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Exploring the Religious Roots of Upper Canadian Political Culture

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract


This article focuses on a debate that raged in Upper Canada during the early and mid-nineteenth century over the degree to which civil authorities should assume responsibility for promoting societal virtue. Supporters of state-aided Christianity, many of whom were Tories, clashed with critics of close church-state ties, many of whom were Reformers. The catalyst for this conflict was the Clergy Reserves endowment. Drawing on works that situate British North American affairs in an expansive interpretive framework, this article maintains that the Upper Canadian debate over state-aided Christianity was subsumed within a larger conflict regarding the church-state relationship that originated in early modern England and played itself out across the North Atlantic World.

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Exploring the Religious Roots of Upper Canadian Political Culture*

By Denis McKim

Introduction

esse Ketchum, a prominent businessman and Reformer, mounted a platform that had been erected outside the courthouse in York, Upper Canada, in March of 1832. He intended to convey to the “very great crowd” amassed before him the sense of disapproval felt by himself and other “friends of reform” regarding an allegedly fraudulent petition that had recently circulated among the town’s inhabitants. Bearing upwards of 1,500 signatures, the petition expressed “approbation of the administration of our worthy and excellent Lieutenant Governor, Sir John Colborne.” Yet Ketchum’s attempts to denounce the petition—and, by implication, the colony’s conservative Lieutenant Governor—were rendered futile by a rowdy contingent of Tory sympathiz-

ers, who drowned out his remarks and subjected the would-be spokesman to a barrage of “eggs, apples, stones, and [other] such missiles.” The Tory “mob” then marched west along King Street from the courthouse, which was located between Church and Toronto Streets, to the Lieutenant Governor’s residence, which was located between Simcoe and John Streets, where they offered “three times three cheers for the King [William IV], and three times three cheers for John Colborne.” Still brimming with energy, the Tories proceeded to make an effigy of William Lyon Mackenzie, an associate of Ketchum’s and a leading Reformer, which they hoisted on a pole and paraded through the “principal Streets” of the town before finally burning it in front of the offices of Mackenzie’s newspaper, the *Colonial Advocate*.¹

Responsibility for these events, in

* For their helpful comments on drafts of this article the author wishes to thank Helen Dewar, Brad Miller, Todd Webb, and *Ontario History*’s anonymous reviewer.

¹ *Christian Guardian*, 28 March 1832, 79; *Patriot* 3 April 1832, unpaginated.

the opinion of “An Eye Witness” writing in the *Christian Guardian*, lay not with the “poor ignorant creatures” who carried them out, but rather with Upper Canada’s “state paid priests.” These individuals were purportedly guilty of inciting the mob to behave in such a disgraceful manner on account of their desire to thwart the Reformers’ efforts to eliminate government aid for the clergy of certain churches. “An Eye Witness” urged Reform-oriented Upper Canadians to continue their campaign against state-sanctioned denominational hierarchy, and to “prevail on His Majesty’s Government to withhold... support for all ministers of religion.”²

Recent years have witnessed a veritable renaissance in the writing of Canadian political history. Thoughtful works, many of which pertain to the nineteenth century, have been produced on topics ranging from the part played by ideas in shaping Canada’s political development, to the evolving role of the state, to the contributions of ordinary people to movements of political protest.³ Yet for

Abstract

This article focuses on a debate that raged in Upper Canada during the early and mid-nineteenth century over the degree to which civil authorities should assume responsibility for promoting societal virtue. Supporters of state-aided Christianity, many of whom were Tories, clashed with critics of close church-state ties, many of whom were Reformers. The catalyst for this conflict was the Clergy Reserves endowment. Drawing on works that situate British North American affairs in an expansive interpretive framework, this article maintains that the Upper Canadian debate over state-aided Christianity was subsumed within a larger conflict regarding the church-state relationship that originated in early modern England and played itself out across the North Atlantic World.

Résumé: Cet article examine un débat qui a fait rage en Haut-Canada pendant la première moitié du 19^e siècle, concernant le degré auquel les autorités civiles devaient assumer la responsabilité de promouvoir la vertu dans la société. Ceux qui préconisaient un soutien de l’État au christianisme (dont grand nombre de Tories) s’opposaient aux adversaires de liens étroits entre Église et État (en grande partie des Réformateurs). Au cœur du conflit étaient les réserves du clergé (terres réservées au soutien du clergé protestant). Se basant sur des oeuvres qui envisagent les affaires de l’Amérique du Nord Britannique dans un cadre d’interprétation plus large, cet article traite ce débat du Haut-Canada comme partie d’un conflit plus généralisé concernant les relations entre l’Église et l’État, conflit qui a eu ses origines en Angleterre aux débuts de l’ère moderne et s’est manifesté par la suite dans tous les pays de l’Atlantique du Nord.

all of their insightfulness and diversity such works have typically accorded short shrift to the close relationship between religion and early Canadian political

² *Christian Guardian*, 28 March 1832, 79.

³ For ideas see Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); for the state see Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); for popular politics see Ian Radforth, “Political Demonstrations & Spectacles During the Rebellion Losses Controversy in Upper Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 92:1 (March 2011), 1-41.

culture that found expression in the remarks of “An Eye Witness.”⁴ This lack of emphasis seems odd, given that several of the most contentious issues within pre-Confederation politics—debates over which denominations’ clergy would be permitted to perform marriage ceremonies, struggles over sectarian schools, the ever-vexatious Clergy Reserves endowment—were expressly religious concerns, while many of the people involved in determining the character of early Canadian politics—John Strachan, Egerton Ryerson, George Brown—were deeply religious individuals. The lack of emphasis devoted to the interplay between religion and early Canadian political culture also seems odd in view of the fact that historical works investigating politico-religious topics have proliferated in recent years elsewhere in the world, including Britain and, especially, the United States, with the latter playing host to lively debates over whether the early republic can be viewed as a “Christian Nation.”⁵

This article, through an examination of Upper Canadian political culture’s deep religious roots, seeks to address this historiographical gap. It focuses on a polarizing debate that raged in the colony during the early and mid-nineteenth century over the degree to which civil authorities should assume responsibility for promoting societal virtue. The debate brought into focus the existence in Upper Canadian society of ingrained politico-religious differences of opinion. Supporters of state-aided Christianity, many of whom were Tories, clashed with critics of close church-state ties, many of whom were Reformers. The catalyst for this conflict was the Clergy Reserves endowment, which Governor General Lord Sydenham described in 1840 as “[a] perpetual source of discord, strife and hatred.”⁶ Drawing on works that situate British North American affairs in an expansive interpretive framework, this article maintains that the Upper Canadian debate over state-aided Christianity was

⁴ For a noteworthy exception to this pattern see Michael Gauvreau, “Covenanter Democracy: Scottish Popular Religion, Ethnicity, and the Varieties of Politico-Religious Dissent in Upper Canada, 1815-1841,” *Histoire Sociale* 36:71 (2003), 55-83. For older works on politico-religious topics see John S. Moir, *Church and State in Canada West: Three Studies in the Relation of Denominationalism and Nationalism, 1841-1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); and Goldwin French, *Parsons and Politics: The Role of the Wesleyan Methodists in Upper Canada and the Maritimes from 1780 to 1855* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1962).

⁵ For perspectives on the intersection of religion and politics in Britain see J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancient Regime*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For differing views on the “Christian Nation” debate see James Hutson, *Forgotten Features of the Founding: The Recovery of Religious Themes in the Early American Republic* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003); and Jon Butler, “Why Revolutionary America Wasn’t a ‘Christian Nation,’” in *Religion and the New Republic: Faith in the Founding of America*, edited by James Hutson (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 187-202.

⁶ Paul Knaplund, ed., *Letters from Lord Sydenham to Lord John Russell* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), 43-44.

subsumed within a larger conflict regarding the church-state relationship that originated in early modern England and played itself out across the North Atlantic World.⁷

Aggravating politico-religious tensions was the existence in Upper Canada of competing strategies for the Christianization of colonial society. Advocates of religious establishments, who typically viewed the propagation of Christianity as a top-down process that was to be initiated by clerical elites, conceived of the state as an essential ally in their campaign to foster heightened moral standards among the Upper Canadian populace. By contrast, opponents of close church-state ties, many of whom were evangelical Christians who emphasized the primacy of repentant individuals cultivating personal relationships with God, perceived civil intrusions in the religious domain as a recipe for doctrinal corruption and an obstacle to the propagation of the Gospels.

Participants on both sides of this debate drew on the language of pro-British loyalty—albeit in differing ways—in an effort to substantiate their divergent politico-religious arguments, which attests to the resonance and elasticity of “Britishness” as a cultural identity across large swaths of Upper Canadian society. So heated was the rivalry between Tory advocates of religious establishments and

Reform-oriented opponents of state-supported Christianity that it transcended the public sphere of reasoned dialogue and manifested itself in raucous public demonstrations and acts of violence.⁸ Examining the competing contentions that lay at the heart of this struggle—which ultimately intersected with such crucial considerations as justice, governance, and ethnicity—throws into relief religion’s utter centrality to the political culture of Upper Canada.

The Establishmentarian Idea

Christian establishments, through which civil authorities confer on one or more churches such benefits as reliable financial support and legal privileges, were among the most contentious politico-religious phenomena in post-revolutionary British North America. The principal beneficiary of establishment status was the Anglican Church, or Church of England, which existed alongside the Church of Scotland, a Presbyterian institution, as one of Great Britain’s two state churches. The philosophy of Anglican establishmentarianism is premised on the notion that the English Church and the English state are organically interwoven. This perspective emerged as a result of two key sixteenth-century developments—the Henrician Reformation, through which the English

⁷ See, for example, Nancy Christie, “Theorizing a Colonial Past: Canada as a Society of British Settlement,” in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions, and Social Experience in Post-Revolutionary British North America*, edited by Christie (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 2008), 3–44; and Elizabeth Mancke, “Another British America: A Canadian Model for the Early Modern British Empire,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 25:1 (January 1997), 1–36.

⁸ For the emergence of a dynamic public sphere in Upper Canada see McNairn, *Capacity to Judge*.

monarch supplanted the Pope as head of the English Church; and the Elizabethan Act of Supremacy, which affirmed that the English monarch was the “supreme governor” in both religious and temporal realms. Consequently, barriers separating royal and ecclesiastical sovereignty in England were dissolved, and politico-religious authority was consolidated under the auspices of the Crown.⁹

Among the most articulate exponents of the notion that, in England, church and state were tightly intertwined was Richard Hooker, whose voluminous late-sixteenth-century work, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, stands as a landmark in the history of Anglican thought. Hooker took issue with English groups that sought to draw a distinction between civil and ecclesiastical spheres, arguing instead that the Church of England and the English state constituted a seamless whole. He believed that England’s governmental authorities—including the monarch, whose authority came from God—had a responsibility to support the aims and activities of the nation’s established church, which in Hooker’s understanding represented a uniquely righteous *via media* between the extremes of Puritan fanaticism and Roman Catholic tyranny. “A grosse errorr it is,” he declared, “to think that re-

gall power ought to serve for the good of the bodie and not of the soule... as if God had ordained *Kings* for no other ende... but only to fatt up men like hogges?”¹⁰

Bolstering Anglican establishmentarianism in the early modern era was a belief that non-Anglicans—chiefly Puritans, who were associated with the regicide of Charles I, and Roman Catholics, who were implicated in the conspiratorial Gunpowder Plot—were threats to England’s stability. As a result of such views, legislation designed to limit the political influence wielded within English society by non-Anglican groups, or Nonconformists, was introduced following the Restoration of the Stuart regime. Examples include Acts of the 1660s and 1670s that essentially prohibited Dissenting (or non-Anglican) Protestants from holding public office and rendered Roman Catholics ineligible to occupy seats in parliament.¹¹ The belief that Anglicanism and the English state were inextricably linked subsequently became entrenched across much of English society—so much so that Edmund Burke, writing in the late eighteenth century, asserted that the English people, a majority of whom belonged to the Anglican Church, viewed that institution “not as a thing heterogeneous and separable [from

⁹ Peter M. Doll, *Revolution, Religion, and National Identity: Imperial Anglicanism in British North America, 1745-1795* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 15.

¹⁰ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, edited by P.G. Stanwood (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1981), VIII: 343-44. See also Doll, *Revolution, Religion, and National Identity*, 16.

¹¹ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: Volume II: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 417-18.

¹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 99; Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland*, 4.

the state]... [but rather] as the foundation of their whole constitution.”¹²

When it came to British colonies of settlement imperial policymakers identified state-aided Anglicanism as a means by which loyalty and order could be inculcated in the colonial consciousness. This perspective crystallized in the aftermath of the American Revolution, which was largely attributed to the absence in the thirteen colonies of an Anglican bishop, and to the pervasiveness within colonial society of such pernicious—and allegedly interrelated—phenomena as Dissenting Protestantism and political radicalism.¹³

Anglican establishments, owing to such convictions, were installed as counterrevolutionary mechanisms across post-revolutionary British North America. Yet while it existed in the Maritime colonies and Lower Canada, the establishmentarian phenomenon was most contentious in Upper Canada. The key factor accounting for this fact is the Clergy Reserves endowment, substantial lands set aside under the Constitutional Act for the “Support and Maintenance” of an ill-defined “Protestant Clergy.” (While in this instance it was unclear which denomination the Act had in mind, a subsequent

clause within the document conferring on colonial governors the authority to create “within every Township or Parish... One or more Parsonage or Rectory... according to the Establishment of the Church of England” made plain the fact that imperial authorities envisioned Anglicanism, at least, reaping the benefits that derived from state aid.¹⁴) Tensions over which denominations had access to these lands—the majority of which were located in Upper Canada—mounted in the 1820s as the endowment’s value increased on account of population growth, and persisted through the Reserves’ secularization in 1854.¹⁵

The Clergy Reserves debate, perhaps predictably in view of its intensity and duration, exerted considerable influence within the domain of politics. Upper Canada’s Tories—many of whom were establishmentarian Anglicans—sought to attain an optimal degree of control over the endowment, convinced as they often were that “the powers and privileges... [of] an Established Church... belong only to the Protestant Church of England.”¹⁶ Conversely, the colony’s Reformers—many of whom were Protestant Dissenters—denounced state intervention in the religious sphere, and called

¹³ Judith Fingard, *The Anglican Design in Loyalist Nova Scotia, 1783-1816* (London: SPCK, 1972), 2-11.

¹⁴ Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty, eds., *Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada, 1759-1791* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1918), II:1045.

¹⁵ Alan Wilson, *The Clergy Reserves of Upper Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1969), 6.

¹⁶ Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), John Beverley Robinson Papers, MS 4 Reel 3, “Copy of Instructions to Sir George Prevost... 22nd Day of October, 1811... [by John Beverley Robinson].” See also Terry Cook, “John Beverley Robinson and the Conservative Blueprint for the Upper Canadian Community,” *Ontario History* LXIV:2 (June 1972), 91-92.

with evermore fervency for the Reserves to be liquidated, with the proceeds being channelled into such non-denominational initiatives as public education.¹⁷

John Strachan, educator, Anglican clergyman, and mainstay of the archconservative Family Compact, articulated the establishmentarian outlook that underpinned much of Upper Canadian Toryism in a sermon delivered in 1825. Through the sermon, which emphasized the importance of religious establishments to the promotion of societal virtue, Strachan sought to obtain from imperial authorities additional financial support for the English Church's activities in Upper Canada. "[It] is the duty of every Christian Government," he declared, to support Christian establishments, "[which] promote among all men true morality and purity of life." The absence of state-aided Christianity, Strachan cautioned, would lead to widespread irreligion or, equally distressing, to the enhanced influence within colonial society of Dissenting preachers hailing from the "republican states of America," who would surely propagate among Upper Canadian settlers unorthodox religious views and subversive political doctrines that were "any thing but favorable to the

political institutions of England."¹⁸

Central to the Strachanite conception of the church-state relationship was a decidedly hierarchical worldview. Strachan, comparable to many of his conservative establishmentarian counterparts on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, believed that society was subsumed within a comprehensive universal design. Such views were informed by the ancient idea of a "Great Chain of Being," which included everything in ascending order from the simplest inanimate object to the divine creator himself. The unity and harmony of this all-encompassing system—which included the entirety of humanity—were perpetuated by complementary notions of paternalistic obligation, through which the strong assumed responsibility for promoting the welfare of the weak, and deference, through which the weak acquiesced to the leadership of the strong. Reinforcing the hierarchical worldview among supporters of Christian establishments were the legacies of the American and French Revolutions, the turbulence of which were attributed, respectively, to Dissenting Protestant and atheistic challenges to the providentially ordained *status quo*.¹⁹

For Strachan and other establishmentarian Tories a reciprocal relation-

¹⁷ John S. Moir, *The Church in the British Era: From the British Conquest to Confederation* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 180-83.

¹⁸ John Strachan, *A Sermon, Preached at York, Upper Canada, Third of July, 1825, On the Death of the Late Lord Bishop of Quebec* (Kingston: James MacFarlane, 1826), 15-26. See also AO, John Strachan Papers, MS 35 Reel 2, "A Letter Addressed to R.J. Wilmot, Esq. by the Rev. Dr. Strachan... dated 16th May 1827; respecting the State of the Church..." 1-2.

¹⁹ Curtis Fahey, *In His Name: The Anglican Experience in Upper Canada, 1791-1854* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), 113-22; Terrence Murphy, "The English-Speaking Colonies to 1854," in *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, edited by Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 125.

ship between church and state was indispensable to the persistence of the universal hierarchy. The church bolstered the system by encouraging the strong to honour their obligations to nurture and defend the weak, and by encouraging the weak to accept with equanimity their subordination to the strong. Moreover, the church instilled in its adherents the belief that efforts to disrupt the *status quo* amounted to an assault on the divinely sanctioned order, an offence for which providential punishment would invariably be meted out, whether in this life or the next. "Christianity," Strachan declared in the late 1820s, "[is] a continual lesson of obedience to the laws [of the state]," which in turn promote "submission" on the part of the populace "to constituted authorities."²⁰ The state, for its part, facilitated the church's efforts by conferring on its clergy stable financial assistance and legal privileges, while also formulating and enforcing laws that discouraged sinfulness—or, as Strachan put it, the "malignant desires" and "secret envyings" that suffused society.²¹

Dissenting Protestants, many of whom were galvanized by an evangelical enthusiasm (about which more will be said), represented an existential threat to the Tory conception of a universal

order.²² Downplaying the hierarchical notions that lay at the heart of the establishmentarian outlook, evangelical Dissenters emphasized the equality of all sinners—regardless of social rank—in the eyes of God. Such spiritual egalitarianism contrasted sharply with the elaborate hierarchy that typified the "Great Chain of Being." Similarly distressing from the Tory perspective was the emotionally unbridled manner in which the most fervent Dissenters expressed their religious convictions. For conservative establishmentarians, these uncouth manifestations of evangelical zeal epitomized the transgressive tendencies inherent in much of Dissenting Protestantism. Consider the remarks made by Strachan in 1806 about the Methodists, who were perhaps the quintessential Upper Canadian evangelical constituency, and the behaviour exhibited by adherents of this denomination at one of the emotionally charged revival festivals in which members of the group took part. "The Methodists," he noted,

[are] filling the country with the most deplorable fanaticism. You can have almost no conception of their excesses. They will bawl twenty of them at once, tumble on the ground, laugh, sing, jump & stamp [their feet] and this they call the working of the spirit.²³

²⁰ John Strachan, *A Speech, of the Venerable John Strachan...On the Subject of the Clergy Reserves* (York, UC: Robert Stanton, 1828?), 27–28. The quintessential metropolitan exposition of the reciprocal church-state relationship is William Warburton, *Alliance between Church and State* (1736).

²¹ William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 22; Fahey, *In His Name*, 122; Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

²² Murphy, "English-Speaking Colonies to 1854," 125–26.

²³ George W. Spragge, ed., *The John Strachan Letter Book: 1812–1834* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1946), vii.

These remarks, coming as they did from a member of the Upper Canadian elite, may well have sprung from a haughty disdain on Strachan's part for the Methodists' unrestrained displays of religious fervour. Yet they also betray a palpable sense of anxiety regarding the challenges posed by evangelical Dissenters to the colonial *status quo* and the universal hierarchy of which it purportedly formed part.²⁴

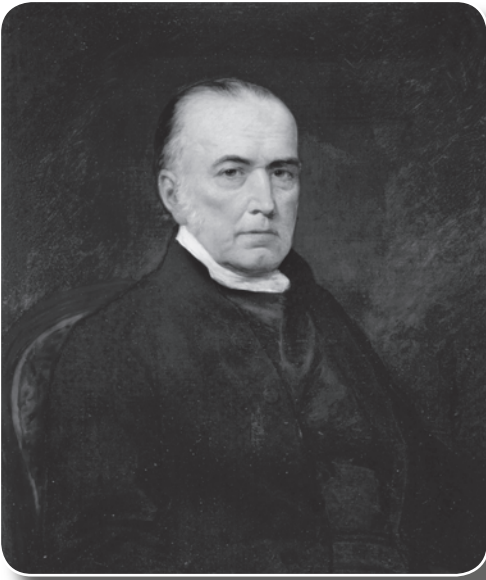
It should be noted that, while Anglicans like Strachan were closely associated across much of Upper Canadian society with a synthesis of political conservatism and Christian establishmentarianism, they were by no means the only exponents of such a combination of outlooks. On the contrary, colonial adherents of the Church of Scotland, a Presbyterian institution that was recognized alongside the Church of England as one of Great Britain's two state churches, were "[pillars] of conservatism" who laid claim to co-establishment status in Upper Canada alongside the English Church (through which, among other things, they hoped to attain a permanent share in Clergy Reserves revenues). Thus, William Morris, a prominent Upper Canadian member of the Church of Scotland and Tory politi-

cian who held "many ideological assumptions" in common with the Family Compact, declared in 1837 that "it is the duty of every Christian country to provide some way or other for the spiritual wants of the people," adding that "it would be an act of great injustice to subjects of both Kingdoms [England and Scotland] if these [Clergy Reserves] lands were applied to any other purpose than the support of religion."²⁵

A synthesis of political conservatism and state-aided Christianity also informed the attitudes of Bishop Alexander Macdonell, a Roman Catholic immigrant from the Scottish Highlands whose loyalist leanings were cemented in the aftermath of the British government's quashing of the Jacobite insurgency. Though he objected to Anglican attempts to monopolize the Clergy Reserves, Macdonell "shared the assumptions and cardinal tenets" that undergirded Compact Toryism, and viewed state aid as a vital means by which notions of loyalty and obedience could be promoted among the colony's Catholic minority. Government assistance to the Roman Church in the form of monetary support and access to Crown lands, he stated in the

²⁴ Especially disconcerting from the conservative establishmentarians' perspective was the behaviour of a particular Methodist faction—the Episcopalists—that had extensive historical links to the United States. Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press: 1996), 46. The Episcopal Methodists' radicalism differed significantly from the comparatively conservative orientation of the Wesleyan Methodists, a large and influential faction that had strong connections to Britain. See Todd Webb, "The Religious Atlantic: British Wesleyanism and the Formation of an Evangelical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ontario and Quebec" (Ph.D. diss., York University, 2006).

²⁵ Fahey, *In His Name*, 128-29; H.J. Bridgman, "Morris, William," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, volume VIII, <http://biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=4096> (accessed 24 Nov. 2011). Morris quoted in E.C. Kyte, "Journal of the Hon. William Morris' Mission to England in 1837," *Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records*, XXX (1934), 229-30.



John Strachan, inveterate Upper Canadian Tory and stout defender of Anglican establishmentarianism (Archives of Ontario, Accession Number: 619822)

early nineteenth century, would render Upper Canada's Catholics "a strong barrier against the contagion of Republican principles so rapidly diffusing among the people of this Province by... settlers from the United States."²⁶

The Emergence of an Alternative

An early critique of the establishmentarian outlook that informed the views of Hooker, Burke, Strachan, and others appeared in John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), in which he advocated the separation of church and state as an antidote to the politico-religious conflict that contributed to such cataclysmic events as the English Civil War. "If each of them," he explained

in reference to the temporal and religious domains, "would contain itself within its own bounds—the one attending the worldly welfare of the commonwealth, the other with the salvation of souls—it is impossible any discord should ever have happened between them."²⁷

Such notions exerted tremendous influence within colonial America and the early republic. Though Christian establishments existed in pre-revolutionary America—Congregationalism, beginning in the early seventeenth century, received state support in New England, while Anglicanism, by the early eighteenth century, enjoyed establishment status in Virginia, the Carolinas, Maryland, and parts of New York—the colonial populace had been emphatic in its opposition to the creation of an Anglican Bishopric. The creation of such an office, it was felt, threatened to curtail not only colonial Americans' religious liberties by conferring special status on the English Church, but also their political ones on account of Anglicanism's links to the English state. The spectre of civil *and* religious tyranny resonated with colonial Americans in a way that purely secular political theory never could, eventually serving as one of the catalysts for the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. While in certain instances religious establish-

²⁶ J.E. Rea, *Bishop Alexander Macdonell and the Politics of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1974), viii-ix; 21.

²⁷ John Locke, *Treatise of Civil Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, edited by Charles L. Sherman (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937), 220.

ments persisted at the state level into the early nineteenth century, Americans' deep-seated concerns regarding state-sanctioned politico-religious hierarchy found expression in the first amendment to the United States Constitution, which definitively declared that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."²⁸

A large-scale anti-establishmentarian movement took longer to emerge in Britain than it did in colonial America and the early republic. This was due in large part to the belief among a great many Britons that religious establishments were integral to the nation's temporal stability and spiritual welfare; and to the numerical dominance of the established Churches of England and Scotland, which in 1750 enjoyed the support of upwards of 90 per cent of Britain's churchgoing population.²⁹

Yet during the early nineteenth century British anti-establishmentarianism began to gather momentum. This development was attributable to such phenomena as a marked increase in the number of Britons belonging to Nonconformist churches (by the early 1850s non-Anglicans comprised roughly half of England's churchgoing population, due primarily to the dramatic ascent of Methodism); the disproportionately large number of Nonconformists concentrated among

Britain's increasingly influential manufacturing interests; and the alliances that had been forged between opponents of state-sanctioned religious hierarchy and advocates of liberalized trade policies and parliamentary reform. The most extreme expression of British anti-establishmentarianism—the emergence of which coincided with the rise of the nation's middle class—was the politico-religious doctrine of voluntarism, which called not simply for an end to legalized discrimination against Nonconformists but also for the separation of church and state and, ultimately, for the disestablishment of the Church of England itself. Instead of relying on the bounties of the state, voluntarists maintained, churches should draw their support exclusively from the freewill offerings of devout individuals.³⁰

Given the prominent position occupied by anti-establishmentarian attitudes in early America and nineteenth-century Britain, it is hardly surprising that such sentiments rose to prominence in post-revolutionary British North America. A spirited exposition of Upper Canadian anti-establishmentarianism was put forth in 1826 by a twenty-three-year-old Methodist circuit rider named Egerton Ryerson, whose anonymous response to Strachan's establishmentarian sermon of the previous year was published to wide acclaim in the *Colonial Advocate*. While

²⁸ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 200-16; Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 29-31; 67-84.

²⁹ Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland*, 2.

³⁰ G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832-1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 8-25.

Ryerson, in future years, came to be associated with Upper Canada's moderate conservatives—witness his support for the government in the “loyalty election” of 1836—his opposition in the 1820s and early 1830s to state-sanctioned religious hierarchy aligned him firmly with the colony's embryonic reform movement.³¹ This group, which enjoyed the support of members of various denominations—including numerous Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists, as well as anti-establishmentarian Presbyterians and Anglicans—increasingly identified the eradication of religious establishments, along with the achievement of responsible government, as one of its two principal objectives.³²

While he began his response to Strachan's sermon by stating that he did not object to the English Church's “doctrines, liturgy, or discipline,” Ryerson was unequivocal in his denunciation of his Anglican counterpart's contention that “Christian governments” were obligated to provide religious institutions with unwavering material assistance. Ryerson, in substantiating his critique, deployed both historical arguments—noting that the Christian church “was never... so pure, as she was in her first three centuries... [when she] was not only without the aid of civil government, but was most violently opposed by it”—and scriptural

ones—referring, for example, to Christ's assertion in John 18:36 that his kingdom was “not of this world.”³³

Ryerson also took issue with Strachan's contention that, in the absence of state-aided Christianity, irreligion or destabilizing political views imported from the United States were liable to proliferate. In dismissing the notion that religious establishments were bulwarks against atheism and agnosticism, Ryerson noted that, while he was “no republican,” he could not help but notice that, in the American republic, where by the mid-1820s state churches were virtually anathema, a vibrant Christian culture had taken root, one that was led by “men... [of] piety, [and] learning.” As for Strachan's charge that Upper Canada's Dissenting preachers were chiefly American-born radicals, Ryerson declared that, in fact, they were overwhelmingly either British-born or naturalized British subjects. Moreover, he added that the colony's Dissenting clergy were largely uninterested in worldly political matters, concerning themselves instead with such purely religious phenomena as the salvation of sinners, which amounted to a rejection of the charge that they espoused subversive political doctrines.³⁴

It is possible to interpret Ryerson's remarks on the latter issue as somewhat disingenuous, given the affinities that ex-

³¹ As the 1830s unfolded Ryerson parted company with zealous Reformers like Mackenzie on account of their burgeoning radicalism. United Church of Canada Archives (hereafter UCA), Egerton Ryerson Papers, Box 1 File 10, John Ryerson to Egerton Ryerson, 7 November 1833.

³² John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 90; Moir, *Church and State in Canada West*, 16.

³³ *Colonial Advocate*, 11 May 1826, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20–28.

isted in early-nineteenth-century Upper Canada between Dissenting Protestantism and Reform-oriented politics. Yet one could also contend that Dissenting Protestant involvement in Upper Canada's political affairs was motivated not by temporal ambition, but rather by religiously based concerns. The political activities of the colony's Dissenters—including adherents of the American-influenced Episcopal Methodist faction, whose Reformist leanings were singled out for criticism by Colborne in the early 1830s³⁵—were actuated by a desire on their part to eliminate state-sanctioned denominational hierarchy, which as we shall see was viewed by numerous anti-establishmentarians as an obstacle to the propagation throughout the colony of unalloyed Christian virtue. It is therefore possible to conclude that fervent Dissenters—including Reform-oriented Episcopal Methodists—who became involved in Upper Canadian politics did so, in keeping with Ryerson's remarks, as a result of an abiding preoccupation with spiritual phenomena.

Whatever their merits, Ryerson's remarks came as music to the ears of Upper Canada's Dissenters, many of whom objected to the conceptual foundations on which establishmentarianism rested and bristled at the allegations of disloyalty and radicalism that had been levelled

against them by members of the colony's Tory—and largely Anglican—elite.³⁶ For evidence one need look only to the recollections of one Anson Green, a Methodist preacher based in eastern Upper Canada who reflected on the reactions of himself and one of his co-religionists to Ryerson's remarks following their reception of the edition of the *Colonial Advocate* in which they had been published.

...[We] went into the field in the rear of the parsonage, sat down by the fence, and read the review [Ryerson's response to Strachan's sermon of 1825]. As we read we wept, and speculated about the unknown author. Again we read and wept; and then kneeled upon the grass, and prayed and thanked God for the able and timely defense of truth against the falsehoods that were being circulated amongst the people.³⁷

Competing Christianities

The contrasting views put forth by Strachan and Ryerson on the issue of Christian establishments, which reveal the existence in Upper Canada of ingrained differences of opinion over the church-state relationship, are indicative of a larger politico-religious conflict that had its roots in early modern England and manifested itself on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Exacerbating tensions between Tory establishmentarians and Reform-oriented critics of state-aided Christianity were financial imperatives,

³⁵ UCA, Ryerson Papers, Box 1 File 9, "Official Reply by Lieutenant Governor Sir John Colborne to an Address of the Methodist Conference in 1831."

³⁶ Paul Romney, "A Struggle for Authority: Toronto Society and Politics in 1834," in *Forging a Consensus: Historical Essays on Toronto*, edited by Victor Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 12.

³⁷ C.B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin and Company, 1937), I:28.

as participants on both sides of this conflict struggled with one another over revenues that could potentially be derived from Clergy Reserves lands. Yet to reduce this conflict solely to material considerations—to portray the Upper Canadian debate over religious establishments as little more than a confrontation between one group of people who wanted to control Reserves revenues and another group of people who wanted to see those revenues funnelled into ventures like public education—is to ignore the deep-seated convictions that lay at the heart of a vehement, decades-long rivalry.

Fuelling the conflict in Upper Canada between Tory proponents of religious establishments and Reform-oriented critics of state-sanctioned religious hierarchy were competing strategies for the Christianization of colonial society. Establishmentarian Anglicans viewed the conversion of individual sinners to a life of Christian righteousness as a gradual process, one that could only be initiated by members of a highly educated and permanently endowed clergy whose ministrations would steadily inculcate religious virtue in people's minds. Such a process, however, required access to substantial lands and financial resources through which ecclesiastical institutions could be constructed and the initiatives of clerical elites could be sustained.³⁸

Only the state, establishmentarians reasoned, could provide the church with such assistance, as the voluntary offerings

of individual parishioners—especially in sparsely populated colonial communities—were viewed as unreliable and, often, inadequate. Given the “total insufficiency of the voluntary principle to provide for the spiritual wants of a... people,” it behoved “every [Christian] government to supply the means of religious instruction to all classes of its subjects.”³⁹ The withdrawal by the state of the material assistance that it had traditionally extended to the English Church would therefore hobble that institution's efforts to propagate Christian piety across Upper Canadian society, leaving the colonial populace susceptible to the corrosive effects of irreligion or, equally problematic, the destabilizing doctrines peddled by Dissenting preachers.

Evidence of the pronounced extent to which Upper Canadian establishmentarians viewed the state as an ally in its campaign to Christianize Upper Canadian society can be found in a memorial composed in 1838 by the “Clergy of the Established Church of Upper Canada” and addressed to British Colonial Secretary, Lord Glenelg. Expressed in the memorial was a sense of opposition on the part of these colonial Anglicans to a campaign underway in Upper Canada to end the monopoly that the English Church had traditionally enjoyed over the Clergy Reserves and make the endowment available to several denominations. (This initiative, which aimed to alleviate politico-religious tensions

³⁸ Westfall, *Two Worlds*, 22.

³⁹ *The Church*, 6 May 1837, unpaginated.

in the colony by widening access to Reserves' revenues, was patterned on legislation that had been introduced in New South Wales through which public funds that had traditionally been controlled by the Anglican Church were distributed among various Christian groups.⁴⁰)

Dividing the endowment in such a manner threatened in the establishmentarians' view to "[to] alienate the Clergy Reserves from the original objects of their appropriation"—namely, "the religious instruction of the people of this province." Carving up the endowment, they elaborated, would "directly compromise the principles as well as the interests of the Established Church," which in turn would "endanger the cause of Protestantism" and act as a "permanent source of civil disunion." Implicit in the memorialists' remarks was the conviction that state aid in the form of a Clergy Reserves monopoly was essential to the Anglican Church's ongoing efforts to bring about the moral edification of the populace.⁴¹

Whereas Anglican establishmentarians viewed the state as an ally in their quest to Christianize Upper Canadian society, Reform-oriented opponents of

religious establishments perceived civil intervention in the spiritual domain as an obstacle to the diffusion throughout the colony of Christian precepts and practices. Upper Canadian anti-establishmentarians, similar to many of their Protestant counterparts elsewhere in the world, were influenced by the phenomenon of evangelicalism.⁴² This emotionally charged form of Christianity originated among central European pietistic sects in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War, and was subsequently propagated throughout much of the world via patterns of migration and missionary activity. Evangelicalism took root in the Anglo-American World during the eighteenth century largely as a result of the exertions of such iconic preachers as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John and Charles Wesley. Denouncing the tepid rationalism that had hitherto pervaded much of western Christendom, these figures were instrumental to the advent of religious revivals—intense demonstrations of popular piety—on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.⁴³ The attendant surge in evangelical enthusiasm, which was sustained in the nineteenth century by a vast

⁴⁰ Roger C. Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8-9.

⁴¹ *Copies or Extracts of Correspondence Respecting the Clergy Reserves of Canada* (London: Colonial Office, 1840?), 137. Despite such concerns, the Clergy Reserves were divided among several denominations in the early 1840s, although the Church of England retained a disproportionately large share of the endowment. Moir, *Church in the British Era*, 124-25.

⁴² It should be noted that, while evangelicalism was especially influential among such Dissenting denominations as the Methodists, the Anglicans were not immune to this emotionally charged expression of Christianity. See, for example, Richard W. Vaudry, *Anglicans and the Atlantic World: High Churchmen, Evangelicals, and the Quebec Connection* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

⁴³ Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

network of bible and missionary societies, had important implications for the way in which Upper Canada's Dissenters viewed the church-state relationship.

Evangelicals typically viewed conversion to a life of Christian virtue not as a gradual process that was to be led by members of a clerical elite, but rather as a sudden experience that roused people from states of religious indifference and complacency and alerted them to the possibility of redemption. The emotional intensity of this spontaneously occurring phenomenon is captured in the remarks of Ryerson, who reflected in his autobiography on the evangelical conversion experience that he had undergone in the middle of the night as a twelve-year-old.

My consciousness of guilt and sinfulness was humbling, oppressive, and distressing; and my experience of relief... was clear, refreshing, and joyous. In the end I simply trusted in Christ, and looked to Him for a present salvation.... I turned, rose to my knees, bowed my head, and covered my face, rejoiced with trembling, saying to a brother who was lying beside me, that the Saviour was now near us.... I henceforth had new views, new feelings, new joys, and new strength.⁴⁴

The belief that conversion was sudden and spontaneous prompted numerous evangelicals to reject the notion that clerical elites had an essential mediatory role to play between individual sinners and their creator. This is not to suggest that evangelicals viewed clerical ministrations as unimportant. Far from it—they believed that clergymen could serve as

models of piety for the populace through their own everyday behaviour, and could elicit within their parishioners a yearning for redemption by exhorting them to lead lives of Christian righteousness. Yet evangelicals were also convinced that the all-important process of conversion ultimately hinged not on the initiatives of ministers, but rather on the forging of personal relationships between repentant individuals and God.⁴⁵

It followed for many evangelicals that civil intervention in the spiritual domain—as expressed, for example, in the creation of religious establishments—was not only unnecessary, but also unhelpful. Government officials, by meddling in the religious realm and erecting denominational hierarchies, invariably created obstacles to the achievement of potentially soul-saving relationships between individual sinners and their creator, thus inhibiting the diffusion of true Christianity. The belief that civil authorities' involvement in the affairs of the church served only to impede the propagation of religious virtue featured prominently in the statements of George Brown, who in the 1840s replaced Ryerson as Upper Canada's most influential critic of state-aided Christianity. Consider his remarks at a meeting of the staunchly voluntaristic Anti-Clergy Reserves Association held in Toronto in 1851. Brown, a Free Church Presbyterian and vigorous Reformer whose statements reputedly elicited "loud cheers" from the Association's members,

⁴⁴ Egerton Ryerson, *The Story of My Life*, edited by J. George Hodgins (Toronto: William Briggs, 1884), 27.

⁴⁵ Westfall, *Two Worlds*, 26; Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, 15-19.

informed his audience that, “the Church which cannot be maintained by the voluntary contributions of the Christian people is not worth supporting.” Central to his denunciation of religious establishments was the belief that they corrupted the purity of Christ’s teachings, and prevented them from being propagated as widely as possible. “State Churchism,” in Brown’s view, “[had a] degenerating effect... on the purity and simplicity of the Gospel,” and “turned men’s minds from its great truths as a religion of the heart, to the mere outward tinsel.”⁴⁶ For Brown and his voluntaristic supporters, then, religious establishments were objectionable largely because of their capacity for inhibiting the propagation of uncorrupted Christianity.⁴⁷

Contesting Christian Loyalty

Participants on both sides of the politico-religious struggle between ad-

vocates of religious establishments and critics of “State Churchism” drew on the vocabulary of pro-British loyalism—albeit in differing ways—in attempting to substantiate their divergent arguments, which brings into focus the tremendous importance and flexibility of “Britishness” among a variety of Upper Canadian communities. British imperial enthusiasm, as a spate of recent works have demonstrated, was a compelling phenomenon for many British North Americans.⁴⁸ Yet highly influential though it may have been, the sense of attachment that bound numerous colonials to Britain was by no means monolithic. On the contrary, notions of “Britishness” manifested themselves in diverse ways, ranging from a sense of ethnic identification with the peoples of the British Isles to an appreciation for such British institutions as parliamentary democracy. While this diversity did not detract from the inten-

⁴⁶ *Globe*, 26 July 1851, 354. Although they did not object to the principle of religious establishments *per se*, Brown and the Upper Canadian Free Church constituency to which he belonged emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as *de facto* voluntarists. John S. Moir, “‘Who Pays the Piper...’: Canadian Presbyterianism and Church-State Relations,” in *Early Presbyterianism in Canada: Essays by John S. Moir*, edited by Paul Laverdure (Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan: Gravelbooks, 2003), 16.

⁴⁷ The arguments of Brown and other anti-establishmentarians were fuelled in the mid-nineteenth century by an anti-Catholic animus. This perspective emerged as a result of both domestic circumstances—including the belief that Roman Catholics from Canada East impeded the secularization of the Clergy Reserves because of the negative ramifications that such a development could have on their own church, which had long enjoyed state support—and external ones—including the so-called “Papal Aggression” controversy of the 1850s, through which Pius IX attempted to reinvigorate English Catholicism and, allegedly, challenge the Protestant foundations on which British society rested. J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1959), I:114-25. See also J.R. Miller, “Anti-Catholic Thought in Victorian Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* LXVI:4 (December 1985), 474-94. On metropolitan anti-Catholicism see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 11-54; and Colin Haydon, “‘I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’: Anticatholicism, Xenophobia and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c. 1850*, edited by Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-52.

⁴⁸ Examples include Christie, ed., *Transatlantic Subjects*; Phillip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the*

sity of their attachment to Britain—indeed, the fact that “Britishness” could assume differing forms arguably enhanced its potency by allowing it to be invoked for various reasons and in various contexts—it does attest to its elasticity as a cultural orientation.⁴⁹

The same could be said for the discourse of loyalism through which British North Americans conveyed notions of fondness for the imperial metropole. This discourse came to occupy a salient position in British North America as a result of such phenomena as the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the post-1815 surge of British immigrants into colonial society. Yet much like “Britishness” it had diverse meanings. For example, from the perspective of hidebound Tories loyalism required unswerving obedience on the part of the populace to colonial authorities while, for fervent Reformers, it was entirely compatible with hard-driving campaigns to secure for the colonies’ inhabitants liberties enshrined in the British constitution. The discourse of loyalism also resonated with a broad cross-section of colonial society, including men and women, Aborigines, blacks, and whites, members of various religious groups, and peoples from a mul-

tiplicity of socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, while it was rooted in a fundamentally coherent ethos of allegiance to Britain, loyalism existed in British North Americans’ collective consciousness as a malleable and multifaceted imaginative construct.⁵⁰

The diversity of “Britishness” and the discourse of loyalism can be seen in the protracted politico-religious struggle that lay at the heart of Upper Canadian political culture. Participants on both sides of the conflict that pitted establishmentarian Tories against anti-establishmentarian Reformers drew on the language of pro-British loyalism in attempting to sharpen their competing contentions. For instance, Strachan, writing in the early 1830s, invoked notions of imperial fidelity in denouncing the forces of “liberalism” that in his conception menaced Upper Canada’s Anglican establishment. The efforts of the colony’s anti-establishmentarians, Strachan observed, were reminiscent of the activities of “the enemies of British principles and of the Church of England” in Revolutionary America. Such initiatives were especially “appalling” in view of the fact that Upper Canada’s aging loyalist contingent, “[had] peculiar claims to the Protection

British Empire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Katie Pickles, *Female Imperialism and National Identity: Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁴⁹ Buckner, “Introduction,” in *Canada and the British Empire*, 6. For a somewhat different perspective see Michael Gauvreau, “The Dividends of Empire: Church Establishments and Contested British Identities in the Canadas and the Maritimes, 1780-1850,” in *Transatlantic Subjects*, 203.

⁵⁰ See Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Knopf, 2011); and Jerry Bannister, “Canada as Counter-Revolution: The Loyalist Order Framework in Canadian History, 1750-1840,” in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, edited by Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 98-146.

of the Government,” as they had already been “driven from their homes by rebellion” in the late eighteenth century. The assaults of Upper Canada’s anti-establishmentarians were also upsetting because they threatened to deprive metropolitan immigrants of the state-aided Christianity to which they were entitled as British subjects. He remarked on the “melancholy reflections” of immigrants who, on leaving their native shores in Britain and relocating to Upper Canada, “did not conceive that they left their birthright behind them,” and “[did not] expect that in passing to a British Colony” they would be “depriving themselves of the Privileges of the British Constitution.”⁵¹

Likewise, the “Clergy and Laity” of the Anglican Church in Upper Canada summoned up notions of loyalty in the summer of 1850 in an address to Queen Victoria. The authors of the address urged the British monarch to thwart a motion that had been passed in the Canadian legislature “which aims at the abolition of all [government] grants and endowments for religious instruction in the Province.” Establishmentarian orthodoxy featured prominently within the address itself, with the authors warning that the elimination of government assistance for the Church of England would deal “a heavy blow to the influence and spread of true religion in the Province,” not least because of voluntarism’s inability to provide the inhabitants of “rural districts... with the means of

insuring stated instruction in the truths of the Gospel.” Yet in addition to emphasizing establishmentarianism’s conceptual underpinnings, the address also gave pride of place to themes of pro-British loyalty. It suggested that, if imperial authorities acquiesced to the colonial anti-establishmentarians’ efforts to eliminate the “grants and endowments” that bolstered the ministrations of Anglican clergymen, they would likely compromise the longstanding ties that bound colonial adherents of the Church of England to the metropolitan state. “[The] sanction by your Majesty of the godless character just passed by our Legislative Assembly,” the address asserted, “would have the inevitable effect of speedily alienating from Your Majesty’s Throne and Royal House the loyal attachment of a large number of Your Majesty’s most faithful and devoted subjects.”⁵²

Upper Canadian critics of religious establishments also invoked themes of “Britishness” and loyalty, albeit in differing ways, in attempting to substantiate their politico-religious arguments. While this tendency intensified in the aftermath of the ill-fated Upper Canadian Rebellion (in which Dissenting Protestants had played a disproportionately large role), it certainly existed prior to 1837.⁵³ For example, members of the Upper Canadian legislature composed an address to King George IV in the mid-1820s in which they couched their objections to an Anglican monopoly over the

⁵¹ Spragge, ed., *The John Strachan Letter Book*, 222-23.

⁵² *Church*, 4 July 1850, 194.

⁵³ Colin Read, *The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1988), 18.

Clergy Reserves in unmistakably loyalist language. “We... most humbly represent,” the petition declared,

that the lands set apart in this Province for the maintenance and support of a Protestant clergy, ought not to be enjoyed by any one denomination of Protestants, to the exclusion of their Christian brethren of other denominations... [who are] equally entitled as dutiful and loyal subjects, to the protection of your Majesty’s benign and liberal government.⁵⁴

The petitioners’ opposition to manifestations of establishmentarian privilege, which dovetailed with one of the primary objectives of the burgeoning Upper Canadian Reform movement, made plain the fact that loyalty to the British Crown and opposition to “State Churchism” in the form of a Church of England monopoly over the Clergy Reserves were by no means mutually exclusive phenomena. While such arguments likely sprang from a genuine sense of pro-British loyalty, they also served a utilitarian purpose in that they helped to shield Upper Canada’s anti-establishmentarians from allegations that they were exponents of revolutionary political views.

Sentiments of “Britishness” and anti-establishmentarianism also featured prominently during a visit made by George Brown in 1853 “to the Western Townships of the County of Middlesex.” Brown, who was widely viewed as an icon of Reform-oriented anti-“State

Churchism,” was greeted in the town of Strathburn by a procession that featured “a long train of horsemen and wagons loaded with the freeholders of Middlesex [County],” as well as “forty carriages bearing some 250 persons.” Brown and the procession’s organizers were placed at the head of the procession “[in] a large car drawn by four horses,” which subsequently crept along streets “thronged with people” to a public square in the town’s west end. The event’s chairman, “James Gardner, Esq., J.P.,” proceeded to lavish praise on the guest of honour from a podium that had been positioned in the centre of the square. He lauded Brown for being “ever ready to promote measures of a progressive character,” and took pains to describe Brown’s criticisms of the Clergy Reserves as “fair and candid.” Speaking on behalf of those in attendance, Gardner ultimately declared that, “We are proud of you as an Independent Representative of the Canadian people... [and] we are doubly proud of you as the Champion of truly British principles!”⁵⁵

Violent Conflict and the Church-State Relationship

So acute were animosities between participants on either side of the Upper Canadian debate over religious establishments that they transcended the public sphere of reasoned dialogue and manifested themselves in spectacular events that were far more tumultuous than the

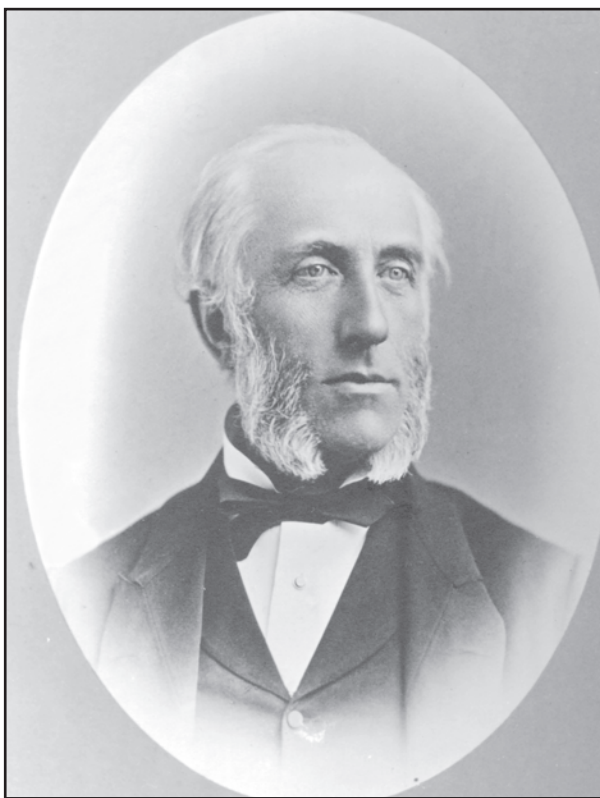
⁵⁴ *Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada, from the 7th Nov, 1825 to the 30th Jan., 1826...* (York: W.L. Mackenzie, 1826), 83 <http://www.canadiana.org/myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/ECO/Item%20Record/9_00941_2?id=fa58c5805dd83db6> (accessed 3 Nov. 2011).

⁵⁵ *Globe*, 20 October 1853, 534.

George Brown, ca. 1885, evangelical Presbyterian and strident critic of state-sanctioned denominational hierarchy (Archives of Ontario, Collection of Dr. O.L. Stanton, Reference Code: F 4634-0-0-0-4)

proceedings in Middlesex County to which I have referred.⁵⁶ Indicative of this fact are the events of July 1851, which featured clashes in Toronto between conservative establishmentarians and their Reform-oriented anti-establishmentarian counterparts. The catalyst for these events was a meeting of the Anti-Clergy Reserves Association that occurred in early July in St. Lawrence Hall on King Street. The meeting, depending on one's perspective, was either "crashed" or attended by the Association's establishmentarian adversaries, whose presence at the event sparked a controversial sequence of events. Tensions at the meeting revolved around whether the gathering of the Anti-Clergy Reserves Association's members was one "of an Association," in which case backers of religious establishments were ineligible to attend, or a "public meeting," in which case all peoples—including ardent establishmentarians—were permitted to be on hand.⁵⁷

Rational debate on this matter quick-



ly gave way to displays of rowdiness and threats of violence. For example, the efforts of Thomas David Morrison, a member of the Anti-Clergy Reserves Association, to demonstrate that the establishmentarians were in fact ineligible to participate in the gathering were "rendered wholly inaudible by the hisses and groans of a party of Orangemen."⁵⁸ Members of the latter group, which had longstanding ties to Upper Ca-

⁵⁶ For the role of spectacle in pre-Confederation politics see Radforth, "Political Demonstrations & Spectacles During the Rebellion Losses Controversy in Upper Canada"; and Bruce Curtis, "The 'Most Splendid Pageant Ever Seen': Grandeur, the Domestic, and Condescension in Lord Durham's Political Theatre," *Canadian Historical Review* 89:1 (March 2008), 55-89.

⁵⁷ *Globe*, 10 July 1851, 327; *Church*, 10 July 1851, 397. The following discussion is based on a synthesis of material drawn from the *Globe*, a publication that typically opposed religious establishments, and the *Church*, a publication that typically supported them.

⁵⁸ For fresh perspectives on the Orange phenomenon in Canada see David A. Wilson, ed., *The*

nadian conservatism, exhibited support in this instance for such Tory establishmentarians as John Beverley Robinson, who was adamant that supporters of religious establishments had every right to be on hand. Tensions, which were already running high, were ratcheted up even further when members of the Association attempted to pass a resolution denouncing the Clergy Reserves. The Association's opponents responded by storming the stage on which several anti-establishmentarians stood, "[jumping] upon the seats in front of it, and [shouting] most vociferously." One such supporter of state-aided Christianity, described by the *Globe* as a "journeyman shoemaker" and Orangeman, proclaimed his support for Robinson and the other establishmentarians in attendance, and challenged to a fistfight "anyone who raised a voice in support of order." Convinced by this point that the circumstances for a meeting were unfavourable, members of the Anti-Clergy Reserves Association elected to dissolve the gathering and reconvene at another time.⁵⁹

Bedlam ensued. The establishmentarians, led by Robinson, took over the event, eventually moving—and passing—an amendment of their own, which declared "That the voluntary principle [was] notoriously insufficient for the adequate maintenance of religion and [the] diffusion of Christian knowledge throughout this Province." (The *Globe*, in recounting these events, noted that the din in the hall was by this point so

loud that the actual articulation of the establishmentarians' amendment was inaudible, and that its content had to be obtained in writing later on by one of the paper's reporters.) Following the adoption of the amendment, the belligerent Orangeman mounted the "reporters' table" that lay at the front of the venue, "and declared his attachment to the Church [of England], and his hatred of the _____ dissenters." The outbreak of a "serious riot" involving supporters of religious establishments and their anti-establishmentarian opponents who had remained on hand was a distinct possibility until a contingent of policemen arrived on the scene and restored a modicum of order to the proceedings. The events at St. Lawrence Hall concluded with the establishmentarians burnishing their support for state-aided Christianity and the "British connection," offering "three cheers for the maintenance of the Clergy Reserves—three cheers for the Bishop of Toronto [Strachan]—and three cheers for the Queen."⁶⁰

The Anti-Clergy Reserves Association reconvened two weeks later in St. Lawrence Hall, which played host to "a most respectable and deeply interested audience" comprised exclusively of anti-establishmentarians. Although the Association's meeting, in this instance, was able to run its course, the proceedings were by no means devoid of controversy. In the days leading up to the gathering, placards were placed throughout the city advertising an

Orange Order in Canada (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007).

⁵⁹ *Globe*, 10 July 1851, 327.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*; *Church*, 10 July 1851, 397.

establishmentarian counter-meeting that was to take place on the same day and at the same time as the Anti-Clergy Reserves Association's function. The counter-meeting, which was held outdoors behind the venue in which the anti-establishmentarians were scheduled to gather, was led by outspoken proponents of state-supported Christianity, including G.E. O'Brien, owner of the Tory newspaper the *Patriot*. O'Brien, in addressing the establishmentarians who had assembled for the event, denounced the "Godless" Anti-Clergy Reserves Association, whose efforts to "pull down the Clergy Reserves" would "not only cause the severance of [the] British Connection," but also usher in a frightful ethos of "Socialism, Republicanism, and Infidelity."⁶¹

When the counter-meeting broke up at roughly nine o'clock a group of "ruffians" resolved to disrupt the Anti-Clergy Reserves Association's meeting that was still underway by "thrashing those present." Accordingly, a "large party" of establishmentarians surged toward St. Lawrence Hall, "cheering and shouting as they went." Yet while they succeeded in entering the building, the mob was confronted outside the door in which the meeting was taking place by the Mayor, John G. Bowes, two aldermen, and the city's "Head Constable," who was flanked by several policemen. The establishmentarians were informed in no uncertain terms that they would not be allowed

to intrude on the Association's meeting and, following a heated exchange, they were expelled from the building.⁶²

The mob was undeterred. Following their expulsion from the hall the establishmentarians smashed the windows of the room in which the Association's members were seated, and tossed through the shattered panes of glass "brick bats" that were intended to injure the anti-establishmentarians located inside. Members of the Association, who were by no means passive observers, retaliated by tossing objects—it is unclear whether they were "walking sticks" or "billets of fire-wood"—through the broken windows and onto the establishmentarians amassed beneath them. The establishmentarian mob subsequently "besieged" the building, and assaulted several people—including the Mayor, whose efforts to promote order resulted in a "severe" gash over one of his eyes—as they made their way out of the building. Chaos reigned for several hours, until soldiers who were stationed in a barracks nearby were dispatched to the Hall in hopes of restoring some semblance of calm. Yet while the most extreme displays of violence subsided as a result of the soldiers' arrival, clashes between members of the two groups continued to flare up sporadically until midnight.⁶³ Such events lay bare the deep-seated animosities that fuelled the Upper Canadian conflict over state-aided Christianity.

⁶¹ *Globe*, 26 July 1851, 355.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Church*, 24 July, 1851, 242; *Ibid.*, 31 July 1851, 417; *Globe*, 24 July 1851, 350; *Ibid.*, 29 July 1851, 412.

Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall (1867) witnessed clashes in the early 1850s between Tory establishmentarians and their Reform-oriented rivals (Archives of Ontario, Collection of Octavius Thompson, Reference Code: F 4356-0-0-0-43)

Conclusion

Religion was central to Upper Canadian political culture. During the early and mid-nineteenth century the colony witnessed a struggle between Tory advocates of Christian establishments and Reform-oriented critics of state-supported religion over the degree to which civil authorities should assume responsibility for promoting heightened moral standards among the populace. This conflict, which threw into relief the existence in pre-Confederation Canada of diametrically opposed politico-religious perspectives, was bound up with a larger controversy regarding church-state relations that originated in early modern England and played itself out on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Compounding tensions between establishmentarian Tories and anti-establishmentarian Reformers were competing strategies for the Christianization of colonial society. The former viewed the state as an ally in its campaign to promote the moral edification of the populace, while the latter viewed government intervention in the religious sphere as an obstacle to the propagation of uncorrupted Christian piety. Participants on both sides of this controversy invoked



the language of pro-British loyalism in an effort to strengthen their competing contentions, a fact that underscores the pervasiveness and elasticity of “Britishness” as a cultural identity in post-revolutionary British North America. Divergent perspectives on the church-state relationship thundered from pulpits and cropped up with unmistakable frequency in the pages of pamphlets and newspapers. They also expressed themselves in tumultuous public demonstrations and street fights, as evidenced by the chaotic events that occurred in Toronto in July of 1851. These factors account for the intensity in Upper Canada of politico-religious conflict, which continued to exert influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as Ontarians became embroiled in Dominion-wide debates over such polarizing issues as the Jesuit Estates and Manitoba Schools controversies.