Liberty, Tyranny, and Ethnicity: The German Reformed “Free Synod” Schism (1819–1823) and the Americanization of an Ethnic Church

On the last day of September 1821 clergy and laity gathered in Reading, Pennsylvania, for the annual synodical meeting of the German Reformed Church. The atmosphere was tense. The normal routine of orderly business—licensing and ordaining ministers, listening to sermons, and transacting ecclesiastical correspondence—would not dominate the agenda. Instead, the group faced the prospect of schism. A proposal to establish an American-style theological seminary threatened to tear the synod apart. As the day progressed discussion became more animated and angry “until the feelings of several were wrought up to a high state of exasperation.” Participants denounced one another and one synod member publicly insulted a visiting Dutch Reformed clergyman-observer who symbolized the distant, ecumenical influences rocking the synod. By the end of the day, threats and counterthreats had filled the air, and within several months the synod had divided.

What had caused the “reverend synod” to lose its decorous composure

1 Each spring on a date tied to Pentecost, pastors and elders (a synod, or representative council) met for three days at a host church in Pennsylvania or Maryland. In 1816 the synod switched to a September meeting date. The 1821 synod was held in Reading, Pennsylvania. For a complete listing of coetus and synod dates, locations, and officers, see H. M. J. Klein, The History of the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States (Lancaster, Pa., 1943). 370–76. A coetus is a church body dependent upon a foreign synod, which was true of the German Reformed Church in America prior to 1793 (see n. 11).


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and dance at the edge of denominational division? The late 1810s and early 1820s were not an Era of Good Feeling among German Reformed adherents. If the rest of the nation was finally experiencing a bit of collective relief in the aftermath of the War of 1812—confirmed in their independence from European power and influence—the Pennsylvania Germans who comprised the denomination had reason to be more anxious. More than ever they, too, were caught up in the expansive, energetic spirit of the times, increasingly at home in a world filled with the language of natural rights and the rhetoric of Columbian glory that seemed to work against localist identities and particularity. Yet if that world threatened the traditional ordering of their communities and churches, upsetting old balances of class and deference, it would soon be clear that it could also provide resources for constructing and defending new ways of thinking about the place of Pennsylvania Germans in the United States.

Religious historiography often equates Americanization and assimilation, assuming that the surrendering of ethnicity is the alternative to cultural isolation and continued marginality. Within such a framework, ethnic Protestants became American as they anglicized or adopted Anglo-American evangelical modes of revivalism or reformism. But such images obscure other ways in which the actual development of ethnic sensibilities has itself been a way of becoming American. Ethnicization has often been Americanization as groups defend their claims of distinct identity in terms drawn as much from their New World experience as from their Old World roots. Ethnic groups' battles over Americanization are rarely over the

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1 Descendants of colonial-stock immigrants who had arrived through the port of Philadelphia and settled throughout southeastern and central Pennsylvania, western Maryland, and the Virginia and Carolina back country, Pennsylvania Germans were the largest white non-British group in the new nation. Comprising one third of Pennsylvania's population and spreading southward along the Appalachian Great Wagon Road, they formed stable communities marked by segregated settlement patterns, notable rates of endogamy, and language loyalty. On the colonial background of these patterns, see Aaron S. Fogleman, Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717–1775 (Philadelphia, 1996).


possibility but rather the means of that process.

Religion and religious groups are frequently key players in this process of ethnicization-as-Americanization, and not simply because religious affiliation is often a central building block of group identity and a regulator of cultural change. Rather, religion is primary because from the founding of the republic it was an arena in which the state could not intrude. The principle of disestablishment and the freedom from religious coercion guaranteed by the federal First Amendment and the Pennsylvania state constitution of 1790 meant that from the beginning religion was a different category among the elements that contributed to both national and ethnic self-understanding. In rallying to religious particularity or bolstering arguments with religious rhetoric, ethnic Americans could resist claims of the larger society in the name of common American principles.

The formation of American identity and the experience of Protestant religious groups in that process has become a staple theme in today's scholarship on the early republic. Yet that work has largely remained focused on British-stock subjects often closely involved in the nation's founding revolutionary events. Pennsylvania German faithful, in contrast, stood more on the margins of American political life at the dawn of the republic and their material, intellectual, and social cultures offered an identity—an ethnicity—not immediately linked to American nationality. Shaped by an ethos of southwestern German Pietism, many Pennsylvania Germans carried a decidedly local social and religious orientation, asserting customary rights against outside agents of change. If in the colonial period they already had disagreed sharply over the merits of education reformers

7 Especially since the publication of Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven, Conn., 1989).
8 A. G. Roeber, Palatines, Liberty, and Property: German Lutherans in Colonial British America (Baltimore, 1993), discusses the way in which many German-Americans were only beginning to come to understand Anglo-American political ideas by 1790. Wolfgang Splitter, "The Germans in Pennsylvania Politics, 1758–1790: A Quantitative Analysis," PMHB 122 (1998), 41–43, 63, 71, 75–76, provides fresh and copious data on political participation, demonstrating among other things that the Revolution was not a sharp turning point in the Pennsylvania German political experience and that they remained underrepresented and underinvolved in the years following the Revolution.
and charity school advocates bent on bringing them into the Anglo-American mainstream, what was new in the 1820s was Pennsylvania Germans casting their arguments in patriotic American rhetoric that joined ethnic parochialism and national ideology. Even as their denominational battles also revealed deep and long-standing class tensions, ethnic writers in the new republic could now present them in terms that blended traditional sensibilities with claims of American liberty.

Among German Reformed faithful the lines of debate were especially clear in events surrounding the so-called Free Synod schism and in the pamphlet war that followed. Significantly, however, the tension did not divide cultural recalcitrants from ardent assimilationists; after a century on American soil Pennsylvania Germans were not about to repudiate the nation they called home. Instead, both major parties drew on notions of American liberty to defend ecclesiastical identity—though they did not always agree on the content and meaning of either.

The arguments that inflamed the synod of 1821 were not simply conflicts over church polity or personality clashes writ large, as denominational historians have interpreted them. Rather, participants spoke in terms of republican ideals and American liberty, acting in ways characteristically American in their efforts to defend visions of German faithfulness in a land of new possibilities. These events not only reveal the contested processes of Americanization in the German Reformed Church, but also add to and complicate our picture of the populist impulse and the appeals to the language of liberty among American Protestants of the period.

In some ways members of the German Reformed Church had reason to think of their denomination—despite its Continental title—as a proper republican institution, whose polity reflected the values of the young nation. Comprised of ordained pastors and elected lay delegates, the

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11 The colonial-era German Reformed coetus had been under the jurisdiction of the Synod of Amsterdam. In 1793 the coetus declared its independence from Europe and became a self-governing synod. The move stemmed in part from suspicion that Continental authorities had grown tired of responsibility for their transatlantic spiritual kin, now well-established on American soil for several generations. See the 1789 coetal letter to Amsterdam in Minutes and Letters of the Coetus of the
synod's mixed membership combined hierarchical authority with popular representation—an orderly balance that granted the people a voice in selecting leaders of merit who in turn expected deferential cooperation. Even within the synod itself, a system of ascribed rank regulated group operation. “According to an old custom, the ministers all sat in a row on the front seats” of the church sanctuary, one observer recalled, “arranged according to age, from the oldest to the youngest, and the elders sat behind in like regular order. The former did all the speaking, according to seniority of age, whilst the elders listened, but seldom, if ever, said anything.”

Yet despite the synod’s formal authority, the German Reformed Church was remarkably congregational and local. The synod rarely acted on matters that meddled in congregational affairs, and the authority that church members granted their leaders—pastors as well as lay elders—was rooted in local power balances and a set of Pennsylvania German ideals one might call peasant republicanism. Such a system placed subjects at the debt of their hierarchical betters, but championed liberty from intrusive interference with traditional custom. Adherents could simultaneously embody deferential social ideals and express populist democratic resistance when pressed. These contradictory impulses, however, were set to react in quite different directions when in the 1810s and 20s the American dynamics of power, authority, and organization began to shift.

The activist American spirit of expansion and drive to organize during the new nation's first decades disrupted synod tradition. In 1818, for example, when clergy and elders gathered in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for that year's

German Reformed Congregations in Pennsylvania, 1747–1792; Together with three Preliminary Reports of Rev. John Philip Boehm, 1734–1744 (Philadelphia, 1903), 431; and Acts and Proceedings of the Coetus and Synod of the German Reformed Church in the United States from 1791 to 1816, Inclusive (Chambersburg, Pa., 1854), 8–9 (hereinafter, reference to this work will include a year indicating the year of the synod or coetus). Dutch clergymen had never shown as much interest in American German Reformed activities as the coetus had hoped, and when Amsterdam failed to respond to a suggestion of ecclesiastical independence, the coetus acted unilaterally.

Hierarchical authority was rarely arbitrary or capricious, which was also part of the delicate balance—e.g., congregational election of pastors needed to be ratified by the synod, but such approval was nearly always forthcoming (but see a close approval vote in 1802, Acts and Proceedings, 33).

Theodore Appel, Recollections of College Life at Marshall College, Mercersburg, Pa., from 1839 to 1845: A Narrative with Reflections (Reading, Pa., 1886), 67. See also the only visual representation of the synod in a contemporary watercolor painting by Lewis Miller (1796–1882), of York, Pa., who reproduced the 1827 synod that was held at York, in [Lewis Miller], Lewis Miller, Sketches and Chronicles: The Reflections of a Nineteenth-Century Pennsylvania German (York, Pa., 1966), 109.
synodical session, the increasing size of the denomination and the geographic scope of a seemingly unbounded country prompted some synod members to propose restructuring its organization and adopting a more complex polity. The synod divided into eight regional classes (plural of classis), each of which was to meet annually and include all ministers and elders within its bounds. The full synod, however, would be only a small delegate body composed of a few representatives from each classis who would conduct business on behalf of their colleagues.

Pennsylvania Germans borrowed their structural innovation from the model of the Dutch Reformed synod, the Germans' anglicized theological kin from New York. It was not the first contact the Germans had had with their Dutch coreligionists. In 1803 the German Reformed synod, meeting in Lebanon, Pennsylvania had received a letter from John H. Livingston (1746–1825), theology professor at the Dutch Reformed seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Livingston suggested that the two Continentally-rooted Reformed groups begin regular, fraternal correspondence. The Germans approved a resolution of cordial reply, and then promptly dropped the matter for a decade. Even then it was the Dutch who again pursued Reformed relations, sending two delegates to the German synod in 1813 and again in subsequent years. By 1820, eager to forge a broader Reformed vanguard in America, the Dutch Reformed Church was proposing a sort of

14 The classes were Philadelphia, Northampton, Lebanon, Zion (i.e., York area), Susquehanna (i.e., north-central Pennsylvania), Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Maryland (which also included Virginia and North Carolina).
15 Verhandlungen der Synode der Hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirche... 1819 (Hagerstown, Md., 1819), 8–14. They had initially considered such reorganization in 1817; Verhandlungen der Synode der Hoch-Deutschen Reformirten Kirche... 1817 (Philadelphia, 1818), 6.
16 Verhandlungen der Synode... 1819, 8–14.
17 Acts and Proceedings, 36 (1803). See s.v. "John H. Livingston," Dictionary of American Biography (hereafter, DAB). Livingston received his theological education from Connecticut Congregationalist Nathaniel Taylor and in the Netherlands at the University of Utrecht. From 1784–1810 the Dutch Reformed seminary was, for all practical purposes, Livingston's New York City home. In 1810 he and the school relocated to New Brunswick and shared the Queen's College campus.
18 Acts and Proceedings, 60 (1813). See also Proceedings of the Reformed Dutch Church... [1812] (Albany, N.Y., 1812), 62; and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Dutch Church... [1813] (Albany, N.Y., 1813), 19–20. When Dutch delegates appeared again in 1814, the German body resolved to "receive the delegates of the Sister Church in a brotherly and becoming cordial manner, and provide them with suitable lodging during the sessions of synod. See Acts and Proceedings, 67–68 (1814).
amalgamation of the two groups.

Although the colonial-era German Reformed coetus had reported to the Synod of Amsterdam and both groups shared the general outlines of Reformed faith, fraternal relations and even talk of union could be disconcerting to Pennsylvania Germans whose localist sensibilities inclined them toward fellowship with neighboring Lutherans. While theologically distinct, Lutherans and Reformed folk often shared meetinghouses and lived within a common Pennsylvania German cultural context that frequently meant more than their dogmatic differences. The Dutch Reformed Church, meanwhile, had become an exemplar of assimilation and anglicization and was already at the forefront of an emerging coalition of activist American evangelicals eager to claim responsibility for society as a whole and shape a common national culture—aims that prompted only suspicion in the minds of peasant republicans, but which proved attractive to those who looked to the wider Anglo-American evangelical world for guidance.

In 1806 when a group of German Reformed members in Philadelphia had lost their effort to introduce English worship into their congregation, they promptly withdrew and joined the Dutch synod, as later anglicizers would continue to do. Now ethnic controversy in the form of debates about

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19 Verhandlungen der General-Synode der Hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirche . . . 1820 (Hagerstown, Md., 1820), 13.
20 Charles Glatfelder, Pastors and People: German Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Pennsylvania Field, 1717–1793: The History (2 vols., Breinigville, Pa., 1981), 2:161–70. It is perhaps also worth noting that in the colonial period a significant number of the coetus’ members came from the theological school at Herborn, known for its irenic approach to Lutheranism—a situation that may have contributed to the subsequent prejudice of Pennsylvania German Reformed. On Herborn, see J. Steven O’Malley, Pilgrimage of Faith: The Legacy of the Otterbeins (Metuchen, N.J., 1973), 54–60, 98–109.
21 For background, see Balmer, A Perfect Babel of Confusion, esp. 155–56; Dutch ethnicity remained more securely joined to the Reformed Church in the rural areas around Albany, though even here by 1800 there had been a great deal of Dutch-Puritan melding; see Hackett, The Rude Hand of Innovation. See also A. G. Rober, “The Origin of Whatever is not English among Us,” in Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), 236–37.
22 In 1815 the Rockway, New Jersey, German Reformed congregation joined the “Dutch Connection.” The German synod also registered concern about other anglicizing New Jersey Germans who asked for Presbyterian oversight; Acts and Proceedings, 41, 44 (1805–06; Philadelphia incident) and 70, 73 (1815). In 1831 and 1832 Maryland classis German Reformed churches complained that Presbyterian pastors were wooing their members and making unwelcomed attempts to “Presbyterianize” their congregations; see Guy P. Bready, History of the Maryland Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States . . . (Taneytown, Md., 1938), 39, 41. German Reformed pastor Johannes Braun (1771–
language was surfacing again in Philadelphia (1817) and Baltimore (1818) just as the latest Dutch ecumenical overtures arrived. Many in the German Reformed Church interpreted the aggressive advances of the more assimilated and geographically distant Dutch as a threat to their understanding of local liberty and their claims of ethnic and religious identity. In the end, the Dutch Reformed institution that sparked Pennsylvania German reaction was the theological seminary associated with Queen’s College (now Rutgers University) in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The school represented a newly emerging style of ministerial training which efficiently centralized that education and tended to separate it from its community base. Traditionally, German Reformed ministerial students had received training through local apprenticeships to seasoned pastors, with several acclaimed teachers attracting so many students that their homes became known as “Schools of the Prophets.” One of the best known teachers was Lebrecht Frederick Herman (1761–1848), of Falkner’s Swamp, Pennsylvania, whose parsonage even received the appellation “Swamp College.”

1850) had the same complaints in Virginia; see Klaus G. Wust, The Virginia Germans (Charlottesville, Va., 1969), 142.


25 This style of training had, of course, not been unique. For a description of this method in Congregational New England, traced over several generations, see David W. Kling, A Field of Divine Wonders: The New Divinity and Village Revivals in Northwestern Connecticut, 1792–1822 (University Park, Pa., 1993), 29–42.

26 James I. Good, History of the Reformed Church in the U. S. in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1911), 12–20; and Klein, History of the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church, 126. An example of student work is the notebook of Daniel Hertz, who studied under Samuel Helfenstcin, entitled “A Catechism on Church Government,” last page with text dated February 18, 1823, Philadelphia; Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pa.

27 Students transcribed Herman’s lectures (drawn from an old manuscript copy of European theological notes). Although fluent in English, Herman insisted on German in the classroom; see “The Late Rev. Joseph S. Dubbs,” Reformed Church Messenger 46 (April 25, 1877), 4. Other well-known instructors were Christian L. Becker (1756–1818) who trained nineteen candidates while pastor in Lancaster and Baltimore, and Samuel A. Helfenstcin (1775–1866) of Philadelphia had no fewer than twenty-seven students under his tutelage at one time or another. Helfenstcin later published his lectures in English as The Doctrines of Divine Revelation, as Taught in the Holy Scripture . . . for Young Men Preparing for the Gospel Ministry in Particular (Philadelphia, 1842).
German synod members who admired the more formal seminary model, however, considered how they might begin such a program for their denomination. Although the German Reformed Church was still an official sponsor of the flagging Franklin College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, that school held little promise of growth. In 1819 seminary promoters received an open letter from Dutch professor Livingston who regretted that German Church people had "not found it convenient" to send their students to New Brunswick, but encouraged Pennsylvania Germans to begin their own school on the Dutch model. Proponents enamored with the apparent Dutch success in creating the latest in organizational structures and efficiency drew plans for a German Reformed institution and brought them to the 1820 synodical meeting. That year's gathering took place in late September in Hagerstown, Maryland, and was the first synod composed only of classis representatives: thirteen ministers and nine elders—appointed delegates somewhat abstracted from local authority and influence—conducted the church's business.

With strong influence from the Maryland hosts, the synod actually approved a five-article constitution for a denominational seminary to be established in Frederick, Maryland. The delegate synod—not the more representative regional classes—would "have final power over the Theological Seminary, its officers, laws, and regulations," while trustees chosen by the synod would manage more immediate affairs. School finances would come from "an annual collection" in each congregation, or from

28 Synod had commissioned pastor William Hendel, Jr., to compose an historical account of the German Reformed Church in America, which was appended to the 1817 synodical minutes. In the brief essay Hendel praised the Dutch seminary and suggested its format for his own church's New World needs. See "Bericht der Committee die bestimmt war eine Untersuchung oder historische Nachricht von dem Ursprung und Fortgang unserer Synode zu geben" in Verhandlungen der Synode der Hoch-Deutschen Reformirten Kirche . . . 1817, 14–20; comments on the Dutch Reformed Church and their seminary appear on p. 19.

29 The financially endowed but academically impoverished Franklin College (founded 1787) was officially supported by both Lutheran and German Reformed; see Joseph H. Dubbs, History of Franklin and Marshall College (Lancaster, Pa., 1903), 112. See also Berichtigungen des Synodes . . . 1818, 5–6 (on the seminary) and 9, 12–13 (on correspondence with the Dutch).


31 In contrast, thirty-seven ministers, thirteen ministerial candidates, and forty-six elders had attended the 1819 synod.

32 Verhandlungen der General-Synode der Hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirche . . . 1820 (Hagerstown, Md., 1820), 19–21.
subscriptions raised by parachurch voluntary associations modeled after similar groups operating in the larger evangelical world. The synod also chose as the school’s first professor, Dutch Reformed pastor Philip Milledoler (1775–1852), of New York City, granting him a salary of $2,000 per year. Finally, the synod forbade the continuance of the local so-called Schools of the Prophets, resolving “that in the future no minister be allowed to receive a young man in order to educate him in theology; only in preparatory courses for entrance into the Seminary.”

The synod’s actions provoked sharp and immediate response. Lay members and clergy cried out that Frederick was an English environment, that Milledoler was an English-speaking Dutch teacher not conversant with German culture, and that his salary was exorbitant. Moreover, they questioned the synod’s authority to pronounce the seminary’s exclusive claims over local theological instruction. On March 26, 1821, in fact, preceding that year’s spring classes meetings, a group of seminary opponents met at Norristown, Pennsylvania, and drew up a protest petition. The Philadelphia classis then endorsed the Norristown statement and sent three clergy to meet with the nascent seminary’s board of directors, conveying a

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33 Milledoler was actually present at this meeting, being the Dutch Reformed fraternal delegate sent from New York that year. Born in Rhinebeck, New York, to Swiss parents, he had studied theology under German Reformed pastor John D. Gros (1738–1812). Milledoler was even ordained by the German Reformed Synod in 1794, but had spent most of the next quarter century pastoring Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed congregations (serving as moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1808) and promoting various religious associations, such as the American Bible Society and United Foreign Mission Society. See DAB s.v. “Philip Milledoler”; and his appeal for a broadly Reformed coalition of public-minded American churches presented in a Fourth of July sermon as Philip Milledoler, A Discourse Delivered by Appointment of the General Synod of the Reformed Dutch Church . . . at Hackensack, N.J. . . . July 6, 1824 (New York, 1824), esp. 11.

34 Verhandlungen der General-Synode der Hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirchen . . . 1820, 21–24, records the discussion on the seminary and its proposed role in the synod. Livingston had suggested supporting the school through subscription-paying voluntary societies established for that purpose; Livingston, Address to the Reformed Germans, 33–34.

35 Much of the negative reaction was centered in the denomination’s eastern Pennsylvania strongholds, though opposition also surfaced in the western part of Pennsylvania and in Ohio as pastors complained about the provision forbidding private ministerial training, saying the seminary was too far from their fields of labor.

36 On the charges and complaints against the seminary, see the articles by Lewis (“Ludwig”) Mayer and Ferdinand Bergennmeyer which appeared in the Reading (Pa.) Adler (Reading Eagle) even as the schism was unfolding: Mayer’s essays appear in March 26, April 2, 9, May 14, June 4, 18, 1822. Bergennmeyer’s pieces appear in April 23, 30, May 7, June 11, 25, July 16, 1822. One of the curious side debates in this exchange was Bergennmeyer’s insistence that Milledoler was not of German extraction—as Mayer insisted—but Danish.
demand that—should the seminary actually materialize—they would insist at the least on its having a German professor.37

Seminary supporters found the mounting opposition deeply troubling. Lewis Mayer (1783–1849), a Maryland pastor and member of the seminary board, wrote Bernard C. Wolff (1794–1870) that “the prospect before us was gloomy. A storm was gathering in the East among the German brethren, and threatened to burst upon us with destructive effect.” In fact, when the three representatives of the Norristown remonstrants presented their demands, Mayer's fellow board members resorted to threats of schism and “assured them that if our [seminary] measures were defeated, both our congregations and we would secede from the German Reformed Church and go over to the Dutch Reformed”—a threat that only further linked the idea of ethnic betrayal and the anglicized Dutch in the minds of many Pennsylvania Germans.38

Seminary opponents now pursued a different strategy, prevailing upon Philadelphia classis member Samuel A. Helfenstein (1775–1866)—who had presided over the 1820 synod—to exercise his interim presidential prerogative and declare the upcoming 1821 synod an old-fashioned, all-inclusive convention synod, rather than a delegate gathering. They hoped such a convention synod would translate grassroots opposition into effective voting power and restore the authority of local congregations.39

The 1821 convention-style synod met in Reading, Pennsylvania, drew

37 Isaiah N. Rapp, comp., “Minutes of the Philadelphia Classis,” 1820–1825, May 20–22, 1821, bound volume (1938), Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pa., 6–8. Casper Wack (1752–1839), J. William Dechant (1784–1832), and Frederick W. Van der Soot (1773–1831) comprised the committee. Van der Soot was the pastor who in 1818 had led dissident members of the Philadelphia congregation in forming a German-language-only congregation.

38 Lewis Mayer to Bernard C. Wolff June 25, 1821, reprinted in Theodore Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 24–26. The book contains an entire run of transcribed Mayer correspondence that Appel said was found among Wolff's papers. However, the original letters are no longer extant. In several cases Appel replaced key proper names with blank spaces to protect the anonymity of individuals about whom Mayer wrote especially critically. To seminary supporters the Dutch connection via Milledoler was apparently also important since Frederick-area seminary boosters had pledged money on the promise that a professor of national standing who was at home in English society could be obtained.

39 In Mayer’s opinion, “The object of [Helfenstein's] call appeared to me to be to effect the withdraw[al] of Dr. Milledoler, a change in the location of the Seminary, and an alteration of its Plan. The call was made at so late a period, and so unexpectedly, that many of the brethren who reside at great distances could not attend; and it was manifestly so irregular and unconstitutional that some who attended brought no lay deputies with them”; Mayer to Wolff, October 16, 1821, in ibid., 26–30. See also, Rapp, comp., “Minutes of the Philadelphia Classis,” May 20–22, 1821, 7–8.
forty-three ministers, two ministerial candidates, and twenty-eight elders, and was an angry, raucous affair. In addition to those objections already raised against the proposed seminary, the remonstrants (who apparently constituted a majority\textsuperscript{40}) added their opposition to the seminary’s obtaining a state charter of incorporation. Many Pennsylvania Germans believed that incorporating religious institutions compromised the proper separation of church and state, since their conventional wisdom assumed that incorporation provided the synod with the legal and coercive right to extract money from congregations for institutional budgets.\textsuperscript{41}

Seminary opponents demanded that professor-designate Milledoler present course work and lectures entirely in German, even though, according to Mayer, it was “well-known that Dr. Milledoler would not accept the professorship of a merely German Seminary.” At that point, as previously mentioned, “debate was continued until the feelings of several were wrought up to a high state of exasperation” and a seminary opponent “insulted one of the [visiting-observer] Dutch Reformed delegates.” When the resolution calling for exclusive German instruction passed by a wide margin, seminary supporters again threatened to secede from the church. After what Mayer considered a long and awkward silence, opponents conceded a dual-language institution, provided all graduates show themselves fluent in German before ordination.\textsuperscript{42} Having won approval for his seminary and professorial choice, Mayer left the synod believing that “A perfect cordiality now prevails,” and that “the German brethren have generally pledged themselves to support the Seminary with all their influence.”\textsuperscript{43} However accurate his observations of the synod itself, he had greatly overestimated the good will that existed in

\textsuperscript{40} Lewis Mayer reported that the “party in opposition [to establishing a seminary] were an overwhelming majority”; moreover, “Some of our friends had abandoned us, and gone over to the other side” (ibid.). While the body elected seminary supporter Lebrecht L. Hinch (1769–1864) as president, the votes do seem to support Mayer’s sense of the synod.

\textsuperscript{41} See comments and arguments of Ferdinand Bergenmeyer, Reading Adler, April 23, 1822.

\textsuperscript{42} Mayer to Wolff, October 16, 1821, in Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 26–30. See also Verhandlungen einer Allgemeinen Synode der hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirchen ... 1821 (Philadelphia, 1821), 11–16, and 18 on incorporation. The Dutch delegates were Cornelius Westbrook and Thomas DeWitt.

\textsuperscript{43} Mayer to Wolff, October 16, 1821, in Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 26–30. This was also the assessment of the committee that prepared the “state of religion” report at the close of the synod and that contrasted the dark clouds of seminary conflict which hung over the gathering’s opening with the bright sun of harmony they now foresaw; Verhandlungen einer Allgemeinen Synode der hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirchen ... 1821, 21–22.
the church.

As word of the autumn synod’s action spread, many Pennsylvania German lay members and clergy reacted with outrage and announced that the church was falling under the forces of foreign tyranny. Several months later, in fact, in January 1822, members of the Kutztown, Pennsylvania, German Reformed Church reconsidered their relationship to a synod that had established an “English” seminary under Dutch direction. Secretary of the congregation Ferdinand Bergenmeyer noted that “In accordance with the purpose of the meeting” those gathered read “the proceedings of the Synod of the years 1820 and 1821” and then listened to a report prepared by seven members. The report outlined their grievances, including their contention that “the Synod of North America in various sessions has made statutes and laws by which all congregations are to be compelled to maintain an incorporated seminary for preachers in Frederick, Maryland” from which, they noted with a bit of sarcasm, the Synod was supposed to obtain “their German preachers in the future.”

Loss of local autonomy was also tied up with concrete economic concerns. Members complained that “already an English preacher from New York has been appointed with a salary of $2,000.” Therefore, since “the delegates to the General Synod are getting too extravagant for our congregations in these pressing times,” the group “resolved that we have declared our congregations from now on independent and free from the Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States of America. . . .” The group also requested that their pastor convene a consultation of “all free congregations in Pennsylvania and the adjoining states” and publish their decision in the Reading Adler, a flagship newspaper for the Pennsylvania German population.

The Kutztown church was not alone. By the time it took action, more congregations in Chester, Lancaster, and Berks Counties had also declared their independence. Ten days after the Kutztown gathering, a similar secession meeting took place at the New Hanover (Swamp) congregation in

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44 “. . . zu kostspielig für unsere Gemeinden in diesen drückenden Zeiten werden . . . .”

45 Reading Adler, Feb. 12, 19 1822. Although a secular paper, the Adler was a forum for church news, e.g., carrying notices of German Reformed classis meetings, April 17, 1821, March 31, 1829, etc. On the Adler’s influence, see Karl J. R. Arndt and May E. Olson, eds., German-American Newspapers and Periodicals, 1732–1955: History and Bibliography (Heidelberg, 1961), 587–88.

46 Reading Adler, Feb. 12, 1822, reported the withdrawal of the Vincent, Coventry, and St. Peter’s churches in Chester County, the Center Church in Lancaster County, and the Allegheny congregation in Berks County.
Montgomery County. That group, too, reviewed synod actions and recorded similar dissatisfaction with an incorporated seminary and its “English” professor “because we consider such undertakings as aristocratic, robbing us of our freedom and [it] appears extravagant, [and] in it we see no benefit for the German congregations, but rather fear the loss of many members of our church.”

The number of withdrawals mounted quickly as one congregation after another denounced the “extravagant and aristocratic” means of “depriving us our freedom.”

On April 24, representatives of dissident congregations gathered at the Maxatawny, Pennsylvania, home of Charles G. Herman (1792–1861), well-known pastor and leader of the Kutztown charge of churches, to draw up a constitution for the “Synod of the Free and Independent German Reformed Church of Pennsylvania.” They noted that “congregations of the German Reformed Church, feeling themselves oppressed by the proceedings of the General Synod” were prepared to “further the welfare of their congregations as Free and Independent Congregations.” Yet they insisted that they were not the party of innovation, and wished it “understood, however, that the same Catechism, Doctrine, and Symbols be retained as usual heretofore in the Reformed Church.” Their constitution contained fourteen brief articles that assured members the new synod would never become an indirect delegate body and that it would support historic local congregational rights and privileges. By the time of the first regular

47 Reading Adler, Feb. 26, 1822.
48 On February 23, 1822, Zion Church in Berks County, and the Montgomery County Trappe congregations withdrew—Reading Adler, March 5, 1822, April 2, 1822. On February 28, 1822, the Pottsgrove [Pottstown] church announced its independence—Reading Adler, April 2, 1822. On March 2, 1822, Berks County’s Pike Township congregation withdrew, as did the Colebrook Township, Berks County, Reformed Church—Reading Adler, March 19, 1822. On March 20, 1822, the Bensalem, Zion, Corner, and Jacob’s Church in Lehigh County also declared their independence; see Reading Adler, April 2, 1822. Quotation from the Pike Church declaration, but all cited similar concerns.
49 See Charles G. Herman, “Private Records of Rev. Chas. G. Herman. Corrected Copy,” C. E. Keiser, transcriber, Historical Society of Berks County, Reading, Pa., which illustrates the extensive ministry he performed from 1810 to 1861, listing baptisms, marriages, and funerals. The double-column, single-spaced index of his baptismal registry alone runs 105 pages!
50 The constitution and subsequent minutes of the Free Synod’s annual gatherings are transcribed as William J. Hinke, ed., “Syndical Ordnung und Protocoll der Verhandlungen der Synode der Hochdeutschen Freyen Reformirten Gemeinden in Pennsylvanien Angefangen den 24sten Tag April, Anno Domini, 1822,” bound volume (1934), Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society. The constitution appears in pp. 2–4; the minutes follow. All are in German except 1832 which are in English. An English translation of the minutes appears as a 247-page appendix to Watts, “Free Synod Move-
meeting of the Free Synod on September 7, its numbers had grown even larger as more congregations in eastern Pennsylvania abandoned the old church.\(^5\)

In many cases pastors supported the move toward independency, though not everywhere. In response to a Northampton classis demand that its members announce by September 1, 1822, "whether or not they desire to remain members of the German Reformed Synod," John Zülich (1796–1875) replied that he did "not desire to be a member of the so-called Free Synod" but his congregation had insisted on separation.\(^5\) And the June 25 Reading Adler carried a notice by sixty-seven lay members—including elders, trustees, and deacons—of the Tulpehocken congregation who declared their refusal to have any pastor who supported the seminary. Although the congregation never actually withdrew from the old synod, its pastor, seminary supporter William Hendel, Jr. (1768–1846), resigned.\(^5\)

By 1826 so many congregations had withdrawn from the old church that two of its classes—Philadelphia and Northampton—were forced to combine into a new, single eastern Pennsylvania classis. By 1832, in fact, the Free Synod minutes reported 101 congregations and several dozen ministers and licensees.\(^5\) Meanwhile in May 1822, in the midst of all the debate and schism, seminary professor-designate Milledoler, still living in New York, resigned his post at the not-yet-established seminary.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Berks County's Salem congregation withdrew March 30, 1822, reported in Reading Adler, April 9, 1822; the White Reformed Church of Berks County withdrew May 22, 1822, reported in Reading Adler, June 11, 1822. Lebanon County's Mühlbach church withdrew March 24, 1822, in Reading Adler, June 18, 1822.


\(^5\) "Kirchen Angelegenheiten," Reading Adler, June 25, 1822. Hendel was to have given the charge at the planned June 1822 inauguration of Milledoler; see Mayer to Wolff, Feb. 21, 1822, in Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 31–32, and 45.

\(^5\) Hinke, ed., "Synodical Ordnung und Protocol," 87–88; in 1832 the old church listed 329 congregations. The last two pages of the appendix in Watts, "Free Synod Movement" present a listing of all ministers licensed and ordained by the Free Synod.

\(^5\) Mayer to Wolff, May 21, 1822, in Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 32–34. Milledoler's two letters of resignation (dated February 20 and March 18, 1822) are reprinted in Clement Z. Weiser, "The External History of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in the United States, Lancaster, Pa.," Mercersburg Review 23 (1876), 34–36. Milledoler said that he had read copies of the synod minutes and sensed resistance to the school.
announcement and the withdrawal of the congregations that comprised the Free Synod, the old church struggled for several years to stabilize itself and reorganize its efforts. Eventually, in 1825, it opened a small seminary department on the campus of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Without the resources to attract an instructor from beyond its ranks, the synod settled for its own seminary proponent, Lewis Mayer, as professor.56

Did the old church consciously view its new seminary as a means of assimilation? Not according to its public pronouncements. In 1824 at the Bedford, Pennsylvania, meeting of the old church synod, delegates noted that “according to the view of the several members, as well as the entire Body” their seminary should be a German institution, lest “the German language shall die out in silence.” Indeed, they feared that “the Germans in this country are in danger of forgetting their own language and thereby surrendering themselves to the influence of English literature.”57 Both the Free Synod remonstrants and the old synod loyalists saw themselves as faithful Pennsylvania Germans. Indeed, despite seminary opponents’ charges to the contrary, it is unlikely that even seminary supporting German Reformed congregations in Maryland had English preaching in 1820.58 The Free Synod controversy involved issues of ethnicity, but not ones simply pitting assimilation against cultural separatism. Instead the differences involved divergent streams of Americanization—different ethnic responses to life in the new nation.59

56 Richards, History of the Theological Seminary, 129-37.
57 Verhandlungen der Allgemeinen Synode der Hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirche . . . 1824 (Baltimore, 1824), 13-14. The entire discussion recorded in the minutes is filled with appeals to ethnic pride and “German patriotism.” Perhaps this pro-ethnic language emerged after the “English” school provoked such a strong reaction from so many members and clergy. The discussion resulted in the synod’s decision to relocate the seminary from its initial home at Dickinson College (a Presbyterian school at the time) to an independent location in York, Pennsylvania.
58 Bready, History of the Maryland Classis, 36-42. In 1825 one of the classis meeting sermons (delivered by Samuel Helfenstein, Jr.) was in English, although, through 1849, Maryland classis annual gatherings also featured German sermons. The congregation in Frederick, where the seminary was to have been, did not begin English worship until 1829; had the seminary been there it may not have changed even then, since there was still enough German language sentiment to divide the congregation in 1829; see Edmund R. Eschbach, Historic Sketch of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Frederick, Maryland (Frederick, Md., 1894), 30.
59 Clearly, the debates that accompanied the division helped to sharpen the differences that by 1824 separated the two sides. As late as 1863 an interpretation of the division could still be presented in stark, if not angry, terms: [Henry Harbaugh], Uber Spaltungen und Unabhängigkeit in der Kirche Christi, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf neuliche Erregungen des schismatischen Geistes in Theilen der
In the months that followed the controversy over the seminary and the Free Synod several authors spelled out the ideas and issues at stake, giving voice to the fears and logic of both parties. Perhaps the first popular defender of the Free Synod was Carl Gock who described himself as a Berks County, Pennsylvania, farmer and school teacher. Apparently a Lutheran by baptism, he spoke for his Reformed neighbors as a Pennsylvania German immersed in the region's ethno-religious cultural milieu for decades, no matter his claim of having been born in Europe. Gock announced that his *Defense of the Free Church of North America* sprang from his “love of pure biblical religion following the words of Jesus [and of]... sincere freedom.”

For Gock, the issue that sparked the formation of the Free Synod was quite simply one of true American liberty. “In what does our liberty exist, fellow citizens,” he asked, “and what is the cornerstone of our liberty? I answer here...”
what every other free American must also say: ’the right to vote!’”

In place of this traditional exercise of popular opinion as a part of church government, the old synod had proposed establishing layers of authority and complicated corporations governed by indirectly selected boards of directors removed from the influence of the local congregations, so as “to achieve complete control” of the church. Yet Gock was sure that “Every reasonable republican would agree” that there is no incorporation “that does not bring disadvantage to a free people in secular or spiritual matters” because of its separating local opinion and effective power and its chartered right to collect funds from synod members.

With such claims Gock brought together a powerful combination of sentiments linking local authority, community structure, and class. Civic voting rights in Pennsylvania were, after all, still linked to property-holding. Even if churchy voting was an entirely different legal matter, it did suggest ways in which the synod’s actions were especially galling. A distant hierarchy was not only imposing an expensive educational institution that would burden the laity financially and thereby rob them of their property. It was also limiting the laity’s ecclesiastical franchise, thus disregarding whatever standing common men of property had and upsetting the balance of peasant republicanism by subordinating them to a new class of distant clerics and educated anglophones.

Gock went on to detail the threat to liberty posed by the assertive synod itself and its institutional child, the seminary. Gock found ethnic mixing in the synod troubling, apparently reacting to the reciprocal inclusion of Dutch delegates who were, in his mind, English. “How is it that our reverend German preachers so generally unite and mix with the English clergy in a consistory?” Gock asked. “The religion is one thing!, but how do the two languages fit together there is no earlier example at hand in the Old or New World.”

Indeed language and liberty were closely linked in Gock’s mind, but his concern was rooted in republican values, not ethnic romanticism. “[I]f we should send a [lay-elder] representative to General Synod, [and] the

63 Gock, Die Vertheidigung der Freyen Kirche, 11.
64 Ibid., 12.
66 Ibid., 13–14.
reverend pastor takes one who is a true German and who understands little or no English," Gock hypothesized, "and everything takes place in English, the [lay] deputies would then find themselves counting as less than nothing." Liberty was directly linked to lay representatives' comprehending the synodical proceedings. An English-speaking synod robbed Pennsylvania Germans of their republican rights. "O good German citizens," he cried, "what kind of morality will our over-educated reverend clergy teach us then." Moreover, it would only get worse when younger seminarians came along who had been taught in English. "Although the way theology is taught in German is more thorough and basic and produces better pupils ... than the English way," he opined, "nonetheless, the English theology is quickly and easily preferred [by seminary advocates] ... because the worldly law is written in English and, yes, the reverend clergy (at least many of them) also like to mix in worldly matters."6

Gock predicted that the old synod would eventually arrogate to itself as much power as the ecclesiastical oppressors of Europe from whom he believed Pennsylvania Germans' ancestors had fled.68 Indeed, should the synod bureaucratize any further "the sacred body would be too big and too powerful and it is not very hard to execute their plans as they fill the empty places with their [seminary] pupils." In such a setting the tradition of lay elders' acquiescence to clerical leadership would become a sort of tyranny in which deputy votes could be manipulated. With the growth of autonomous synodical power would come the censorship of religious books, Gock predicted, in a manner much like the Roman inquisition. "[S]oon you would hear all the Lutheran and Reformed priests thunder from the pulpit and call everyone unchristian who does not say 'yes' and 'amen' to all that their constitution said, or who protests against it," he warned. Linking his attack to the highly-charged contemporary issue of free masonry and its alleged antidemocratic principles, Gock insinuated that the synod was becoming a secret society for the clergy. Even the ministerial candidates remain uninitiated, he suggested, "until they are named as pastors, and [then] through a handshake and solemn vow, hold secret the particular way of

67 Ibid., 14–15.
68 The entire second chapter of the book (pp. 39–48) is a harangue against the European clergy, while the fifth section is a brief history of the world as a conflict between tyrannical clergy and liberty-loving people of true faith (pp. 73–99). At another place he suggests that European-style religious persecution had surfaced on American shores—in New England, ibid., 33–34.
life.”

Seminaries threaten liberty, too, Gock asserted, by centralizing power and removing ministerial training from the context of local churches whose pastors were directly accountable to them. Gock's rage against schools of higher learning at times took on an anti-intellectual air. Indeed, seminaries ran counter to Gock's brand of folk wisdom: “German farmers in Pennsylvania almost all have good Luther Bibles, with good interpretation from genuine theologians who lived according to Jesus' words,” he claimed. “And so long as we have these, we will answer: let us alone in our darkness!” Gock believed that given English-language sermons of “high academic nonsense” and deprived of their German Bible, he and his neighbors “would in the end become Christians in name only, reasonable animals in human form.”

In the book's last section, Gock delivered a detailed critique of the seminary charter, charging that it could only come from a “monkish-synod-ministerium and consistory priests” who “take for themselves reverend titles” and constitute “an aristocratic spiritual Congress.” The high costs of the school guaranteed that rural people would have to put up with repeated collections for funds, and likely be saddled with what amounted to a church-imposed tax enforced through laws of incorporation making each member financially liable for the school's solvency. Meanwhile seminarians would have learned nothing but student pranks and “Yankee tricks.”

Yet Gock insisted that he was not opposed to proper order. On the contrary, “God is a God of order and a synod free of all private and secret rules will we love and obey,” he insisted. Thus, he could praise what he called

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69 Ibid., 19–22, 101–103, 111–12.

70 See, e.g., Gock's penchant for using biblical quotations suggesting that higher education is foolishness compared to the simple faith of children. Gock claimed that apprentice-style ministerial training is the "apostolic tradition"; ibid., 32. Yet he also argued for establishing more primary schools for rural Pennsylvania Germans—a project he felt suffered for funds while the seminary would consume an ever larger budget. Ibid., 49–53, 60.

71 Ibid., 16.

72 Ibid., 100, etc.

73 Ibid., 104. Some of Gock's anticlerical language sounds similar to that described in Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity.

74 Gock, Die Vertheidigung der Freyen Kirche, 106, 112.

75 Ibid., 107–111; p. 111 includes the story of a seminary graduate in Jena who lacked the spiritual common sense of his uneducated uncle.
the "republican synod in Pennsylvania" under Carl Herman's leadership.76 "A free people love order," but only that which is in accord with their liberty and not coerced. In contrast, corporations and associations amass power and destroy any true republic, and synods held in a language that the people cannot understand undercut their liberty.77

Gock's version of American liberty was not the only one afloat in Pennsylvania German circles of the time, however. Other voices in Gock's own neighborhood, in fact, responded quite differently, stressing obedience and criticizing populist excess. Gock's pamphlet received a quick reply from Theodor Eylert, a school teacher from Berks County's Tulpehocken Township, near Rehersburg, who in January 1823 published *The Darkness in the Free Church of America.*78 Disparaging Gock's "course, false, twisted, tiresome, abusive, shallow, and empty contents,"79 Eylert charged that Gock was simply "a vassal of pastor Rev. Herman and his followers." Eylert devoted much of his pamphlet, with its occasional outbursts of romantic German nationalism, to criticizing Gock's disparaging remarks about European churches and clergy, insisting that American republican ideas could not be used as a measure for the Old World.80

When Eylert came around to Gock's immediate concern, however, he had little sympathy. "If at its center [Gock's] definition of liberty is, as I suspect, 'that one can do and allow, whatever we will'—then I do not speak to him," Eylert asserted. Whoever is a dutiful subject "is free whether he lives in a republic or a monarchical state." On the other hand, the one who detests civic law and order "is a slave even if he lives in America. Daily one hears the word liberty on all lips, and that God himself pities!" the teacher moaned. "If I must have unrestrained satisfaction of all my passion," Eylert cried, "and if I can do so because I live in the United States;—O noble liberty, how one has abused your name! It is lack of restraint that is the ruin of all.

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76 Such a body would only "test candidates to see if they have enough knowledge and fortitude to be a preacher and take counsel of the teaching of Jesus." Indeed he hoped some day Lutherans might even join the group and establish a church organized on Pennsylvania German principles, ibid., 22–24, 28, 114, 118.
77 Ibid., 114, 116, and 19–22.
79 Ibid., 3; and 13, 18, 20, 30, etc.
80 Ibid., 5, 8.
over both the short and long term.\textsuperscript{81}

Such a radical brand of populist liberty was, in fact, another form of tyranny, Eylert insisted. Should a single member dislike something a pastor preached, he could rely on demagoguery to have the pastor turned out. “Plenty of that liberty?” Eylert asked. “In that case it becomes a complete reversal. Here the citizen or farmer is the despot and the reverend pastor the slave; he must dance as we play the pipe.”\textsuperscript{82} Eylert was all too familiar with such a definition of liberty among Americans where “One often has heard: we will not have any non-local, none foreign; we can help ourselves.” The teacher agreed “That is noble, free, and respected republican language,” but its speakers never practiced their profession. While praising independence they aped European fashion and imported Continental goods, as any person going to a coastal port city would see.\textsuperscript{83}

Thus, Eylert concluded, if Gock’s book represented the teaching of the Free Synod, “I am sorry for you . . . because the liberty with which you pompously go about is none other than liberty-dizziness,” and such liberty does not “square with the spirit of the teachings of Christ.”\textsuperscript{84}

Later in 1823 another reply to Gock’s book appeared in Reading, Pennsylvania, under the title \textit{Carl Gock’s Slanders, or the Justification of the German Lutheran and Reformed Synods.}\textsuperscript{85} The author was Johann C. Gossler (1798?–1831), whose work was more detailed yet less profound than Eylert. Gossler was not one to grow romantic over American populist liberty; he had published a life of Napoleon only the year before,\textsuperscript{86} but his effort against Gock was mostly given to personal attacks and point-by-point refutations of Gock’s \textit{Gewäscht} (twaddle).\textsuperscript{87} He did trace the history of the German Reformed synod back to colonial days when “deeply respected

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 10. See p. 17 for comments on order, society, and church.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 11.


\textsuperscript{84} Eylert, \textit{Die Finsterniß in der freyen Kirche}, 32.


\textsuperscript{86} [Johann] C. Gossler, \textit{Lebensgeschichte Napoleon Bonaparte’s, des ersten kaisers der Franzosen, mit besonderer rücksicht auf dessen zehn jährige regierung, Verbannung und tod. Vier theile in einem bande, mit kupfern} . . . (Reading, Pa., 1822). Gossler was apparently involved in a variety of publishing enterprises; see his obituary in \textit{Reading Adler}, April 12, 1831.

\textsuperscript{87} Gossler, \textit{Carl Gock’s Verläumdungen}, 23, 65, 74, 96.
names such as Schlatter, Pomp, Helfrich, Helfenstein, Faber, Hendel, [and] Winkhaus” provided supervision for the church and good order prevented “anarchy that gets out of control.”

Gossler believed that the Free Synod resulted simply from fearmongering among uneducated rural Pennsylvania Germans who did not understand constitutional law as well as they should have. Gossler may have been partly correct, and yet such arguments only revealed the gulf that separated him from the impulses animating many of his neighbors. To Gossler it was obvious that resolutions passed by religious bodies and even chartered church institutions posed no threat to public law or to anyone’s civil liberty. To his more reformist mind, church and state had legally distinct roles, yet supported one another in achieving common social goals; a state-chartered seminary was one such result—and one to be appreciated. Gossler also found fears of English language influence overdrawn, since he claimed at present “in our Reformed Synod no one may speak English without express permission.” Moreover, anxiety over the influence of so-called English synods was misplaced since they were all historically and theologically related.

Gossler most clearly revealed his commitment to vesting authority in a hierarchy of merit in his support of the theological seminary. “How can we practice virtue alone if we do not know what virtue is?” he asked. “How can we get clear the often dark places of the Bible if we do not have our men who have dedicated themselves exclusively to the study of the Holy Scriptures” and who can rebuke us if we choose some mistaken opinion? Gossler feared that the Free Synod had replaced external authority with subjectivity—or the demagoguery of Free Synod leaders, or the likes of Gock. Turning some of Gock’s primitivist-sounding arguments on their heads, Gossler suggesting that the New Testament church had structure, organization, and even a treasury, much like the old synod. Thus, it was the...
Synod of the German Reformed Church that carried on apostolic tradition, while the Free Synod could claim nothing but human innovation.94

Behind and beside these arguments, Gossler also presented the Free Synod as a ploy for power on the part of the large Herman family,95 a clerical clan whose members had all left the old church.96 Gossler went so far as to accuse the aged teacher and pastor L. F. Herman with forging Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, pastor Peter Miller’s name on a secession document, and to charge Herman with giving only $5.00 to the synod treasury out of an 1818 Oley congregation contribution of $10.32.97

In the end, Gossler’s book may have actually worked in favor of the Free Synod, since Gossler’s personal attacks on the venerated Herman engendered a measure of defensive loyalty among the Free Synod faithful. Indeed, on June 12, 1823, thirty lay representatives from fifteen congregations of Berks, Lancaster, Chester, and Montgomery Counties met at the Hereford German Reformed Church to protest the attacks on the Free Synod and Gossler’s ethical charges against L. F. Herman. They asserted that Herman had not started the Free Synod, insisting that it was

94 Ibid., 144–45. In fact, Gossier insisted (p. 154) that “the reverends of the ‘Free Synod’ already some time ago completely discarded the old symbolical book, namely the Heidelberg school catechism, after which the members of the German Reformed Church in North American and their parents and grandparents were confirmed,” and introduced “a whole new teaching book.” The charge was incorrect, however, as it referred to the group’s republishing L. F. Herman’s text to accompany the catechism—a type of book several Reformed pastors had issued in America to assist in teaching (not replacing) the Heidelberg document. See Lebrecht F. Hermann, Catechismus der glaubenslehren Lebenspflichter der Christlichen religion. . . . (Reading, Pa., 1819 [and various later reprintings and editions]).

95 In the midst of the battle over the seminary at the 1821 synod, other dramas had played themselves out, including one involving the expulsion of pastor Frederick L. Herman (1795–1849), son of respected pastor and teacher L. F. Herman, for intemperance. Shamed, the aged Herman asked what his son’s suspension involved, to which the synodical president Hinsch replied apparently contemptuously, “In diesem falle heißt das auf immer und ewig ausgeschlossen” [In this case it calls for exclusion always and forever]. There was no provision in Reformed polity for such a sweeping exclusion (and, in fact, he was later reinstated by the Lebanon classis). After Hinsch’s remark the elder Herman left the meeting in anger. Another son, Augustus L. Herman (1804–1872), was also later suspended. See Daniel Y. Heisler and Henry Harbaugh, The Fathers of the German Reformed Church in Europe and America, Continued by D. Y. Heisler (3 vols. [numbered 4–6], Lancaster, Pa., and Reading, Pa., 1872–88 [vol. 5 appeared in 1881]), 5:36–37; and Verhandlungen einer Allgemeinen Synode der hochdeutschen Reformirten Kirche . . . 1821, 21. L. F. Herman’s son, Charles, hosted the Free Synod organizational meeting. Son-in-law John C. Guldin pastored three Chester County churches that were among the first to leave the old church.

96 Gossler, Carl Gock’s Verläumdhungen, 155.

97 Ibid., 18–21, 138. The forgery charge involved a February 9, 1822, meeting at the New Hanover congregation.
the people's desire to leave the old church and Carl and L. F. Herman merely assumed leadership of the populist movement.  

With several decades of hindsight German Reformed pastor and historian Theodore Appel (1823–1907) reflected on the bitter rancor surrounding the Free Synod schism, wondering if “it might be inferred that” during the 1820s “there could have been little or no Christianity . . . among the German people” of Pennsylvania. In Appel's opinion, however, there was plenty of piety to go around; the problem stemmed rather from the fact that “the churches in Eastern Pennsylvania were badly constituted,” since “the old order of things as brought from Germany still prevailed.”

But, in fact, it did not. The Free Synod faction that Appel associated with reactionary opposition to a theological seminary and fear of inter-denominational contact with English-speaking Christians had acted in what was becoming a characteristically American way. Its members had mobilized, asserted their rights, drafted declarations of independence from authority they no longer considered legitimate, and published their actions in the popular press. In doing so, of course, they were striving to protect their understanding of what it meant to be faithful German Reformed people, but they had grounded their struggle in an American promise of liberty which they claimed promised freedom to manage their own affairs.

Meanwhile, supporters of the old synod could insist that they, too, were faithfully carrying on the German Reformed tradition in America, tied to their Dutch coreligionists since colonial days and championing synodical authority and respect for meritocratic leadership. Their notions of authority and American liberty showed signs of affinity with that of American evangelical crusaders, although their commitment to American-style democratic principles was perhaps less sure than they themselves realized. That writers such as Eylert and Gossler could grow romantically eloquent when writing of Germany, Frederick the Great, or Europe in general, demonstrated that they had not embraced the American exceptionalism that

98 "Kirchen-Angelegenheiten," Reading Adler, June 24, 1823. The resolutions quoted from and refuted the Gossler book, particularly regarding the charges of forgery, financial mismanagement of contributions, and disregard for the Heidelberg Catechism. The group also cited the Tennessee Lutheran Synod as another group of German church folk who refused to accept distant, centralizing authority—in their case, that of the Lutheran General Synod.

99 Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 35–36.
marked the larger evangelical-republican coalition of their day.¹⁰⁰

Appel was correct, however, in suggesting that “many people imagined that they were in danger of losing some of their most precious rights—of being brought under a galling tyranny.”¹⁰¹ But what sort of galling tyranny was the most threatening to Pennsylvania German liberty and faithfulness? The answers to that question demonstrated the American quality of their ethnic and religious identities. They also remind us of the other, often overlooked ways in which ethnic Protestants wove together the themes of freedom, authority, and order in the early republic.

Other American Protestant churches also experienced schism during the first half of the nineteenth century, including such sizable groups as the Methodists and Presbyterians. What to make of religious life in a nation that saw itself as the “new order of the ages” and how to manage the claims of sometimes contradictory notions of liberty were not merely the struggles of cultural minorities. But for Pennsylvania Germans these questions were coupled with a more basic concern of defining peoplehood. In the midcentury decades that followed, new conflicts would erupt within German Reformed churches as adherents struggled with issues of religious authority and denominational structure. By then, however, they did not begin as battles over the possibility or promise of Americanization, but as problems posed by the successes of Americanization and facing a people who, despite—or maybe even because of—their strong sense of ethnic identity, thought of themselves as fully and properly American.

Goshen College

STEVEN M. NOLT

¹⁰⁰ By the 1850s the American evangelical coalition was becoming more critical of the United States, but even that criticism was not set against the glories of the Old World. See Mark Y. Hanley, Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrl with the American Republic, 1830–1860 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994).

¹⁰¹ Appel, Beginnings of the Theological Seminary, 34. Of course Appel’s commitment to a version of late-nineteenth-century Protestant ecumenicity likely colored his interpretation of any sort of schism.