



*A Tale of Two Deists:
John Fitch, Elihu Palmer, and the
Boundary of Tolerable Religious
Expression in Early National
Philadelphia*

FOR A FEW WEEKS IN EARLY 1792, heady disputes over the truth of Christianity moved into Philadelphia's streets and press. When deist pamphleteer and orator Elihu Palmer placed a notice in the *National Gazette* for a speech "against the divinity of Jesus Christ" that he intended to deliver in Philadelphia on a Sunday morning, he incited both a print war and local mob action against him. Philadelphian John Fitch anticipated this reaction to Palmer, recording in the pages of his autobiography that he believed Palmer's actions were "very imprudent."¹

¹ *National Gazette*, Mar. 15, 1792; John Fitch, *The Autobiography of John Fitch*, ed. Frank D. Prager (Philadelphia, 1976), 139. Although studies of Palmer are few, see Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic* (Lawrence, KS, 1992), 240–44; Nathalie Caron, "Introduction to the Life and Work of a Militant American Deist: Elihu Palmer (1764–1806)," *Annales du Monde Anglophone* 1 (1999): 35–45. Secondary works on Fitch include Richard DeLuca, "Against the Tide: The Unfortunate Life of Steamboat Inventor John Fitch," *Connecticut History* 44 (2005): 1–31; and Ric N. Caric, "To the Convivial Grave and Back: John Fitch as a Case Study in Cultural Failure, 1785–1792," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (2002): 537–89.

Fitch knew of what he spoke; he was also a deist and an active member in the Universal Society, a small deist debate club he helped establish in 1790. During the society's two-year existence it had never aroused popular opposition on the streets or in the press. Unlike Palmer, Fitch and the members of the Universal Society understood where and how to express provocative religious opinions without attracting community ire.

The different reactions to Palmer and Fitch elucidate an informal boundary between acceptable and unacceptable religious expression in early national Philadelphia. This line was not a legal but rather a cultural construct that reflected local religious sensibilities and was maintained through local strategies for policing public order. Although the boundary of acceptability was fluid, it influenced where and how dissenters expressed controversial religious opinions. It was discernable in the geography of the city and in the content of the local print culture.² Members of the Universal Society expressed their deism in the semiprivate realm of a debate club, where radical ideas and conversation would only be heard by and shared with people who willingly joined. As a result, Fitch's society was accommodated spatially in the city, and its presence was tolerated within civil society. On the contrary, Palmer's proposed oration was controversial because he announced it in a local newspaper, publicizing deism in a way that the Universal Society never did. Philadelphians therefore challenged his presence in the city and in the local public sphere by deploying social and political mechanisms that ordered urban life in the 1790s.

The 1792 Palmer controversy reveals the daily exchanges that solidified and enforced Philadelphia's boundary of acceptable religious expression. The polemicists and rioters in 1792 all subscribed to a resonant political fiction that American civil society and political culture had only a finite capacity for dealing with conflicting religious opinions. The Palmer controversy indicates that early national Philadelphians defined the religious standards of their community, and attempted to limit religious difference

² My effort to understand how and where deism was expressed in intellectual as well as spatial terms draws upon recent work on the practices of religious toleration in early modern Europe, especially Benjamin J. Kaplan, "Fictions of Privacy: House Chapels and the Spatial Accommodation of Religious Dissent in Early Modern Europe," *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 1031–64, online at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.4/ah0402001031.html>, pars. 8–9. Although Kaplan's study focuses on European states with legal religious establishments, the methods that early modern Europeans developed for addressing religious difference was remarkably similar to American approaches during the 1790s, only the focus was on categories of opinion rather than dissenting religious beliefs.

within their community, by using newspaper debate and crowd action as opposed to legal pronouncements or abstract philosophical treatises. In doing so, all controversy participants, including Palmer and his opponents, demonstrated their commitment to ideas and practices that promoted religious *toleration*—an approach that emphasized a balance between the common good and religious freedom at the expense of the latter if necessary.

Philadelphians were committed to a narrow understanding of religious toleration premised on locally enforced boundaries between private belief and public expression over freedom of conscience—an idea that had yet to embed itself in American culture. Although adoption of the federal Constitution advanced an intellectual shift toward an understanding of religion as a matter of opinion and a legal shift toward freedom of conscience, this was a process that moved only haltingly. Reaction to Palmer's announcement reveals that early national Americans adhered to the practices of religious toleration even as the ideals of their Revolution and the guarantees of the new Bill of Rights and federal Constitution encouraged them to accept more expansive ideas of religious freedom. This conflict between political ideals and local practices was central to how early national Philadelphians grappled with epistemological questions regarding religious truth and their political implications. Specifically, Philadelphians contested the extent of permissible religious toleration in a political and cultural domain between private religious belief and the formal realms of constitutional deliberation.

The Palmer controversy allows us to reconstruct in detail the intellectual, social, and political context of these debates. Beginning with the popular discussions regarding Pennsylvania's constitution of 1776, and then proceeding into the early 1790s when Philadelphia was the national capital, this article highlights the collection of ideas, assumptions, and practices that transformed concerns about deism and the sources of religious truth into a political grammar for debating the meaning of religious toleration.³

³ The two accounts of the legal and religious history of ideas about freedom of opinion that inform my interpretation are: Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York, 1997), 310–12; and Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 263–68. On the intellectual and historical significance of understanding religion as a matter of opinion rather than faith, see Roger D. Lund, ed., *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. J. G. A. Pocock, "Within the Margins: The Definition of Orthodoxy," 33–53.

Deism and the Constitution of State Government in Pennsylvania

The popular efforts in Philadelphia to establish informal boundaries of acceptable religious expression exemplified a central eighteenth-century concern to balance the certainties of religious belief, the proliferation of conflicting religious opinions, and a conception of the public or common good.⁴ In the early national United States, this issue became more pronounced as various states disestablished religion during the 1780s and after Article VI of the federal Constitution prohibited religious tests for national political office.⁵ Americans expressed and debated concerns about Christianity's vitality in response to revolutionary political theory that emphasized private conscience and the epistemic authority of individual common sense. Having sanctified private belief, public religious expressions—without the counter authority of established churches—became problematic in entirely new ways. From the 1770s through the 1790s, Americans thus confronted the possibility that republican ideals could introduce uncertainty into hitherto widely accepted religious truths. Local disestablishment, combined with a federal Constitution that was relatively silent on matters of religion, transformed philosophical questions about the sources of religious knowledge into contentious political questions about the social and cultural limits of tolerable religious expression.

Philadelphia's informal religious geography also reflected recent political developments, in particular the adoption of a state constitution in 1776. Pennsylvania's constitution has long been touted as the most radically democratic frame of government established during the American Revolution. The constitution's provisions included an annually elected, unicameral legislature; the expansion of representation and the franchise;

⁴ On eighteenth-century efforts to balance religion and the common good in the Anglo-American context, see Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994). On the persistence of ideas about the common or public good in the early American republic, see William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996).

⁵ Stephen Botein provides a succinct overview of the central religious themes common in the various state constitutions. See "Religious Dimensions of the Early American State," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987), 318–19. Delegates to the North Carolina and Massachusetts ratifying conventions debated the implications of Article VI in terms of how best to balance religious belief with the common good. See *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. Jonathan Elliot (Philadelphia, 1836–59), (North Carolina) 5:196–98 and (Massachusetts) 2:90 and 118–19.

a twelve-member council rather than a single executive; and a provision that stipulated that all laws passed by the legislature had to appear in print and receive popular approval before enactment. The 1776 constitution required members of the assembly to declare a belief “in one God, the creator and governor of the universe, the rewarder of the good and the punisher of the wicked.” The oath continued, “And I do acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by Divine inspiration.”⁶

After the constitution was introduced to the public, some of Philadelphia’s most notable residents wondered whether Christianity might become a casualty of the new legal framework. Prominent merchant John Bayard thought so. Bayard presided over a public meeting in October 1776, where participants unanimously condemned the religious oath contained in Pennsylvania’s new constitution because the “Christian religion is not treated with proper respect.” At issue was the absence of any reference to the divinity of Jesus Christ or the holiness of scripture. Moreover, government members had to acknowledge a God rather than profess belief in *the* Christian God. Bayard argued that Pennsylvania’s constitution did not recognize Christianity’s central theological tenets and that the state’s elected officials were not required to do so either.⁷

Writers in local newspapers also pondered what would become of Pennsylvania if government service required nary an utterance of pious Christian belief. Several issues of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* included a mock exchange that debated the new constitution in which Orator Puff enlightened Peter Easy about the religious implications of the existing oath. Orator Puff emphasized the oath’s lack of reference to a triune God or to holy scripture. More troubling was that Orator Puff detected designs by convention delegates “to throw slight and contempt upon” Christianity, thus allowing “Deists, Jews, Mahometans, and Indians, by putting their own gloss or equivocation on the foregoing ‘acknowledgement’ may hold the first offices of profit and trust in our free and blessed state.”⁸

The new constitution’s democratic provisions made its religious oath

⁶ Constitution of Pennsylvania (1776), sec. 10. For an early history of Pennsylvania’s 1776 constitution, see J. Paul Selsam, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776: A Study in Revolutionary Democracy* (Philadelphia, 1936). For a recent survey of American political history before the Civil War that takes as its starting point events in Philadelphia in 1776, see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005).

⁷ *Pennsylvania Packet*, Oct. 22, 1776. The meeting was held on October 17.

⁸ *Evening Post*, Oct. 10, 1776.

especially controversial. Opponents feared that the 1776 constitution would grant ordinary Pennsylvanians new political power while also eliminating safeguards that existed under Pennsylvania's colonial charter to prevent non-Christians from serving in the government. A disbelieving citizenry was tolerable, but a constitutional framework that provided disbelievers a political conduit through which personal opinions could be translated into electoral decisions was altogether unacceptable. According to the constitution's detractors, religious toleration in Pennsylvania should allow private unbelief but not grant it civil status.

An indication that opponents of the 1776 constitution subscribed to limited notions of religious toleration is evident in the menagerie of religious others listed by the *Evening Post*. The most obvious similarity among deists, Jews, Indians, and Mahometans—the eighteenth-century term for Muslims—was that they were not Christian. This fact alone made them suspect within a culture that based a range of civil, social, economic, and political rights and obligations on oaths, trust, and conceptions of morality that Christians believed were binding only if individuals believed in eternal punishments administered according to the judgment of a Christian God. Of the religious groups listed as potential legislators, deists were most likely to be elected. For demographic and cultural reasons, it was nearly impossible for Jews, Muslims, or Indians to be elected at all, let alone in large numbers. There were too few Jews and no Muslims in Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania's very recent history of violence between Euro-Americans and Indians in its western regions certainly made Native Americans unlikely candidates. By citing the possibility of undesirable religious "others" entering Pennsylvania politics, constitutional opponents actually voiced concerns that republican political principles included non-Christians as full participants in civil society. This claim was a polemic strategy, however, not an actual prediction informed by the reality of Pennsylvania's religious culture.

English intellectual traditions regarding religious toleration, especially John Locke's writings, and popular English political tactics from the 1750s influenced the opponents. Locke's classic defense of religious toleration, premised on sincerity of belief, did not extend to Catholics and atheists; he held that the former were ignorant of true theology and the latter politically deviant and subversive. Locke's formulation offered a precedent for limiting tolerance to beliefs that did not disrupt civil and cultural life, a sensible position considering Locke's proximity to the reli-

gious strife caused by the English Civil War.⁹ Popular English appropriations and applications of Locke's theory of tolerance were evident in responses to Parliament's 1753 act enabling Jewish naturalization, the so-called "Jew Bill" to its detractors. Opposition polemics warned English readers that the bill threatened to allow a range of "prohibited sects," including deists, to assume political power. These writers believed that the bill undermined England's status as a Christian nation.¹⁰

Pennsylvanians deployed a similar set of fears and warnings to enforce limited religious toleration in the absence of a state church. Pennsylvania may not have officially been a Christian commonwealth, but critics of the constitution believed that Pennsylvania did have a Christian political culture. The concerns broached at the October 1776 public meeting and expressed in the *Evening Post* were amplified, expanded, and contested by writers on both sides of the issue during the early fall.¹¹ These polemicists, all of whom wrote anonymously, used the press to construct an informal boundary of acceptability, and many of them identified denials of Christian revelation as the paramount political transgression of this threshold. Early national Philadelphians addressed the problem of a political culture that was unable to accommodate broad religious difference through figures such as Orator Puff, who became fictional architects of the city's very tangible limits on religious expression.

Debates over the state constitution's religious test subsided in autumn 1776 as the broader demands of the Revolution gained importance. Nevertheless, Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution and its oath created political groupings along fairly distinct religious and ethnic lines. Constitutionalist—those who supported the 1776 Pennsylvania constitution—included a leadership and an electorate that were primarily

⁹ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (London, 1689).

¹⁰ On the "Jew Bill" and its implications for English debates about the limits of toleration, debates that relied on polemic strategies that anticipated debates in Pennsylvania in 1776, see Justin Champion, "Toleration and Citizenship in Enlightenment England: John Toland and the Naturalization of the Jews, 1714–1753," in *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter (Cambridge, 2000), 133–52. "Prohibited sects" quoted in Champion, 136. I borrow the term "menagerie" from Don Herzog, who uses it to describe racial, gender, and class categories in late eighteenth-century British political discourse that informed debates over social hierarchy and cultural mores. See Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), 244–323. A similar combination of categorization, polemic, and political debate defined questions about the religious implications of the American government and state following the Revolution.

¹¹ In opposition to the constitution, see *Evening Post*, Sept. 26, 1776, and *Pennsylvania Packet*, Oct. 29, 1776. In support of the constitution, see *Pennsylvania Packet*, Oct. 22, 1776, and *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 13, 1776.

Scots-Irish Presbyterians or members of the German Reformed churches. The Republicans, consisting of Anglicans, Quakers, Lutherans, and various German Sectarians, opposed the new state constitution. They did so largely because it created a government that diminished the social and political authority that they, especially the Quakers and Anglicans, wielded during the colonial period.¹²

Both factions competed for political power throughout the 1770s and 1780s. After adoption of the federal Constitution in 1787, ratification debates in Pennsylvania occurred along partisan lines similar to those that had shaped state politics during the previous decade. Constitutionalist tended toward Anti-Federalism and Republicans frequently became Federalists. Though Anglican-led Federalists and the Presbyterian-led Anti-Federalists had political motives for advancing their respective positions regarding ratification, they had religious reasons as well. Weak religious oaths or the absence of religious tests caused little consternation for many Pennsylvania Federalists. Their leadership and constituencies included numerous latitudinarian Anglicans and Quakers who supported religious toleration for philosophical and theological reasons. The Presbyterian influence among the Anti-Federalists ensured a commitment to orthodox Christian piety and the popular civic mechanisms for enforcing it.¹³ William Petrikin, an Anti-Federalist writer from Carlisle, adhered to the constellation of religious and political ideas at the center of Anti-Federalist dissent in Pennsylvania. Petrikin advanced notions of democracy premised on localism and the power of juries, the militia, and even crowds as the most effective sources of popular political action. He also subscribed to a narrow definition of religious toleration and supported religious tests in order to ensure the virtue of political leaders. As a voice for the state's "plebian Anti-Federalists," Petrikin's writings reflected only one form of Anti-Federalist thought in Pennsylvania, but they revealed much about the political and intellectual context in which the 1792 controversy unfolded.¹⁴

Distinct understandings of religious toleration, democratic authority, and state power expressed by Pennsylvania Federalists and their Anti-

¹² For an overview of the religious and ethnic alignments that emerged in debates over Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution, see Owen S. Ireland, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Ratifying the Constitution in Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA, 1995), xvi–xvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 256–57.

¹⁴ On Petrikin, see Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788–1828* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 107–9.

Federalist opponents in the 1780s persisted into the 1790s. Federalist and Anti-Federalist positions framed debates over the political implications of private disbelief in contexts far removed from the confines of constitutional ratification. Political alignments that emerged during the 1770s and the 1780s ensured that discussions over the limits of religious toleration would continue to simmer in Pennsylvania throughout the Revolution and into the 1790s.

Pennsylvanians adopted a new constitution in 1790 that included a more generic religious test than the one it replaced; it also allowed for greater religious freedom. Pennsylvania's new state constitution, along with a federal constitution that prohibited religious tests for national office, reinforced popular assumptions that Pennsylvania, and indeed the nation, needed informal limits on acceptable religious expression in order to sustain a viable political culture.¹⁵ The anonymous polemicists in 1776, along with Pennsylvania's subsequent political history, had shaped definitions of acceptable religious expression that Palmer, Fitch, and others grappled with in Philadelphia during the early 1790s. These definitions provided markedly different spaces for Fitch and Palmer to debate and promote their beliefs.

Accepting, and Rejecting, Deism in Philadelphia

National and local political developments influenced Philadelphians as they debated religious epistemology in the early 1790s. These discussions centered on the real and imagined presence of "infidelity"—a protean term that included irreligion, disbelief, and critiques of Christianity. Early national Philadelphia seemed a likely site for arguments over religious knowledge, but, ostensibly, an unlikely place for these arguments to generate popular opposition to unorthodox belief. Historians have described Philadelphia's place within the orbit of the "Revolutionary Enlightenment." In the 1790s, local luminaries mingled with French visitors, each group admiring Philadelphia's climate of religious freedom and its progressive social and intellectual institutions. The city was home to the American Philosophical Society, and between 1790 and 1800 it was

¹⁵ Ireland, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics*, 259, 262–63, and 273. Article IX, section 4 of the 1790 constitution stipulated that "no person, who acknowledges the being of a God and a future state of rewards and punishments, shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office or place of trust or profit under this commonwealth." Gone was any reference to scripture, inspired or otherwise.

the capital of the United States. Even the orderly grid of city streets suggested enlightened rationalism to Philadelphia's visitors.¹⁶ The existence of the Universal Society and Palmer's initial expectation that Philadelphia would offer "a more extensive field for the display of his talents" complemented this perception of early national Philadelphia.¹⁷

However, Philadelphia in the 1790s was also characterized by community imperatives to police the sites where controversial religious opinions could be expressed, shared, and propagated. The order and stability of Philadelphia's enlightened urban culture depended on this discipline, which was an extension of practices and debates that first emerged in Pennsylvania politics during the 1770s. This discipline was informed by concern about the possibility of religious violence and strife that always lurked beneath proclamations of religious toleration. The experiences of Fitch and Palmer reveal that Philadelphia was a place with commonly understood and agreed upon spaces for the expression of disbelief in Christianity; this understanding shaped how religious toleration was actually practiced.¹⁸ In a city such as Philadelphia, religious ideas could be expressed in a variety of mediums, from fleeting personal exchanges on the street to published philosophical treatises. The cumulative result of these discussions, however, was a concept of religious toleration that was a social and political construct rather than merely a normative concept or a legal doctrine.

Fitch, Palmer, and Palmer's opponents all believed that civil society and political culture had a finite capacity for dealing with conflicting reli-

¹⁶ On Philadelphia and the "Revolutionary Enlightenment," see Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 202–24. Some more recent studies that outline intellectual and cultural life in Philadelphia during the 1790s are, Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001); and Nina Reid-Maroney, *Philadelphia's Enlightenment, 1740–1800: Kingdom of Christ, Empire of Reason* (Westport, CT, 2001). The works by May and Reid-Maroney engage the broader meaning of the Enlightenment as a historical moment in America, and they focus, rightly so, on its religious implications. Scholars of the European Enlightenment have recently returned to its religious manifestations, and with this shift in focus they have also proffered definitions of the Enlightenment as not merely a set of philosophical or religious precepts, but as new alignments of institutions, spaces, and communication networks in which its intellectual history unfolded. See, in particular, Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1061–80. My attempt to embed the Universal Society and the Palmer controversy in the society and politics of Philadelphia is informed by Sheehan's insights in combination with the intellectual history model of May and Reid-Maroney.

¹⁷ John Fellows, *Posthumous Pieces by Elihu Palmer* (London, 1824), 5–6.

¹⁸ On the efforts to understand the practices of religious toleration, see Kaplan, "Fictions of Privacy," pars. 8–9.

gious and political opinions. Deists and nondeists alike were committed, albeit from different theological perspectives, to a conception of limited religious toleration. For Fitch, through his Universal Society, and Palmer, through his defense of a right to publicly denounce Jesus Christ, toleration entailed a demonstration that no religious belief was truer than any other. All sectarian doctrines, faith claims, or sacraments must be viewed only as matters of opinion, not incontrovertible truth, in order to make toleration meaningful and avoid religious violence.

Nevertheless, Palmer and Fitch were not unabashed advocates of religious liberty. Because their definition of tolerance made them particularly wary of sectarian appeals in public life, they argued that religious ideas grounded on anything but reason were sure to result in sectarian strife. Concerned about the social disruption of unrestrained religious belief, Palmer and Fitch advanced notions of toleration in which deism determined the ideal boundary of acceptable religious opinion; revealed religion transgressed this boundary. Fitch and Palmer helped maintain a regime of limited religious toleration premised on the community's obligation to police religious expression.¹⁹

John Fitch came to his definition of religious tolerance within postrevolutionary Philadelphia's rationalist climate. Born in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1743, and after stints as a clock maker, a silversmith, and a land surveyor and speculator, Fitch found his way to Pennsylvania where, in 1785, he began work on a steam engine.²⁰ Fitch developed his idea for a deist society while acquainted with business partner and self-professed deist Henry Voight. In his autobiography, Fitch recorded details about the origins and history of the Universal Society. A salient theme throughout this work was his sensitivity to gauging pronouncements of deism by context and audience. He relayed moments of mild drunkenness in which he and Voight shared their religious views with the many visitors to Fitch's steamboat. Fitch acknowledged the imprudence of sharing

¹⁹ On deistic notions of religious toleration as developed by English deists such as John Toland, see Champion, "Toleration and Citizenship in Enlightenment England," 151. As outlined by Champion, Toland's conception of toleration reflected the role of religious dissent within England's state church, a context in which arguments against the truth of divine revelation were directed against the government, its primary target, and the broad cultural field of religious difference was of secondary importance. I argue that in the early national United States the implications of deistic toleration were reversed: the state was of secondary importance, and completely irrelevant in places such as Pennsylvania, but the culture's religious diversity and the potential power of private belief posed the real danger to conceptions of the public good.

²⁰ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 120–21; DeLuca, "Against the Tide," 1–31.

such unpopular beliefs, but also stated that he and Voight quickly learned “that large bodies of people were of our belieff altho too delicate to confess it.” His presumption that deism had popular, if often unstated, appeal supported his belief that expressions of religious opinion were often circumscribed by social and political considerations. Fitch was interested in forming a deist society where “all questions should be freely discoursed even to the denial of the divinity of Moses Jesus Christ or Mahomet.” Yet, he also recognized that popular aversion to religious strife and the persistence of informal social limitations on the expression of deism posed a practical challenge to his endeavor.²¹ Fitch concluded that critical investigations of religion should be grounded in the normative foundations of debate-club sociability.²²

Fitch’s proposal, outlined in his autobiography, sought to temper the disruptive forces of religious sectarianism by offering a model of sociability that did not rely upon revealed religion and professions of faith as its primary adhesives. Instead, Fitch wanted his society to instill moral obligation in its members by requiring them to honor each other. This society would enforce moral discipline by publicly expelling members who offended other society members or nonmembers. Fitch argued that his secularized notions of honor and shame would be a far more effective means of influencing behavior “than all the Tormants of Damnation preached by the ablest divines.” Fitch’s desire to prove that his society could remain amicable and its members moral after disallowing divinely ordained forms of eternal punishment was crucial, for he hoped to gather in his association “a large body of people in whome Religion or rather Christian Creeds had no weight to induce them to behave as good Citizens.”²³

When the time came to actually organize the society, Fitch recruited Voight, who readily approved of the ambitious plan; within a few days they persuaded others to join. Voight was the chief coiner at the United States Mint in Philadelphia, which explains in part why Isaac Hough, a mint clerk, became an early member of the society. An engraver named

²¹ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 121.

²² David S. Shields has described literary debate clubs in the early republic as places formed for nonadversarial conversation. Although Shields is primarily interested in clubs formed by writers and readers, the priority these clubs placed upon comity and the avoidance of political problems was reflected in Fitch’s understanding of the Universal Society. See Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 321–22.

²³ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 121–22.

Robert Scott also joined, as did a Mr. Parrish. The society nominated the latter, along with Voight, to draft its constitution.²⁴ By the winter of 1790, Fitch claimed that the society had upwards of forty members. Based on available membership information, the Universal Society largely attracted artisans and mechanics, the same sort of people who gravitated towards Philadelphia's Universalist Christian churches.²⁵

Once established, Fitch envisioned his society as being more than a mere "Deistical Society"; he considered it a forum for open public discussion between deists and Christians. Fitch wanted deists and Christians to distinguish themselves during meetings by wearing the society seal attached to their clothing with a blue or a red ribbon, indicating one's belief in either deism or Christianity. Fitch's attention to the details of a society seal and the implications of adorning it suggests that he hoped to channel what were historically socially disruptive distinctions between infidelity and sectarianism into literal badges of identity. Patrons would be able to wear or remove them within a realm of sociability and free inquiry without being held to categorical professions of faith. Fitch had lofty goals for his proposed society; it was established "for the benefit of mankind and support of Civil Government," not just in the United States but also throughout the world. He ultimately argued for a cosmopolitan sensibility as an outgrowth of deistic free inquiry. The Universal Society marked a first step toward replacing an often local or sectarian religious identity with that of membership in a global community of free thinkers.²⁶

The society recorded its proceedings in ways that paralleled efforts during the French Revolution to demarcate time and record history without references to the sacred or Christianity, but rather with a temporality suitable to the aims of the society and a broader sense of national identity. Fitch initiated this move by arguing before the society that, "as we denied Jesus Christ I thought it improper to date our writings after the Christian

²⁴ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 121–22. On the occupations of the first members, see James Hardie, *Philadelphia Directory and Register* (Philadelphia, 1793).

²⁵ Ronald Schultz, "God and Workingmen: Popular Religion and the Formation of Philadelphia's Working Class, 1790–1830," in *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, VA, 1994), 137 and 148–55.

²⁶ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 121–22. Fitch offered a second reason for proposing the society, one that spoke to his own self-image rather than his adherence to lofty ideals of cosmopolitan free inquiry: "Pride" and his determination "to let the world know as contemptable as I was and despised by all ranks of People from the first Officers of Government down to the Blacburry garls" that he could still change the world.

Era." The members agreed, and at that point they dated their transactions from the "1st year of the Universal Society and of the Independence of America fifteen." The society's decision to jettison the Christian calendar emphasized its devotion to free inquiry and its utopian aspirations.²⁷ This commitment was also evident in the questions submitted for debate. They covered a wide range of topics, from the appropriateness of polygamy, capital punishment, and dueling to questions about physics and meteorology. The society also broached questions about central tenets of Christianity. William Goodfellow, a watchmaker, asked whether belief in an afterlife was conducive to human happiness. Mathew Burch, a cabinetmaker, posed the question, "Are the Prayers of finite Creatures of any avail with Deity?"²⁸

Ultimately, however, the Universal Society did not fulfill Fitch's ambitious hopes; instead, it was a semiactive debate club with a relatively small following. Nevertheless, its existence offers an illuminating counterpoint to the reaction engendered by Palmer's proposed oration. Although members of the Universal Society held religious opinions wholly in line with Palmer's, they expressed them in a private setting that did not evoke concerns about the limits of religious toleration. The Universal Society had an undisturbed existence even though its members were avowed deists participating in regular meetings at locations outside the homes of the various members. The Universal Society likely had a public profile. Neighborhood residents and local magistrates were certainly aware of it. However, in its organization and in Fitch's founding principles, the society did not challenge what historian Benjamin J. Kaplan described in another context as the "fictions of privacy." According to Kaplan, the "fictions of privacy" were pretenses of secrecy and private religious belief that allowed communities to permit fairly open expressions of religious difference and still maintain the semblance of a coherent religious identity or sensibility.²⁹ In the case of early national Philadelphia, infidelity could be tolerated only if all interested parties agreed that it remained a matter of private belief expressed in contexts removed from arenas of public power. The Philadelphia to which Palmer arrived in 1792 was one where a strong intellectual bent toward Enlightenment sympathies persisted amid the presence of a "cultural fiction" that patterned how communities accom-

²⁷ Ibid., 123.

²⁸ Ibid., 130–32.

²⁹ Kaplan, "Fictions of Privacy," pars. 8–9.

modated religious difference within civil society.³⁰

Palmer's path to minor public infamy in Philadelphia—by way of western Massachusetts, Long Island, and Augusta, Georgia—was dotted with several small rows over what New York printer and Palmer admirer John Fellows characterized as Palmer's liberal sentiments: his disdain for "expatiating upon the horrid and awful condition of mankind in consequence of the lapse of Adam and his wife."³¹ Palmer's penchant for publicly announcing his disbelief in Christianity upset local notions of piety even before he arrived in Philadelphia. Palmer was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1763 and spent his first twenty-one years on his father's farm. He was admitted to Dartmouth College, where he graduated as an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1787. By the early 1790s, however, Palmer had jettisoned his fairly heterodox Christian faith for an unabashed adherence to deism. Palmer would never abandon his zeal to proselytize that he cultivated at Dartmouth, but his energies promoted ideas certain to cause chagrin among the college's orthodox benefactors.³²

Only in Augusta, Georgia, it seems, did Palmer find a community of fellow thinkers. In 1790, Palmer arrived in Augusta, where a group of deistically inclined local elites welcomed him. Palmer remained in the city for nearly a year, and he taught oratory to the local youth at Richmond Academy and actively participated in the town's public life.³³ The academy's corporate charter stipulated that the school's trustees were also to function as Augusta's town commissioners, devolving city governance into the hands of the academy administration.³⁴ The quasi-governmental role of

³⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 9.

³¹ Much of what is known about Palmer's life during the 1790s comes from a memoir that Fellows compiled in 1824 entitled *Posthumous Pieces by Elihu Palmer*. For the "Adam and Eve" quote, see *Posthumous Pieces*, 4–5. It is often difficult to parse Palmer's actual beliefs in the 1790s from Fellows's interpretation and narrative, which may well have been a vehicle for Fellows to pronounce his own disdain for revealed religion and suspicion of Christian institutions. Moreover, Fellows's account often has the ring of an apostolic testimony put forth to evoke sympathy and reverence for an almost martyred prophet. No doubt this was Fellows's impression of Palmer and why radical London bookseller Richard Carlile requested from Fellows information about Palmer's life, for in 1824 Carlile was in the midst of his own battles with British authorities over his publication of deistic and free-thought writings. See Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1998), 70–72. These caveats aside, Fellows's narrative is still the most comprehensive source for information about Palmer's life.

³² Fitch, *Autobiography*, 139.

³³ On Palmer's work at the academy, see a letter from Isaac Briggs to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society written on Palmer's behalf on September 10, 1790, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³⁴ Charles C. Jones Jr., *Memorial History of Augusta, Georgia: From Its Settlement in 1735 to the close of the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY, 1890), 320.

Richmond Academy suggests that Palmer's "liberal" sentiments, which caused a stir in other communities, earned him the support of Augusta's prominent citizens. The "fictions of privacy" that eventually prevailed in places such as Philadelphia worked very differently in Augusta. Palmer had access to the courthouse, probably gained through his elite patronage, where he gave frequent lectures that "commenced upon the broad base of Deism." The city seemed open to public discussion on subjects deemed unacceptable elsewhere.³⁵

According to Fellows, Palmer first openly embraced deism while in Augusta. Palmer's private correspondence from Augusta reflected his intellectual transformation. In a letter to Congregational minister Jedidiah Morse of Charlestown, Massachusetts, Palmer confessed that he "openly avowed the universal and Socinian doctrines. I believe them both & think I can maintain them by conclusive arguments." By embracing "universal and Socinian doctrines," Palmer acknowledged that he did not believe in Christian notions of original sin, eternal damnation, or the Christian Trinity. He also questioned the power of prayer to facilitate humanity's relationship with God. Palmer posed to Morse, "Tell a man that he shall be punished according to his crimes; or, if he be not elected that he shall be damned to all eternity, let him do what he will, which of these has the greatest tendency to good order in society?" The answer for Palmer was evident: Christian notions of original sin and eternal damnation discouraged social order and community happiness. Palmer believed his ideas were popular and widespread, and he boasted to Morse that "light & liberality are gaining ground rapidly, & it must be something more than the prayers of superstitious mortals that will stop the progress of information."³⁶

By early 1791 Palmer left Augusta for Philadelphia due to his wife's poor health, and he refuted charges that he relocated because his religious opinions were unpopular. Palmer noted to Morse that his beliefs were completely in line with local opinion, as "there are four universalists to one damnationist in the town of Augusta."³⁷ According to Fellows, once

³⁵ Fellows, *Posthumous Pieces*, 7.

³⁶ Elihu Palmer to Jedidiah Morse, Sept. 25, 1791, Gratz Manuscripts, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Socinianism is technically different from deism. Both deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, but Socinians considered themselves Christians and still accepted a range of other Christian doctrines that deists denied. Although Palmer described himself as a Socinian to Morse, based on Palmer's other comments around the same time, it is clear that he was much closer to deism.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

in Philadelphia, Palmer eventually became displeased “with preaching from pulpits, where the morose, vindictive, and uncharitable tenets of Calvin were generally inculcated, and expected by the hearers.” Whereas Palmer was inclined toward pulpit messages imbued with conceptions of a benevolent and rational deity, Fellows surmised that “it is probable also, that he failed to give satisfaction to those pious souls, whose ears had become habituated to the awful denunciations of the Christian God.” This experience turned Palmer toward Philadelphia’s Universalists, who shared his conception of a benevolent God.³⁸

Throughout early 1792, while associated with Philadelphia’s Universalists, Palmer delivered talks on religious subjects that combined polemic anticlericalism with deistic dismissals of Christian revelation. He did so, however, without provocative public statements that could raise questions about the political and social liabilities of his opinions. Palmer’s lectures did not violate an existing spatial or political boundary of acceptability. An announcement for Palmer’s orations in John Dunlap’s *American Daily Advertiser* from early March sought the attention of “Friends of liberal sentiments,” but otherwise described Palmer as a “preacher” of universal salvation.³⁹ Palmer delivered his lectures in the Long Room in Philadelphia’s Church Alley, where he leased space from a member of Fitch’s Universal Society. Fitch attended these gatherings and recorded his impression of the events in his autobiography. Palmer’s “sermon,” as Fitch described it, was delivered before a crowded room and drew from biblical passages that centered on moral instruction and emphasized the benevolence and justness of God. Palmer also denied the divinity of Christ in the course of his lectures.⁴⁰

The message of Palmer’s “sermons” remained consistent. What changed were the means Palmer used to promote his sermons, including his turn to the press. Palmer’s decision to announce his oration in the newspaper precipitated his break with Philadelphia’s Universalists. By early 1792, Palmer already found the Universalists’ adherence to aspects of Christian theology and biblical interpretation stultifying. His discontent with Universalism in part contributed to his decision to criticize

³⁸ Fellows, *Posthumous Pieces*, 5–6. On early Universalists in Philadelphia, including information about class dimensions and theology, see Ann Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America, 1770–1880* (New York, 2001), 22–23 and 33; and Schultz, “God and Workingmen,” 137 and 148–55.

³⁹ *American Daily Advertiser*, Mar. 3, 1792.

⁴⁰ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 138–39.

Christianity in general and to publicize his efforts. Palmer's use of newspapers divided the city's Universalists, prompting some to support him and others to banish him from their movement. Philadelphia's Universalists accepted Palmer's increasingly open deism throughout 1792 as long as he preached it carefully; a published announcement in the local press struck a faction within the Universalist movement as anything but prudent.⁴¹

Fitch was also taken aback by Palmer's poor judgment, in part because his lectures already drew large audiences, but also because Palmer's new strategy disregarded the circumspection that allowed the Universal Society to meet undisturbed.⁴² Indeed, had information about Palmer's lectures continued to circulate through informal channels of private communication instead of appearing in the press, they may have garnered only passing interest and provoked only personal challenges, as had happened a few years prior in Sheffield, Massachusetts. Palmer had preached a similar message on a state-proclaimed thanksgiving day. He did not admonish those in his audience to reflect upon their souls and repent their sins, but rather urged them to spend the day in festive pursuits that encouraged happiness. This blatant rejection of New England tradition and subtle denial of Christian theology drew the ire of just a single local attorney, expressed in a private meeting with Palmer, rather than a public outcry.⁴³

Palmer's published announcement in March 1792 for a proposed oration, which he in fact never delivered, prompted a much stronger reaction than any of his previously delivered lectures. This unprecedented response was likely influenced by context and place. First, Palmer's announcement appeared in a newspaper associated with coalescing partisan alignments. Philip Freneau's *National Gazette* carried the announcement, but it never appeared in John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*. This absence may be attributed to Fenno's overriding editorial agenda to promote the image of an effective national government and to create a sense of national identity rather than to advertise local happenings in Philadelphia. Yet, during the same month that the Palmer controversy erupted, Fenno printed an excerpt from a letter that cautioned Philadelphia editors against printing "infidel" texts because they caused "great injury of those superficial read-

⁴¹ Fellows, *Posthumous Pieces*, 6.

⁴² Fitch, *Autobiography*, 139.

⁴³ Fellows, *Posthumous Pieces*, 5.

ers, who derive the greatest part of their knowledge, both in politics and religion" from the newspapers. When editors allowed critiques of Christianity into their pages, according to this anonymous critic, newspapers became tools for "cramming impiety down our throats" rather than reliable sources of political information. This writer identified another provocative aspect of Palmer's public announcement. By placing a notice in a newspaper, Palmer increased the potential reach and legitimacy of his ideas. Lastly, location was important. Palmer publicly denied the divinity of Christ in the nation's capital, well within the shadow of the new federal government still working to establish its own authority.⁴⁴

The 1792 controversy rested on two discernable positions that each linked religious belief and political principles through distinct combinations of ideas about governance, epistemology, and communication. Palmer was committed to federalism, formal constitutional protections of belief, and the priority of reason reflecting upon nature. He emphasized free inquiry and public discussion in order to prevent sectarian violence; Christian revelation must have limited influence so that deism could reform a republican polity. Palmer's opponents were committed to a local, extraconstitutional maintenance of belief and the priority of, or at least deference to, religious revelation bolstered by religious texts. They believed that public opinion and community religious mores could prevent infidelity; Christian revelation had to delineate the boundary of acceptability or a republican polity would create deists.

This intellectual opposition framed distinct definitions of political legitimacy. Palmer's understanding of legitimacy was premised on moral and religious foundations constantly reaffirmed through the use of reason. He ultimately rejected political legitimacy garnered from a singular act of political agreement in a long-passed state of nature. Opponents of deism believed that revelation gave political legitimacy to the state, and only a society's commitment to the instructions of divine revelation could ensure a religious and moral foundation for politics. Palmer's conception of political legitimacy contained a narrow understanding of religious toleration, and it had little respect for local religious cultures and the democratic assumptions of popular religious belief. Conversely, advocates for a revelation-centered notion of political legitimacy put localism and democratic public opinion at the center of their thought. The controversy surrounding

⁴⁴ *Gazette of the United States*, Mar. 14, 1792. On Fenno, Freneau, and the political implications of their newspapers, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Tyranny of Printers": *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville, VA, 2001), 51–56 and 66–73.

Palmer's printed declaration encapsulated distinct ways of thinking about how best to guarantee the viability of the state.

Palmer's announcement cut to the center of concerns about whether the new American state could meet its obligation to promote a common public good and prevent religious strife, especially in light of open expressions of infidelity. Opposition to Palmer included a mob that gathered to prevent his speaking engagements, pressure on the proprietor of the Long Room to suspend Palmer's lease, and a series of print reactions in Philadelphia papers and a South Carolina journal.⁴⁵ Palmer's opponents reiterated concerns expressed in arguments against Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution, but more importantly, they used political strategies and arguments advocated by Pennsylvania's Anti-Federalists in the late 1780s. However, Anti-Federalist arguments against deism, such as Petrikin's, were rural critiques written from the perspective of western Pennsylvanians suspicious of distant political authority in Philadelphia and the supposed urbane impiety of the city's political elite. Philadelphians—religious leaders, mechanics, and newspaper editors alike—unmoored arguments from their origins in rural Anti-Federalism and used them to address the peculiar problem of religious authority within their city.

It is unclear exactly who organized or led the crowds against Palmer. Fellows described a mob consisting of Universalists, upset by Palmer's denial of Christ's divinity and especially his advertisement in the *National Gazette*, which promised to bring unwanted attention and criticism to the nascent Universalist movement in Philadelphia. People from other unspecified denominations, according to Fellows, also joined the mob against Palmer. Fellows speculated that the group was "instigated probably by their priests," but popular crowd action in the early republic was not simply directed from above.⁴⁶ Instead, mobs often assembled in American cities during the 1790s to defend community mores against egregious violations by individuals or groups.

The 1792 mob in Philadelphia typified two types of urban mobbing identified by historian Paul Gilje: riots of "communal regulation" and

⁴⁵ In most instances it is difficult to identify precisely who Palmer's opposition was. The 1792 controversy is instructive as a window into how ideas were transmitted and received outside formal circles of intellectual elites and how this process drew upon broader political philosophies first articulated in debates over religious tests.

⁴⁶ Fellows, *Posthumous Pieces*, 6. Fellows mistakenly listed the *Aurora* as the paper where Palmer advertised his lecture.

mobs organized to enforce uniformity of religious opinion. Although Gilje's study focused on New York, the dynamics of the Philadelphia mob were markedly similar to the "bawdyhouse riots" of 1793 and 1799, in which New Yorkers used mob action to police violations of local moral standards and to uphold local conceptions of the public good. Mob action to prevent Palmer from speaking also resembled that of New York mobs organized during the 1790s to harass Catholics and evangelical Protestants. Even though Palmer had delivered lectures in Philadelphia critical of Christianity since at least 1791, his turn to the press in March 1792 gave his message a public profile that offended local religious sensibilities. Philadelphians tolerated but did not condone Palmer until he sought to expand the reach of his deistic ideas. When Philadelphians could no longer countenance Palmer's discourses, they policed their community through popular mobbing. Participants in the mob likely believed that Palmer's intent to publicly deny a divine Christ required a community response because it insulted local standards of religious belief and social order.⁴⁷

Elite Philadelphians also exerted pressure. According to Fitch, Bishop William White, minister of the Protestant Episcopal Christ Church, an ornate two-story Georgian structure with a steeple that dominated the Philadelphia skyline, personally intimidated the proprietor into dissolving Palmer's lease. Christ Church and the Long Room both occupied space on Church Alley. But proximity alone does not explain why White may have pressured the Long Room's proprietor. He was committed to a restrained piety, and he was suspicious of religious opinions that he believed disrupted the common good. White was critical of evangelicalism, but open deism was equally problematic and warranted its own condemnation.⁴⁸

The exercise of community pressure to deny Palmer a forum reflected an underlying agreement among diverse Philadelphians about the need to

⁴⁷ See Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987), 85 and 207.

⁴⁸ Fitch, *Autobiography*, 139. The Long Room in question may have been part of the Bunch of Grapes Tavern, located at Third Street between Market and Arch streets. Church Alley ran east to west from Second to Third between Market and Arch streets. For a reference to the tavern, see the *Federal Gazette*, Oct. 6, 1790. On Church Alley, see Edmund Hogan, *The Prospect of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1796), 62; and Robert I. Alotta, *Street Names of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1975), 41–41. For a description of Christ Church in 1792 and White's theology, see Deborah Mathias Gough, *Christ Church, Philadelphia: The Nation's Church in a Changing City* (Philadelphia, 1995), 49–51 and 173–74.

prohibit controversial religious expression. Palmer's troubles occurred at the same time that Philadelphia's artisans were joining the ranks of an inchoate political opposition against Federalist economic policies. Although skeptical of a national Federalist establishment, some of Philadelphia's artisans shared the religious concerns of local Federalists like White. Members of Fitch's Universal Society and the audiences at Palmer's lectures inhabited the same artisan social world as those who participated in the mob against Palmer. Artisan Universalists were among both Palmer's supporters and detractors. Universalism provided Philadelphia's artisans with a form of Christianity that disavowed predestination and the harsher elements of Calvinism without asking them to reject Christianity wholesale. Furthermore, aspects of Universalist belief appealed directly to artisan economic and cultural values. The Universalists who opposed Palmer did so because his denunciation of Christ's divinity undermined a religious viewpoint that justified their vocation and social status amid Philadelphia's changing political and economic culture. The Palmer controversy thus occurred at a politically fluid moment in which elite Philadelphians such as White pursued a similar set of religious priorities as the city's increasingly radical workers.⁴⁹ Within this context, Philadelphia's artisans joined White in using arguments and strategies first advanced by Anti-Federalists such as Petrikin. Opposition to Palmer in 1792 resulted in diverse Philadelphians defending a broadly defined understanding of religious piety that transcended emerging class, political, and sectarian differences.

Whether restrained from below by a mob of neighborhood locals or from above by Bishop White, opposition to Palmer was not inconsistent with at least some understandings of good citizenship in early national Philadelphia. Writing in 1787, Robert Annan, a local Presbyterian minister, concluded a broad ranging pamphlet on the theological and political dangers of Universalism by arguing that "the man of no religion is the most dangerous, and in fact is not a fit subject of moral government." According to Annan, the growing appeal of Universalism, which denied Christian notions of future rewards and punishments, undermined civil

⁴⁹ On the intersections between artisan culture and Universalism in Philadelphia circa 1792, see Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720–1830* (New York, 1993), 130–33. On the development of political alignments in the early 1790s among Philadelphia's artisans in reaction to Federalist economic policies, see Andrew Shankman, *Crucible of American Democracy: The Struggle to Fuse Egalitarianism and Capitalism in Jeffersonian Pennsylvania* (Lawrence, KS, 2004), 42–46.

society and government in the United States. A republican political order rested on oaths, trust, and a moral citizenry, all of which were meaningless without a belief that God ultimately punished or rewarded humanity for its actions. From Annan's perspective, "civil communities and their rulers, will therefore find, that to cultivate moral sentiments, or promote the practice of virtue, which is founded on the knowledge and fear of God, is essentially necessary to the preservation of government among them."⁵⁰

Universalism was especially problematic for Annan as he believed that "deistical principles prevail much already; and this doctrine is calculated to give them greater force and a wider range." Anticipating the reaction to Palmer in 1792, Annan suggested that "in the case of crimes against the state the perpetrators must be punished."⁵¹ Annan's enumeration of Universalism's political dangers and how best to prevent them provided a justification for the popular reaction against Palmer, even though Annan himself did not specifically advocate mobbing as a way to police civil society. The Universalists who joined the mob against Palmer fulfilled the expectations of a Philadelphian unlikely to support them. By doing so, Philadelphia's Universalists also attempted to include their fairly heterodox beliefs within the fold of tolerable religious expression.

In the end, crowd mobilization and direct personal pressure were essentially efforts to compel a set of priorities that emphasized community order instead of free inquiry and the formal protections of belief lodged in the federal Constitution; they were local solutions premised on the democratic authority of local public opinion. By enforcing a local understanding of acceptable expression, the mob, and potentially White, effectively altered where and how deism could be expressed. The mob and White shaped the physical and intellectual geography of Philadelphia's religious landscape.

Palmer responded to his opposition by expressing fairly deep disdain for such forms of popular action. He was suspicious of public opinion if it reflected what he considered were local commitments to superstitious beliefs and outmoded institutions. This wariness informed his determined federalism, which emphasized legal protections of conscience as outlined in the Constitution. Palmer protested the closure of the Long

⁵⁰ Robert Annan, *Brief Animadversions on the Doctrine of Universal Salvation* (Philadelphia, 1787), 38, 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30, 48.

Room in a letter printed in Benjamin Franklin Bache's *General Advertiser*. He addressed his letter "to the public," lamenting that he was "sorry to observe, that notwithstanding the legal and nominal freedom that obtains in this country, the law of opinion, and the internal spirit of persecution, bear hard upon the rights of conscience." Indeed, Palmer even asserted that the Long Room's proprietor had been threatened with "temporal injury" if he did not comply. Palmer concluded that formal constitutional protections for open public discussion were crucial to curb unpredictable and potentially violent expressions of public opinion in defense of religious belief.⁵²

A writer using the initials A. B. answered Palmer's protest on grounds that in matters of religion and morals, federalism was highly deficient. He then cautioned Palmer against placing too much weight on constitutional protections of conscience, advising Palmer to "avoid saying much about the rights of conscience, because that phrase has been late pretty much used to signify no conscience at all."⁵³ This assertion rejected formal constitutional protections of belief as potential masks for private moral turpitude. A. B. identified a central weakness of constitutional provisions regarding belief that, according to him, required local moral imperatives enforced by local public opinion.

Palmer was far more confident in the perceived benefits of open public discussion, and he dismissed deference to public opinion. He was firmly wedded to eighteenth-century ideals that rational discourse combined with humanity's innate sociability could bring people together in the shared interest of truth. In a letter to the *Federal Gazette* penned soon after the controversy erupted, Palmer proclaimed his allegiance to "fair argumentation." If Christian theology, what Palmer deemed the "old fabric," could not withstand rational criticism, "it ought to fall to the ground." Palmer assured his readers that he harbored no disdain for any party or sect, yet he also sought to undermine any justification for membership in a party or sect that did not rely on rationally verifiable truths. Bonds of affection, faith, group identity, tradition—none of these alone or in combination were grounds for association or identity if they could not be proven "true" by rational inquiry. Palmer challenged his opponents, concluding, "no man can suppose, that truth will ever suffer by a fair and public discussion; whoever therefore, opposes this, must be sensible of the

⁵² *General Advertiser*, Mar. 17, 1792.

⁵³ *Federal Gazette*, Mar. 19, 1792.

weakness of his own cause.”⁵⁴

Palmer had unwavering confidence that reasoned sociability would eradicate religious attachments based on faith and revelation. Such confidence, however, positioned him to defend a conception of state in which religion, at least in forms commonly practiced in the 1790s, was decidedly at odds with the ends of governance and civil society. According to Palmer, the common good rested on a narrow foundation of reason. Palmer replaced a uniform religious confession with “reason” and in so doing he essentially resurrected the religious intolerance of the Reformation state in the guise of commonsense appeals to a universal rationality.⁵⁵

An anonymous correspondent to Charleston’s *State Gazette of South-Carolina* in May 1792 recognized and took issue with Palmer’s assumptions about moral and epistemological authority evident in his critique of Christianity. The author echoed Palmer’s support for the federal Constitution, and he issued a cautious, qualified endorsement of the rights of man, “well understood.” But the writer further tempered this position with the view “that limits must be affixed to every degree of admiration in the great scale of human events, and human constitutions.” By limits, the anonymous writer alluded to the degree to which societies and governments could improve the world in light of humanity’s innate limitations and flaws. The extent of progress and improvement in the world was a result of religion, “or a sense of it, duly impressed on the minds of men” that was most useful “in bringing human societies to as great a degree of perfection as human nature is susceptible of.”⁵⁶ Palmer was thus a visionary in the most pejorative sense of the word. His belief that society was perfectible and that the progress of humanity was furthered by reasoning away religious tradition implicated Palmer in the worst sort of hubris, a belief that moral order could be ensured through good government alone.

Up to this point Palmer’s South Carolina critic endorsed a fairly standard argument against unabashed confidence in reason and progress, but

⁵⁴ *Federal Gazette*, Mar. 22, 1792.

⁵⁵ Although Palmer issued his arguments in a very different political context from that which prevailed in Reformation Europe, his unease with sectarian plurality reflected the uncertainty about the limits of religious toleration common in eighteenth-century theories of state. See Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter, “Toleration in Enlightenment Europe,” in *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, 10–17.

⁵⁶ *State Gazette of South-Carolina*, May 3, 1792.

he concluded with concerns that highlighted the problem of “infidelity” specific to the American political context. Federal provisions for religious freedom and open discussion would be for naught because denials of Christianity threatened the very government intended to uphold these laws. In other words, Palmer’s published announcement was a threat to the state, reiterating a view first advanced by Robert Annan regarding the political dangers posed by unorthodox religious beliefs. This writer was dismayed that the *National Gazette* carried Palmer’s announcement, yet he was even more troubled by the implications of Palmer’s pronouncement for the national government. For this writer, a government was inseparable from the religious beliefs that provided its moral foundation. The papers that carried Palmer’s announcement “might as well have advertized that the Christian religion is but a fairy tale, and the members of congress are a set of fairies.” The anonymous writer further contended that with his public announcement, Palmer severely damaged the image of Congress as a capable and wise legislative body by discrediting religion, its only guide to improvement. Without that underpinning, Congress could no longer command public assent or exercise its authority. Government would then, therefore, cease to exist. The South Carolina writer concluded that Palmer’s public announcement was an attack on Congress tantamount in ferocity to the way in which “the most inimical tribes of Indians would attack them, if the seat of government was fixed on the frontiers.”⁵⁷ An allusion to frontier racial violence grounded the implications of religious and intellectual heterodoxy in outcomes deeply resonant to the American imagination.

Palmer’s South Carolina critic had the final word in the 1792 controversy, in part because Palmer temporarily fled to western Pennsylvania. However, he also expressed a position that became increasingly common during the 1790s. This writer was the only participant in the 1792 dispute who came close to articulating a boundary of religious acceptability that transcended local religious preferences to include the entire nation. By 1800, charges of infidelity, deism, and atheism were common in American political discourse, partisan alignments, and the structure of formal politics. During the 1790s, Americans began to understand the intersection of religious belief and political culture through the articulation of local, informal boundaries of religious acceptability. As national political issues became more salient, a national political culture emerged

⁵⁷ Ibid.

from these existing local practices that included concerns about the limits of acceptable expression.⁵⁸ Within this context, the partisan cultural politics of the 1790s increasingly bore the imprint of limits on where and how religious opinions should be expressed.

The contentious religious politics of the 1790s, however, had their origins in the earliest years of the American Revolution. Political independence required Americans to reconcile religious beliefs and church institutions from their colonial past with a new set of republican political principles, in particular disestablishment, which increasingly ordered their lives. Debates over infidelity in response to Pennsylvania's constitution of 1776 and the popular reaction to Palmer's proposed oration were examples of the intellectual and cultural work necessary to uphold notions of religious toleration as state power over religion declined. Although church and state were separating throughout the late eighteenth century, it was a process that varied by state and time. More importantly, the outcome of changes in the relationship between religion and the state was far from apparent. As Americans lacked a ready vocabulary to assess this change and where it might lead their culture, they developed one anchored in references to infidelity. This framework allowed them to deploy an array of cultural touchstones that held popular weight and appeal that would have been unavailable if Americans had relied only on formal constitutional discourses concerning rights.

Ultimately, then, debates over infidelity provided one measure for determining the legitimacy of new governments, while they also established a basis for cultural boundaries to police religious expression without using direct state power. Infidelity provided a protean intellectual framework quite distinct from a narrow republican ideology in order to assess two of the era's pressing political problems: the long-term viability of republican political institutions and the necessity of a moral citizenry.

Brandeis University

ERIC SCHLERETH

⁵⁸ My understanding of the connection between local and national politics comes from Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Cheese and the Words: Popular Political Culture and Participatory Democracy in the Early American Republic," in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 31–56.