system. The literacy rate among German-speaking immigrants to North America was among the highest of any arrivals. By the 1770s somewhere between eighty-eight and ninety percent of both male and female German-speaking arrivals were functionally literate. Even those bound as indentured servants often had educational specifications in their contracts. As late as the 1790s, the majority of young men and women under the age of seventeen were provided basic reading, writing, and ciphering skills.<sup>15</sup>

Nor, prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution and the subsequent polarization of opinion, did the political climate in Pennsylvania evince prejudice against education conducted under religious auspices. Helmuth joined a broader movement of Pennsylvanians in 1786 who suggested the commonwealth make grants of undeveloped western lands to Anglicans, the German Reformed, Quakers, and Lutherans who would use the investment or development proceeds to establish and run free schools for poor children. The legislature agreed to such a practice.<sup>16</sup>

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*Churches in the Pennsylvania Field, 1717-1793* (2 vols., (Breinigsville, Pa., 1980, 1981), 1:87-88, 2:495-512. Helmuth's doubts about the viability of the Lancaster experiment are more obvious than his public pronouncements; see, for example, his review of the situation since 1779 in letters to Halle, Oct. 8 and Dec. 17, 1789, 4D2, AFrSt, where he describes the impossibility of overcoming the country people's failure to give support for the college and a Latin Gymnasium in Lancaster, "die Gmüthart der Landleute, welche an dergleichen dingen noch keinen Geschenk haben." For Rush's plan, see Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York, 1947), 97-100.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Tully, "Literacy Levels and Educational Development in Rural Pennsylvania, 1729-1775," *Pennsylvania History* 39 (1972), 301-12; Farley Grubb, "Colonial Immigrant Literacy: An Economic Analysis of Pennsylvania-German Evidence, 1727-1775," *Explorations in Economic History* 24 (1987), 63-76; Grubb, "Educational Choice in the Era Before Free Public Schooling: Evidence from German Immigrant Children in Pennsylvania, 1771-1817," *Journal of Economic History* 52 (1992), 363-375; in the last piece, Grubb estimates on the basis of 3,478 servant contracts that by the 1790s something like seventy percent of the total contracts provided for some form of education to provide basic literacy.

<sup>16</sup> For details on these land grant schemes, see the summary in Glatfelter, *Pastors and People*, 2:501-12.

Nor did German-speakers engage in divisive debate in their newspapers and almanacs over the ratification of the proposed federal Constitution. The uncertainty among German Lutherans about supporting Helmuth's vision pointed instead to a deepening internal debate in Pennsylvania, questioning whether poor relief, education, and a vision for a republican society could be tied to specific religious tenets. Growing hostility between Christian educators and secular or Deist political leaders debating the nature of American republicanism and its relationship to the French Revolution intensified. Helmuth noted with alarm the rise of Methodist and Baptist evangelicalism, and found himself by 1792 forced to defend a proper "evangelical" Christianity and the learned pastoral office charged with its oversight against both liberal Deist and Quaker critics, and evangelical enthusiasts.<sup>17</sup>

Helmuth published no controversial essays before the 1790s. His more than sixty published pieces encompassed hymnody, children's educational pamphlets, the occasional funeral or Independence Day sermon, and memorializing the reopening of the churches after the war. But he now confided to his diary that the spread of Methodism, with its appeal to the emotionalism of untutored people, endangered souls. The appearance in Philadelphia of Baptist preacher Elhanan Winchester alarmed Helmuth. In 1792 two pamphlets by Quakers dismissed baptism. A reprint of William Dell's seventeenth-century English defense of the sacrament spurred Helmuth in 1793 to publish his only major theological essay, a defense of the sacrament of baptism, the office of the ministry, and the proper authority of Scripture.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For details, see A. G. Roeber, "Citizens or Subjects? German-Lutherans and the Federal Constitution in Pennsylvania, 1789-1800," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 34 (1989), 49-68; for the relevant statute, see James T. Mitchell and Henry Flanders, comp., *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania, 1682-1809* (18 vols., Harrisburg, Pa., 1896-1915), 13:182-84; on the Germans and the Constitution, see Jürgen Heideking, "Die geschichtliche Bedeutung der amerikanischen Verfassungsdebatte von 1787 bis 1791," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 34 (1989), 33-48.

<sup>18</sup> For the William Dell and Willem Sewel pieces, published the previous year, see Arndt and Eck, *First Century of German Language Printing*, entries 862 and 866. Helmuth's worries about Methodism can be seen in his diary entry for Feb. 18, 1790: "Der Methodismus dringt stark aufs Gefühl — Gott bewahre diese Seele!" (PH 48/K 1.6, LAC); see also the Helmuth Correspondence, March 8, 1794, from J. L. L. Ubele in London to Helmuth on Methodist preaching methods and concern for Pennsylvania, fPH 48/E 8, LAC. Helmuth wrote to Halle about two Quaker attacks on the validity of the preaching office but did not mention baptism; see 4D3, AFrSt, Oct. 29, 1792. On Winchester, see Nathan O. Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," in Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York, 1982), 67-68; Hatch errs, however, in assuming that Winchester's Baptist Church was the largest in Philadelphia; Helmuth's Zion Church, originally completed in 1768, rebuilt after a fire in 1794, held over 3,000 persons and was commonly regarded as

In his introduction, Helmuth disavowed an interest in polemics. "It is completely contrary to the author's way of thinking to display anything even remotely resembling what one might call dogmatism, or a disputatiousness."<sup>19</sup> He explained that parishioners urged him to "publicly treat the content of our Teaching, primarily of the Holy Scripture and Baptism." Begun as a sermon series, Helmuth's sermons were collected and sold as a book by members of his Society for the Relief of the Needy Poor. To Helmuth the book had two intimately connected purposes: "not only shall material charities be distributed ever more generously among the poor of our parish, but . . . the entire evangelical Zion of this town, and especially the brethren in the country, should receive some spiritual gift as well, so that they would all be reinforced in the teachings of the Evangelical [Lutheran] Church, advanced in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and comforted in their communal faith."<sup>20</sup>

Despite his disavowal of polemics, Helmuth placed some distance between his teaching and that of the socially and economically powerful Quakers of Pennsylvania. Directly repudiating the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light, Helmuth dismissed the claim that before the Bible had been written God spoke to humans directly. Although this might have been true once, he believed God works through created means. He believed we are creatures of flesh and blood and all the examples of Christ's ministry and dealings point to the God who "acts through means" ("er handelt mittelbar"). For Helmuth this explained not only Lutheran sacramental theology but the importance of using human institutions like schools, orphanages, and relief societies to make the gospel witness lively and its consequences visible among those who professed it.

Nor could he endorse the rising tide of emotionally charged evangelical revivalism. Against enthusiasts who claimed an excessive doctrine of verbal inspiration, Helmuth warned that the written word of the Bible testifies to "the uncreated Word, that is, Jesus Christ." It is not the spelling and the words themselves, but the sense of the truth that works in the souls of men

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the largest church edifice in North America at that time. The church was torn down in 1868; its replacement was also demolished and the original address at Fourth and Cherry is now occupied by the United States Mint.

<sup>19</sup> *Betrachtungen der evangelischen Lehre* . . . (Germantown, Pa., 1793) (hereafter, *Reflections*), ii.

<sup>20</sup> *Reflections*, 4.

through the Holy Spirit that proves the Bible's inspiration, as long as it testifies to Christ himself. Nor did Helmuth believe that everyone can interpret the Bible as he or she wishes. To say this would be to claim that "the Holy Spirit has to adjust itself to the capacity of every individual person no matter how confusedly he thinks. That would drive the Bible into darkest Chaos." Pastoral oversight of both the interpretation of Scripture and its practical application in everyday life could not be dispensed with.<sup>21</sup>

Helmuth's last sermon offered "Some Thoughts on the Present Times." Like many of his contemporaries, he thanked God for the blessings of the American republic. But, he warned, if one can rejoice that superstition (i.e., Roman Catholicism) is dying in America in the light of the gospel, one must mourn the faster spread of unbelief. Superstition may darken my days with sadness, Helmuth claimed, but unbelief robs me of my very soul. The indifference or outright contempt shown the sacraments angered Helmuth the most. Helmuth especially mourned the youth of America who spent their time in "card games, assemblies, drinking and eating bouts." People who sneer "Baptism!—Lord's Supper! What folly! These I leave to the rabble who know no better and allow themselves to be frightened by preachers."

Far worse than external enemies were those who stay away from the Lord's Supper through pride, and, to Helmuth, worst of all were those who are guilty of deceit in business or commit perjury, but presume to commune. Helmuth took aim at both evangelical purists who wanted Lutherans to be congregations of visible saints, and the Deists who dismissed evangelical teaching. But his chief targets were within his own Lutheran parish. Where the early sermons were aimed at Quaker, Baptist, and Methodist critics, they ended with open polemics pointed directly at the acculturated, wealthier sons of German-American political opponents, increasingly identified with the German Society of Pennsylvania and the new German Republican club.<sup>22</sup>

Helmuth's argument and his annoyance with the presumed sophistication

<sup>21</sup> *Reflections*, ii-vii, 2, 4, 16, 17-18, 21, 31, 55-57, 67. For a survey of the various possibilities offered by "plenary inspiration" theories of scriptural authority current in early nineteenth-century Protestant biblical circles, see Walter H. Conser, Jr., *God and the Natural World: Religion and Science in Antebellum America* (Columbia, S.C., 1993), 25-32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, on baptism, 81-185; for citations of authorities, 291-93; against the evils of the present times, 314-20; on the youth, 322; against separatists and Deists, 329-33; on the misuse of sacraments, 333-36.

of the acculturated, wealthy young drew on the Christian past, including medieval Christianity. Educated in the historical theology of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, Helmuth rejected discontinuities. For Helmuth, the study of the Bible, history, and systematic theology built upon the assumption that the truth of the gospel had been saved, albeit in somewhat distorted form, even before the Reformation. So, too, despite his genuine admiration for the American republic, he could not uncritically lionize the future of a "Christian Republic," since he found too many obvious faults in American society. He remained unsympathetic to a mythos of primitivism and simple virtue, whether applied to the history of church or state.<sup>23</sup>

The financial records of Helmuth's parish and those of the Society for Relief of the Needy Poor suggest that few profits were realized from the publication of these sermons.<sup>24</sup> But the gauntlet thrown down to his socially aspiring critics in Philadelphia's German-American community was now picked up and hurled back at Helmuth in a deepening battle that fatally wounded his charity and educational schemes between 1793 and 1800.

To the pastor, events that began in the summer and fall of 1793 took on the appearance of Job's trials. In quick succession, Helmuth endured the founding of the German Republican Club by a group of prosperous artisans. The outbreak of yellow fever in the city took the lives of twenty-five contributing members of the poor relief society. The Whiskey Rebellion awakened sympathy within Philadelphia's German Republicans for the financial plight of the westerners. The burning of Zion Church on December 26, 1794, was followed by rumors that the fire had been purposefully set, either by pro-French Jacobins or arch-Federalist provocateurs. Monies that might otherwise have been collected for the relief of the poor now had to be dedicated to rebuilding the church.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> On the rise of biblical primitivism, see Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church: An Historic Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, John A. Hughes, trans. (Edinburgh, 1994); on the tradition in which Helmuth was working, see A. Skevington Wood, *The Principles of Biblical Interpretation: As Enunciated by Irenaeus, Origin, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1967).

<sup>24</sup> "St. Michael and Zion Receipts and Expenditures," vol. 3 (1774-94), vol. 4 (1784[sic]-1819); fH 10/ P5M6/J1 and J2; lists of properties; treasurer's accounts, 1795-1894, H10/P5M6/F 61; miscellaneous financial records, real estate (Helmuth), PH 48/ Z 16; all LAC.

<sup>25</sup> The devastating impact of the fever on the German Lutheran parish can be seen in the comparison of burial rates for the years 1793-1800. German Lutherans in Philadelphia suffered the dubious distinction of being either in first, second, or third place among those buried in these years, usually outstripped only by "strangers." See Susan E. Klepp, "Zachariah Poulson's Bills of Mortality, 1788-1801," tables 7-10, in Smith, *Life in Early Philadelphia*, 219-42.

The bitter political battles that pitted Federalists against Republicans in Pennsylvania enveloped Helmuth as he denied the German Republican Club permission to use St. Michael's and Zion's schoolhouse for meetings. But he was far from being above politics himself. His own devotion to George Washington and his administration was no secret: Helmuth had approved of a formal, public concert for the Congress and Washington's administration in 1791, and, similarly, a memorial service for Benjamin Franklin, both held in Zion Church.<sup>26</sup>

Helmuth's critics could also question whether his educational schemes were bearing much fruit. Lutherans had established 249 congregations in Pennsylvania, served by approximately fifty-nine pastors. Both Helmuth and his colleague Frederick Schmidt (who was formally called to Philadelphia in 1786) privately tutored some sixteen to twenty young men for the pastoral ministry, but the Ministerium of Pennsylvania ordained no candidates at all between 1792 and 1800. Partly to speed up the process, the Ministerium created the post of "catechist" in the 1790s. These young men, twenty years of age and above, came under the instruction of a pastor. They had to be able to testify to a personal religious experience of conversion or "awakening," but were also to be trained in orthodox Lutheran doctrine and ethics. Catechists played a dual role. They gave laity the opportunity to aid pastors in catechizing parishioners from their earliest years, and qualified persons could in this manner enter a private tutorial system under which those who could not afford formal education might later qualify for ordination.<sup>27</sup>

This system built upon lessons learned in the colonial past. The Ministerium of Pennsylvania, under the tutelage of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, devised a plan by the late 1760s to control access to the pastoral ministry. The Ministerium would acknowledge those already ordained in Europe who could prove, both with a letter of call and with proper certification, that they were capable pastors and willing to serve in an orderly

<sup>26</sup> For further details on this period, see Roeber, "Citizens or Subjects?"

<sup>27</sup> On Schmidt, see Glatfelter, *Pastors and People*, 1:119-20; Roeber, "Citizens or Subjects," 54-58, 68; William B. Sprague, ed., *Annals of the American Pulpit* (9 vols., New York, 1857-69), 9:107-10; on the catechists, see Nelson, *Lutherans in North America*, 87; *Documentary History of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania . . . 1748-1821* (Philadelphia, 1898), 248-63. For the general history of this period, see Glatfelter, *Pastors and People*, 419-521.



fashion.<sup>28</sup> The creation of catechists in the 1790s promoted quality theological education of candidates from modest socioeconomic backgrounds, but left control of education firmly in the hands of formally trained and ordained pastors. Lay delegates could sit in the Ministerium's business meetings after 1792; they could not participate in examinations or disciplinary measures relating to doctrine or theology. The growing sense of crisis gripping Pennsylvania pastors by the 1790s had its roots in ordination patterns. Between 1783 and 1793, examinations identified seventeen qualified candidates to be licensed for ministry, of which eleven were ordained. When not a single candidate was ordained between 1793 and 1800, Helmuth's critics were emboldened.<sup>29</sup>

Although conventional accounts of this decline focus upon the stubbornness of Helmuth, Schmidt, and Jacob Goering in refusing to adjust to English-speakers' demands, such explanations obscure the theological and the socioeconomic stakes underlying the debate. Use of the German language identified those most committed to resisting the allures of theological rationalism and an untutored evangelical revivalism. But Helmuth also found that powerful men in Philadelphia, led by Gen. Peter Muhlenberg, with the support of other pro-Jeffersonian German-Americans, challenged the German pastors in more than theological matters. These worthies also assaulted the charity and education mission Helmuth and his supporters had labored long to bring to life. The traditionalists were, rightly, identified as loyal Federalists and bitter opponents of the French Revolution and the Jeffersonians who sympathized with it. As an avid reader of both European and American literature, Helmuth lamented the appearance of Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*, the arrival in Philadelphia of the English Deist Joseph Priestley, and the fascination among German-speakers for the heresiarch and former Halle theologian and publicist Carl Friedrich Bahrdt.<sup>30</sup>

Helmuth's critics among the more well-to-do members of the German-American Lutherans could make little headway debating abstruse points of

<sup>28</sup> This and the following paragraphs draw upon Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, eds., *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1942-58), 2:407-9; 452; 704-6; 3:667.

<sup>29</sup> Glatfelter, *Pastors and People*, 2:440-42.

<sup>30</sup> On the international aspect of debates over properly defining "freedom," see A. G. Roeber, "Through a Glass, Darkly: German Ideas of American Freedom, 1783-1806," in David E. Barclay and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt, eds., *Transatlantic Images and Perceptions: Germany and America Since 1776* (Cambridge, 1997).

theology or challenging his indictments of known Deists. But they could, and did, use with devastating effect charges that his educational and charity schemes had involved him in questionable financial deals. The administration of monies placed in accounts at Halle from which pastors in America could draw the interest was a complex story pregnant with possibilities for misunderstanding. No evidence confirms the accusations that Helmuth was guilty of financial speculation. What is true, however, was what he finally admitted to Dr. Georg Knapp in Halle in 1821: "a too large and careless love for my children was the basis for [my difficulties] . . . my childrens' loss in their business affairs gives to my situation a melancholy aspect."<sup>31</sup>

Helmuth's financial records suggest that he overreached himself in attempting to keep abreast of the complexities involved in running a large urban parish, organizing charity schemes, promoting learned educational systems, scrutinizing the interest on the accounts at Halle, and aligning his church with the Federalist regime (to which he preached a deferential obedience). His own investments included a house in Lancaster and connections there to the prominent Bernard Hubley. In 1792 alone he recorded negotiations on "a piece of meadow in Provinz Island in the Company with Francys Bayley," the latter Halle's dispenser of pharmaceuticals in Philadelphia; "2,800 acres of land bought via Doctor Rush with £150 Certificates"; investments in the Mississippi Company with his father-in-law Keppele and John Steinmetz, his relative by marriage, whose ship *Philadelphia* also regularly served Halle as transport between Bremen or Hamburg and Philadelphia. He owned land with Tench Coxe and other worthies, and payments from those who owed him money, either on property or borrowed sums, by midsummer of 1792 provided an income of £808. After honoring debts and investments, he noted a balance of £336. In

<sup>31</sup> Helmuth to Knapp, Oct. 14, 1821, PH 48/ C 1820-21, LAC. Helmuth went on to explain that his children's indebtedness to members of the congregation had tainted his own reputation; he assured the Halle fathers that the administration of legacies was being handled appropriately. For an overview of the complex international mechanisms which surrounded the administration of the Solms-Rödesheim account, see Roeber, *Palatines, Liberty, and Property*, 256-57, 401n.24; the fascicles in the Halle archives are 4 F4, AFrSt, Donationes et Legata . . . and 4 F8 Acta die vor H. Hochgräfl. Excellenz zu Solms Rödelshiem . . . Briefly, by 1774, after having authorized Halle's London representative, Johann Michael Ziegenhagen, with power of attorney, a bond was executed advancing £100 Pennsylvania current money to Mühlenberg and Ziegenhagen as part of this legacy intended to support "distressed regular Lutheran Ministers, their poor Widows and School-Masters when in distress." Mühlenberg signed a Deed Poll March 31, 1774, recorded April 19, 1774, Book J, vol. 13, p. 39, indicating that some of these monies were used to pay rent on John Parrock's ground leased to St. Michael's and Zion churches.

addition to the Lancaster property, he paid taxes on property in Philadelphia, including Mifflin ground rents in the North Ward amounting to over £70 annually between the early 1790s and the early 1800s.<sup>32</sup>

Such prosperity would have attracted attention. In a pastor who had dared question the politics and religious attitudes of other wealthy Philadelphians, it provided ammunition for a savage political attack. Helmuth's sons, Henry and John, had embarked on merchant careers, and Henry in particular aspired to political office in the Federalist party. As battle lines were drawn in St. Michael's and Zion parish, Helmuth counted at least some prosperous artisans and businessmen in his corner. But as the political fortunes in Pennsylvania tilted increasingly toward Republican critics of Federalism, Helmuth found himself under attack as an ally of "aristocrats." In fact, those who engineered the rhetorical assault were in many cases just as socially and economically eminent.

Helmuth may have thought that his belief in right doctrine manifested in social responsibility was shared by the eminent. Christopher Ludwig, the baker for the Continental army, and Helmuth's parishioner, in 1797 established a fund for providing bread for the poor. Helmuth and other pastors had successfully argued against a public school bill in 1796 that they feared would effectively end indirect public support for their charity schools. Yet discontent with the pastor's educational and charity schemes never lay far beneath the surface of congregational life. The debates in the parish council over the school bill had been bitter, with Frederick Augustus Mühlenberg and other worthies now solidly arrayed against Helmuth. He discovered how potent his enemies were when he attacked the German-speaking participants in Fries's Rebellion in the spring of 1799. The resultant furor in the press denouncing him and other "aristocrats" began a steady assault that never relented through the election of 1800.<sup>33</sup>

Preachers who loved money, were never home, who administered funds from Europe without giving account of their behavior, who failed to encourage testamentary gifts to the churches for the relief of the poor—all these charges surfaced in the pamphlet and newspaper warfare, all thinly

<sup>32</sup> Miscellaneous financial records, real estate (Helmuth); on Steinmetz's relationship to Halle, see letter, Nov. 14, 1785, 4C20, Nr. 61, 254, AFrSt.

<sup>33</sup> Helmuth must have attempted to argue Ludwig out of the provisions of his will—he notes a long conversation with Ludwig on July 22, 1799, in his diaries, PH 48/ K 1 55, LAC; for details on Fries's Rebellion and the controversies surrounding Helmuth's reaction to it, see Roeber, "Citizens or Subjects?"

veiled attacks on Helmuth. Most savage of all was the pamphleteer's sneering dismissal of Helmuth's book of sermons published in 1793 to raise money for the poor: "In 1793 a book was printed by M. Billmeyer in Germantown under the title *Reflections on Lutheran Teaching* in which to be sure beautiful writing can be found—but acting on such writing is even more beautiful." Replete with attacks on aristocratic and learned clerics, the pamphlets even indicted Helmuth for cowardice in leaving Philadelphia during the yellow fever outbreak of 1799. In a particularly mean-spirited assault on Helmuth's wife, Barbara, whose father had just died, the writer referred to popular explanations of why Lot's wife had been turned into salt: because she had once refused salt to a poor person, just as a poor itinerant preacher who had arrived in Philadelphia found the resident clergy made lots of money and were unfriendly to newcomers.<sup>34</sup>

Since Helmuth continued to promote the idea of poor relief, the accusations reveal the clever political instincts of his opponents in striking at his most cherished values. But Helmuth was hampered in his ability to respond. While one cannot prove financial misdeeds on his part, his poor judgment played into the hands of his opponents. His financial records suggest that beginning in the 1790s he acted not only as a source of loans for his son, but also as a collector of outstanding debts. When his son Henry, alone among Federalist candidates in a local contest, failed to win election in 1800, Helmuth saw himself pilloried as an ineffective Federalist mouthpiece.<sup>35</sup>

Even more distressing, Christopher Ludwig, the provider of bread for the poor, died that same year. When Ludwig's will was probated, Helmuth had to absorb the implications of Ludwig's bequests. Ludwig had impartially remembered the German Society, the Union School in Germantown, the school for poor children under St. Michael's and Zion's care, and given £200 to the Overseers of the Poor to purchase firewood and fuel for the poor. But the bulk of his estate—some £3,000 in hard money—went "towards a fund

<sup>34</sup> See "Address to the Lovers of Truth in the Congregation of the Churches of St. Michael and Zion Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, 1800); "Supplement to the Address of the Lovers of Truth . . ." (Philadelphia, 1802); texts and titles are in German—both filed with English titles: P5 M6 1800, LAC. For an example of the newspaper wars, see variously Melchior Steiner's *Philadelphische Correspondenz* beginning with no. 451 (1795), which first raised the issue of the European legacies, and continuing through the Dec. 24, 1799, issues (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Reel XN 20.1). Steiner, Joseph Kämmerer, Georg Helmhold, and Peter and Heinrich Mühlenberg in particular led the attacks on Helmuth through the German Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>35</sup> Helmuth diaries, Oct. 24, 1800, PH48/K 1 56, LAC.

for the schooling and educating" of all poor children without regard to ethnicity or religion. Ludwig intended that eventually "an Institution and free School on the liberal principles . . . herein above mentioned" should accomplish what he clearly believed his own pastor's plans could not.<sup>36</sup>

By 1805 the acculturated German-speakers began a secession movement from St. Michael's and Zion that led to creating St. John's Lutheran Church. Peter Mühlenberg, Lawrence Saeckel, John Graff—representing well-to-do male members, most of whom were in their thirties and forties—founded the English-speaking church that quickly became known as a church of socially prominent Lutherans. Not until 1812 was thought given to providing for the relief of the poor at the new church on Race Street.<sup>37</sup> The malcontents had failed to control elections that would have forced English-language services upon St. Michael's and Zion, despite attempts to exclude recent arrivals from taking communion and buying pews at the church. Helmuth had to seek the opinion of a lawyer, who assured him that naturalization in no way affected the status of those admitted to membership in the congregation and, therefore, could not be used as a grounds for disqualifying recent immigrants from voting. In 1817 Friedrich Eberle and other defenders of the use of German were tried and convicted for having violently resisted a referendum to change the language of worship at St. Michael's and Zion from German to English. The judge's summary charge to the jury reflected the class bias of the pro-English party's well-rehearsed fear of lower-class German insurrection, and their impatience with the now-aged pastor who stood in their way. These episodes, however, merely reflected debates and socioeconomic tensions that had already crystallized in the 1790s.<sup>38</sup>

The collapse of Helmuth's credibility points to more than his personal

<sup>36</sup> H 10/P5 M6/F8, LAC; for Ludwig's will, June 12, 1798, Register of Wills, Philadelphia, no. 53 (1801), quotation at 5.

<sup>37</sup> See Edward E. Sibole, *Historical Sketch of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1906), 9-25; Willaim H. Horn, *175 Years of St. John's Lutheran Church Overbrook, Philadelphia, Pa.* (Doylestown, Pa., 1981), 6-12; Trustees Minutes, H 10 P5J6 C2; act of incorporation with founding signatories, H 10 P5J6 c.3; Society for Relief of Poor and Distressed Members, H 10 P5J6 F1; all LAC.

<sup>38</sup> Heinrich Mühlenberg (one of Helmuth's critics) to Halle, March 14, 1806, describing these tensions 4D 6, AFRSt; on the consultation with the lawyer, see Helmuth journals, PH 48 K 1.15 (1805), LAC; for further details on the socioeconomic and occupational background of the two groups who crystallized by 1798-99, see Roeber, "Citizens or Subjects," 63-68; for details on the trial, see *The Trial of Friedrich Eberle and Others . . .* (Philadelphia, 1817).

misfortune. Rather, a profound shift in attitudes began to take hold of Philadelphians in the 1790s about whether any linkages existed that could legitimately tie specific religious doctrine to social responsibility for the poor and the republic's stated public values. Helmuth had believed in such linkages; the acrimonious nature of both politics and sectarian religious rivalry, however, doomed his vision.

Helmuth knew, from bitter personal experience, the trauma that could drop marginal, working people into the ranks of the desperate, permanently dependent poor. He also had seen in Lancaster how poverty and rural ignorance could effectively undermine a gospel that demanded a reform of personal mores, the awakening of social conscience, and acceptance of responsibility for the quality of public life. In the mouths of two youngsters, Helmuth had tried to propagandize his feeling: what good were cows, horses, and property without an education?<sup>39</sup>

Nor did he shrink from pointing out the connection of religion to charity and the public good. In his "Plan How Religious Schools Might be Established," Helmuth had argued for superintendents which county residents would elect, into whose hands warrants would be given by the trustees of public tax monies. The superintendents would then use the tax funds (levied in proportion to the population plus one percent of a state bounty) to ensure that poor children received a free education in reading, writing, arithmetic, orthography, and basic religious principles. Surplus money was to purchase clothing and books, and in a blatant redistributionist scheme, wealthier locales not using their dividends from state monies were to give up their portions "for the use of the poor in general."<sup>40</sup> Helmuth's vision was summarized succinctly by his contemporary George Lochman of Lebanon. The result of education in Christian schools was not simply that children would be inculcated with right doctrine, but "they will become capable and useful citizens of the nation."<sup>41</sup> Helmuth, and many Americans, believed that "civil government without Religion is like a Fabric without any foundation and will soon vanish."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> "Colloquy of Two Friends Concerning the Blessings of a Good Education," PH48/Z20, LAC.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., X/16, LAC (in Helmuth's handwriting); this was part of the debates that culminated in the 1796 opposition to public schools that would have ended the use of western lands to subsidize already existing denominational schools charged with charitable education.

<sup>41</sup> *Fragen eines Lehrers an seine Gemein-Glieder* (Lancaster, 1802), PL 82/H, LAC.

<sup>42</sup> "Reflections Concerning the School Bill," AMs, 1795-96, LAC.

For the balance of his own life, many North Americans probably shared Helmuth's conviction and continued to believe that in some vague fashion the American states were "Christian republics." The transformation sketched here was not uniform from one state to another, nor did it go unchallenged. But by the time of Helmuth's death in 1825, the privatization of American charity was substantially complete. Ironically, the Federalist argument articulated by James Madison—that the moral quality of society was not essential for a republic's structural survival—had finally won acceptance.<sup>43</sup>

One may well question, however, whether this point of view triumphed from conviction among Americans of its soundness, or by default. The struggles in Philadelphia point toward the latter explanation. German Lutherans who engaged in bitter controversy over educational, charity, and language schemes finally concluded that partisan and sectarian disagreements prohibited the furtherance of Helmuth's cherished vision. The acceptance of pastoral leadership and paternal protection on behalf of the marginalized, aided by explicit state subsidies to advance the commonweal, was rejected in favor of a liberal individualism that placed its faith instead in the sovereignty of personal freedom over property, charitable giving, and public policy—the latter incapable of being grounded in an explicit theological obligation to care for the poor. One might ask whether this transformation in values has ever been completed. Both those who question the results of the welfare state and the critics of purely voluntary charity rarely receive more than an uncomfortable, lukewarm affirmation of either alternative. American uncertainty about how to tie religious conviction to social conscience and public policy began in Pennsylvania's turbulent history during the 1790s. Helmuth's self-epitaph marked the passing by 1800 of his prescription for certainty in both personal faith and public action. Helmuth wondered whether a privatized "evangelical" and "popular" ethos really benefited ordinary people at the dawn of the nineteenth century. His query does not

<sup>43</sup> For more detailed investigations of the legal and constitutional implications of this shift, see A.G. Roeber, "The Long Road to *Vidal et al. v Philadelphia*: Law and Religion in Early America," conference proceedings (typescript), "The Many Legalities of Early America," Williamsburg, Va., 1996; and by the same author, "Constitutions, Charity, and Liberalism in Comparative Perspective: Germany and the Angloamerican Tradition," unpublished paper delivered at the German Historical Institute Conference "Republicanism and Liberalism in America and the German States, 1750-1850," Madison, Wis., Oct. 3-6, 1996.

seem so strange today. Recovering his story is but one step in an ongoing discussion Americans have never finished. Some may conclude uncomfortably that, in some respects, he was right to wonder.

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