

# Politics in the American Pulpit: American Opinion of Napoleon

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Two millions of people had, some years ago, been murdered in France, since it had been called a Republic. "A tan yard was established by the government, to make leather from the skins of their murdered citizens". Have those of any natural affection, who can wear shoes made from such leather? Leather manufactured from skins taken from human bodies, the bodies of countrymen, of townsmen, of neighbors, and perhaps, of relatives? Read the history of modern France, my hearers, and you will know that she is without natural affection-- is antichrist, the beast from the bottomless pit, a habitation of devils.<sup>1</sup>

The Reverend Abraham Burnham spoke these words aloud to his congregation in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1814. That story, about the supposed tannery of human skins in Meudon, France, that was thought to operate during the Revolutionary Terror, is a sample of some of the stories told about the French by New England ministers about the barbarity of the Revolution in France.

When this story was told in 1814 to horrify and warn Americans, it was considered an historical example of the cruelty of the French. Burnham's following remarks, however, were contemporary events. "Is antichrist a spirit of war? And is not

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Burnham, "Antichrist: A Discourse, Addressed to the Congregational Church and Society in Pembroke, New Hampshire." Pembroke: N.H. 14 April 1814.

Napoleon a bloody warrior?"<sup>2</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, had been in power for fifteen years by this point in time, and he was the most hated man in the eyes of Americans in New England.

This paper seeks to explain how Americans in New England saw Napoleon during the early nineteenth century, more specifically, what and why New England ministers were preaching to their congregations during this time, and for what reasons. In his book on Unitarianism in the antebellum south, John Macauley describes the actions of these rogue preachers as "pulpit treason," which he defines as an act whereby a minister hijacked the church's pulpit to stray from conventional religious messages in order to broadcast messages that featured a more politicized content.<sup>3</sup> In the case of this paper, these political messages were vicious, hostile, and sharp diatribes against Napoleon. What led these ministers to commit pulpit treason? What was it about Napoleon and his actions that they found so questionable and important that these New England pastors felt the need to profane the church with what amounts to, in many cases, well-written and well thought-out hate speech? This paper seeks to answer those questions by examining religious and political trends in New England in early nineteenth century America in a very brief

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<sup>2</sup> Burnham, "Antichrist." 14 April 1814.

<sup>3</sup> John Macauley. *Unitarianism in the American South: The other invisible institution.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001; 166.

fashion, and how these contributed to the negative portrayal of Napoleon broadcast to parishioners at this time by their religious counselors.

Research for this paper consists of sermons, discourses, and orations presented to the laity by their ministers, which were later published by “popular demand” or “at the request of the hearers” by these same church leaders. Newspapers that mentioned and reprinted these sermons were also used in writing this work. Most of the sources used in this work center on Massachusetts, but this work is termed New England because the spread of these sermons via newspapers, letters, and word of mouth is indeterminable at this point in time.

To explain the New England-area anti-Napoleon beliefs from ministers, it is important to know some extremely brief political history in the Early Republic period in America; specifically, the crucial separation of church and state that is a hallmark feature of the United States’ Constitution. During the writing of this document, many of the Framers sought to keep religion out of the Constitution so that equality would flourish rather than have America slip into the religious turmoils that had wreaked havoc in England in the centuries past. With no mention of religion in the Constitution, there would be no repeats of hated British acts like “the Test Acts”, which Brooke Allen describes in his monograph, *Moral Minority*.<sup>4</sup> In England, these acts were created to prevent Catholics and Nonconformists, both equally undesirable religious groups, from being employed by the English government; in

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<sup>4</sup> *Moral Minority: Our skeptical Founding Fathers*.

order to gain a civil position in England during this time, the only acceptable religion to belong to was the Anglican religion. In America, the Framers argued, it should not, and would not matter what a person’s religious beliefs were-- religion would not stop anybody from becoming political.<sup>5</sup>

However, fears began sprouting up in New England regarding the lack of strictures regarding who could be elected to office. Several spoke out against such a worrisome thing as the President of the United States being of a non-Protestant religion-- unsurprising, since Massachusetts in particular was never known as being tolerant of divergent religious beliefs even as a young colony in the early seventeenth century, where the Puritans had been kicking out people of nonconforming beliefs from the very start. While most of the United States began giving up their religious test acts, legal holdovers from their beginnings as English colonies, in the last few years of the eighteenth century, Massachusetts held onto test acts until 1833. This climate of New England religiosity pervaded the government so much so that public fast days, where citizens would spend the day in reflection and prayer, were declared in times of stress; these days were even specially requested by citizens to the government. Though decried by the rest of the United States, New Englanders, and especially Massachusetts, held on to these days as a way of contemplating sin and evil in the world. In his 1812 sermon, “War a calamity greatly to be dreaded”, Kiah Bayley wrote that, “the Representatives of this Commonwealth have requested his

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<sup>5</sup> Brooke Allen. *Moral Minority: Our skeptical Founding Fathers*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006; 138.

Excellency the Governor to appoint a day for public humiliation, fasting, and prayer".<sup>6</sup> This request was a direct response to the declaration of war against Great Britain by America.

This short explanation of the interweaving of religious history and political culture in New England provides a framework for understanding anti-Napoleonic feeling in northeastern America. The most virulent hatred of Napoleon in America stems from an unlikely place-- the Protestant churches that America was founded upon two hundred years prior. In these houses of worship, national affairs of state became the order of the day for ministers to preach upon to their congregations. Many ministers offered explanations behind their pulpit treasors of such non-religious topics as rumored alliances with France, outbreaks of war and the evils of war in general by explaining that their knowledge of such topics was superior to that of their congregations, and that any politicking being done in the church was for the benefit of the parishioners and not that of the minister.

The Reverend Samuel Austin of Worcester, Massachusetts hit upon a creative defense for his pulpit treason in his prefatory remarks to the sermon that he preached for a special fast day in July 1812. Rather than apologize for the political nature of his sermon, Austin explained that there was a

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<sup>6</sup> Kiah Bayley. "War a Calamity to be Greatly Dreaded: The Substance of Two Discourses Delivered at Newcastle, July 23, 1812; Being the Day Appointed by his Excellency, Governor Strong, to be Observed as a Day of Public Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, Through the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in Consequence of our Being Involved in War." Newcastle, ME. 23 July 1812.

logical reason for the subject matter, saying, "It is denied that this sermon is political. True indeed it is, that there are many observations in it, that have respect to the administration of our national government, and the state of our country. Facts of a political nature are adverted to. But they are produced in evidence to a point of religious instruction."<sup>7</sup> Austin's argument that he brought in politics in order to contextualize a religious point was novel. The point Austin wished to make in this sermon was that war was an evil that should be banished from the world, that it was sinful, but more to the point of this paper, that war brought about unholy alliances with Napoleon, "that fell tyrant and destroyer of the earth, the most cruel oppressor and murderer of his fellow beings, the vilest of men, who tramples upon all truth and justice."<sup>8</sup> By overstepping his boundaries as a minister, Austin presented a picture of the evils that awaited Americans if they did not heed his warning. His pulpit treason, like that of all the ministers discussed in this paper, was not to self-aggrandize, but to publicize the dangers of Napoleon and of France.

All of the sermons examined in this study elaborated either one or two common themes that denounced Napoleon and France. The first theme developed is the imagery associated with ministers' descriptions of Napoleon and the French, which was often highly hyperbolic and overly exaggerated. The second theme examined in this paper is the usage of the

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Austin. "A Sermon, Preached in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the Occasion of the Special Fast, July 23d, 1812." Worcester, MA. 23 July 1812.

<sup>8</sup> Austin, "A Sermon, Preached in Worcester," 23 July 1812.

term “antichrist” in reference to both France and Napoleon in turn.

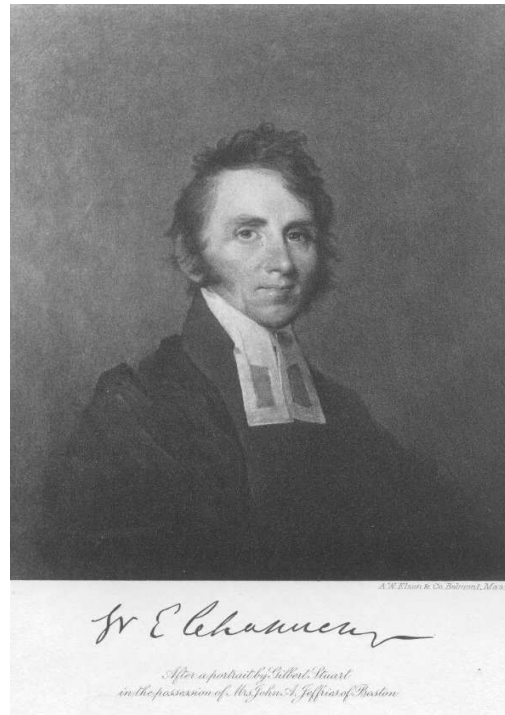
At the beginning of this paper, the Reverend Abraham Burnham described the French had as a barbaric people without natural affection who did not care whom they hurt in the past, and who were alleged to have opened a tannery to cure the skins of victims of revolutionary violence into shoe leather. The imagery of some preachers’ descriptions of the French and later, Napoleon, are too vivid to be easily forgotten. By making Napoleon sound that much more terrifying, ministers attempted to frighten their flocks into turning a cold shoulder to the looming possibility of an alliance with Napoleon against England. One of the most vehement in his criticisms of Napoleon was the Reverend William Ellery Channing. Channing spent several years speaking out against the evils that Napoleon spread, and because of his centrality to the growing Unitarian Christianity movement in Boston during this time, many of Channing’s sermons were published not only in the private press but also in Boston-area newspapers, disseminating Channing’s message much farther than a non-famous preacher would be able to spread his thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

The Harvard-educated Channing began his anti-Napoleon crusade in 1808, publishing several impassioned speeches against Napoleon and everything Channing thought Napoleon stood for. In 1810,

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<sup>9</sup> William Ellery Channing’s sermon of 5 April 1810 was reprinted in newspapers as far away as Newburyport, MA, a distance of approximately forty miles. “A Sermon, Preached in Boston, April 5, 1810, The Day of the Public Fast.” Newburyport Herald 24 April 1810, XIV 6: 1.

Channing’s second known speech against Napoleon, he explained that his devotion to the public welfare was the reason behind



his sermon and the subsequent publication of it. Channing told his parishioners that there was a dark, evil presence lurking in Europe where it had become extremely powerful; he said:

...all this immense power is now centered in one hand, wielded by one mind, a mind formed in scenes of revolution and blood, a mind most vigorous and capacious, but whose capacity is filled with plans of dominion and devastation. It has not room for one thought of mercy. The personal character of Napoleon

is of itself sufficient to inspire the gloomiest forebodings.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike many of the ministers in this study, while Channing was against Napoleon as a man and as a sovereign, he recognized that Napoleon had a good mind, though it had been corrupted by Napoleon's formative experiences during the French Revolution.

What Channing was really worried about was the fact that Americans were growing complacent in their new country, buffered by the Atlantic Ocean, which protected them from the wars in Europe, but also, that Americans were falling under the sway of Napoleon's personal charm. Channing argued against this, saying,

Will it be said, he wants not to conquer us, but only wishes to be his allies? Allies of France! Is there a man who does not shudder at the thought! Is there one who had not rather struggle nobly, and perish under her open enmity, than be crushed by the embrace of her friendship, her alliance. ... Are you lovers of treachery, perfidy, rapacity, and massacre? Then aspire to the honour which Spain has forfeited, and become the ally of France.<sup>11</sup>

Referencing the 1808 French invasion of Spain which soon after turned into an unsuccessful satellite state of France,

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<sup>10</sup> William Ellery Channing. "A Sermon, Preached in Boston, April 5, 1810, The Day of the Public Fast." Boston. 5 April 1810.

<sup>11</sup> Channing, "A Sermon," 5 April 1810.

Channing abhorred the idea of an alliance with France.

In order to make it perfectly clear to his listeners (or readers) how Channing saw Napoleon, Channing offered this description of Napoleon's character:

I fear, there are many, who are blinded to the true character of the conqueror of Europe, by the splendour of his victories; many, who attach to him to the noble qualities, which have been displayed by other heroes, and who repose a secret hope in his clemency. They ought to know, and they might know, that he has risen to power in a revolution, which has had a peculiar influence in hardening the heart; that his character is unillumined by one ray of beneficence; that he is dark, vindictive, unrelenting; that no man loves him, that he cares for no man's love; and that fear and horror are the only sentiments that he ought to inspire.<sup>12</sup>

The reason behind Channing's pulpit treason is obvious: when faced with a potential ally of this character, New Englanders should be repelled at the thought. In Channing's mind, New Englanders "ought to know, and they might know" what kind of being they would be allying themselves with. Napoleon was less than human, as he did not care about the

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<sup>12</sup> Channing, "A Sermon," 5 April 1810.

love of fellow humans, and moreover, no other humans loved. Hoping for mercy from Napoleon was pointless, according to Channing, because Napoleon was incapable of “clemency” or “beneficence.” The negative qualities of Napoleon segue into the next topic of the paper, which is the antichrist.

The concept of antichrist is an old one, dating from the earliest Biblical teachings, and since then, it has been applied to a large number of people; this list is not limited to Simon Magus, Nero, Justinian, Muhammad, Frederick II, John XXII, Luther, Peter the Great, and the relevant one to this paper, Napoleon.<sup>13</sup> The concept seems to resuscitate in times of immense stress in which a people finds itself threatened by an outside force. Bernard McGinn explains that “the Antichrist legend can be seen as a projection, or perhaps better, a mirror, for conceptions and fears about ultimate human evil.”<sup>14</sup> Though it differs from religion to religion as to what the antichrist is and is not, there are certain common features of antichrist and the “ultimate evil” associated with him. The antichrist could take a variety of shapes, though mostly as “the false messiah, the ‘pseudo Christ’ is first and foremost the great deceiver, the arch-hypocrite.”<sup>15</sup> The antichrist, or just plain antichrist, then, is a person who is fundamentally against Christ, whether by being supremely evil, by simply denying the existence of God and Jesus, or by acting as “the other” to a group of threatened people.

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard McGinn. *Antichrist: 2000 years of the human fascination with evil*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; 4.

<sup>14</sup> McGinn, *Antichrist*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> McGinn, *Antichrist*, 5.

Here is a good description of antichrist in the early nineteenth century in New England. In his sermon quoted earlier, Abraham Burnham gives a point by point breakdown of how to identify the antichrist; should you be confronted with supreme evil in person, if you attended Burnham’s sermon or read the published version later on, you would be able to recognize true evil. What you were supposed to do after recognizing the ultimate human evil in person was not part of the sermon. According to Burnham, antichrist was a spirit of infidelity; antichrist was a spirit of deception; antichrist put on at times a form of religion (though apparently never the correct religion); antichrist was a spirit of insubordination; antichrist was a spirit of covetousness; antichrist was a spirit of hostility to the church of God; antichrist, as was seen earlier, was a spirit without natural affection; and finally, antichrist was a spirit of war.<sup>16</sup>

When all this was tallied up, the picture Burnham was painting became clear-- antichrist in the early 1800s was alive and well, and terrorizing Europe in the guise of none other than the Emperor of the French, Napoleon Bonaparte. By Burnham’s broad brush, Napoleon was an atheist, an oath-breaker, a war-monger, a liar, an infidel, and a tyrant. Napoleon as antichrist is a common image in early nineteenth century New England sermons. Another proponent of the Napoleon as antichrist theory was the Reverend Kiah Bayley in his 1812 anti-war speech quoted earlier. Like Channing, Bayley warned against an American alliance with France, and said,

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<sup>16</sup> Burnham, “Antichrist.” 14 April 1814.

Great national sacrifices are generally made to obtain these alliances. And when they are formed with powerful and wicked nations, they often lead to the degradation and slavery of those, who form them. Of the truth of this remark ancient and modern history furnish conclusive evidence. Look only to Europe, and you will find, that every nation, which have formed an alliance with the Antichrist of these last days, are now his vassals, his tributaries, his slaves.<sup>17</sup>



supplementary addition to explain the things that the author forgot in the earlier two and three volume works. This book, published in England, with the lengthy title of “A dissertation on the prophecies that have been fulfilled, are now fulfilling, or will hereafter be fulfilled, relative to the great period of

Bayley explained to his congregation that nothing good could come of allying themselves with a country like as France, led by such a man as Napoleon. Treaties made with France were not honored, and French allies were humiliated and abused, as Bayley showed in examples throughout his sermon. French allies, Bayley concluded, were nothing more than French slaves.

1260 years: the papal and Mohammedan apostasies: the tyrannical reign of antichrist, or the infidel power; and the restoration of the Jews,” cannot but have flamed the fires of belief in antichrist in America.<sup>18</sup> The label applied to Napoleon did nothing to promote the belief that Napoleon was a supernatural being who would plunge the world into a hell on earth after his conquests were completed. He was, as many of the ministers pointed out, a sign of the times that the world’s end was nigh, and Napoleon was only hastening its demise.

Where does all of this lead, though? Why antichrist? Antichrist became a way for Americans to explain the unexplainable. Bibliophile John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1812 about a new book that was lately published, which proved that Napoleon was the antichrist. This particular book was so popular in the early 19th century that it went through five different editions of varying length as well as a

Yet one wonders why New Englanders were so upset about Napoleon. A plausible

<sup>17</sup> Bayley, “War a Calamity,” 23 July 1812.

<sup>18</sup> George Stanley Faber. A dissertation on the prophecies that have been fulfilled, are now fulfilled, are now fulfilling, or will hereafter be fulfilled, relative to the great period of 1260 years: the papal and Mohammedan apostasies: the tyrannical reign of antichrist, or the infidel power; and the restoration of the Jews. London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1808-1818.

explanation for the intensity of New England preachers' outrage towards Napoleon and his conduct is an economic one. Nearly every sermon referenced in this work has some mention of Napoleon's attacks against the commerce of New England, and how they be financially ruined because of these attacks. In 1806, Napoleon began his Continental Blockade, designed to destroy the English economy in an effort to end the European wars once and for all. As a side effect of this blockade, America's merchant class was hit hard by the Continental System and the American Embargo Act. Watching the livelihoods of their parishioners going up in smoke may have had an effect of the strength of their anti-Napoleonic rhetoric.

In a celebratory sermon of 1814, Channing wrote that, "Everywhere commerce, the golden chain of nations, the spring of the enlarged philanthropy, the disperser of art, science, and improvement, was discouraged by bloody edicts."<sup>19</sup> Commercial interests--another odd message to hear in the sanctity of the church. Pulpit treason, perhaps? Isaac Braman of Havervill, Massachusetts, who delivered his 1810 discourse, "Union with France a greater evil than union with Britain," wrote that it was foolish to expect France to be a good ally because:

We could not expect exemptions from the common fate of those, who listening to the siren voice of the charmer, have submitted to her embrace, and put themselves in her power. She is not our friend, whatever her

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<sup>19</sup> Channing, "A Discourse Delivered in Boston at the Solemn Festival in Commemoration of the Goodness of God in Delivering the Christian World from Military Despotism, June 15, 1814." Boston. 15 June 1814.

professions. She treats us as enemies, capturing, burning, or sinking our vessels to which come within her reach, detaining and confiscating, on any slight pretext, others which enter her ports and confining the crews in dreary prisons.<sup>20</sup>

Like Channing's sermons, the commercial aspect of Braman's discourse is undeniable, and that financial message must have borne some responsibility for increasing the outrage in New England ministers' sermons that deal with Napoleon.

Is it any wonder that, when Napoleon's reign ended in 1814 and then again in 1815, that though New England ministers were still committing pulpit treason, by this time their opinions of Napoleon had softened to a degree? Napoleon was no longer in power, had been defeated and been proven to be nothing more than an overreaching and thus, fallible man. Gone are the name-calls, the doomsday prophecies about the end of days and antichrist. In 1814 Napoleon's former enemy Channing was full of nothing but pity for Napoleon. In June, after Napoleon's first abdication, Channing said, "The most dreaded and flattered despot is after all but a man, exalted to his bad eminence for the chastisement of a guilty world, and destined to magnify, by his own destruction, the Almighty justice he has defiled."<sup>21</sup> It appears that once Napoleon was no longer a real (or imagined) threat, there was no need for New Englanders to fear him any longer.

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<sup>20</sup> Isaac Braman, "Union with France a Greater Evil than Union with Britain: A Sermon Preached in Rowley, West Parish, at the Annual Fast, April 5<sup>th</sup> 1810." Rowley, MA. 5 April 1810.

<sup>21</sup> Channing, "A Discourse Delivered in Boston," 15 June 1814.



Though Napoleon and his reign were political topics, this did not stop ministers from imparting their opinions to their brethren. New England ministers committed what John Macauley labels “pulpit treason”, where preachers hijacked their churches’ pulpits in order to publicize not messages of religion but of political consequence instead. This has its roots in New England’s history of a high degree of religiosity and the importance of the commercial trade to the New England economy, which Napoleon’s edict’s helped to devastate during his years in power. Ministers in the New England area retaliated by labeling Napoleon the antichrist and describing his character in the darkest manner possible.

In the end, to Americans living in the Early Republic era, Napoleon was nothing more than a scoundrel whose crimes deserved to be broadcast to the widest possible audience so that the “right” information about him could be known, and Americans could use this knowledge to avoid becoming another nation enslaved in his game of conquest. To achieve this level of public service to the community, ministers used their pulpits in an original way to spread anti-Napoleonic messages in the only way they knew how: through the use of religious symbols and apocalyptic predictions about the end of days.