

INTRODUCTION

Religion and the search for Southern distinctiveness

At noon on February 18, 1861, the Rev. Basil Manly, pastor of the Baptist church in Montgomery, rode to the capitol in a carriage with Jefferson Davis, Alexander H. Stephens, and their military escort. He delivered a prayer later that afternoon that spoke directly to the event – the inauguration of the president and vice-president of the Confederate States of America. "Thou hast provided us a man," Manly proclaimed, "to go in and out before us, and to lead thy people." He also invoked God's blessing for the new born Southern nation: "Put thy good spirit into our whole people, that they may faithfully do all thy fatherly pleasure,..." Manly called further for truth and peace in the administration of government and righteousness for the people. He concluded, finally, by asking God to "turn the counsel of our enemies into foolishness."

Present at Manly's benediction were the politicians who had brought the South to the brink of separate nationhood. Taken together, they embodied the wide spectrum of antebellum Southern politics. William L. Yancey, the fire-eater from Alabama and the leading orator of the secessionist cause, and Robert Barnwell Rhett, the vociferous Southern nationalist from South Carolina and the voice behind the radical Charleston Mercury, were the extremists who had pushed Southerners toward political revolution. Although not as radical as Rhett or Yancey, Davis himself had been a strong advocate of Southern rights as a senator from Mis-

"Diary of Basil Manly: January 1, 1858-1878," Manly Collection, Special Collections, Samford University Library (Microfilm), p. 37. For a brief biographical sketch of Manly, see Samuel S. Hill, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion in the South (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984), p. 442. Davis's inauguration is covered in Hudson Strode, Jefferson Davis: American Patriot, 1808-1861 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), pp. 406-12; William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis, The Man and His Hour: A Biography (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 307; John M. McCardell, The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860 (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 334-5; William E. Dodd, Jefferson Davis (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1907), pp. 223-5.

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sissippi during the 1850s. The moderates were represented by Stephens, a former Whig who only a few months before had opposed separate state secession, and fellow-Georgian Howell Cobb, a Unionist in the early 1850s who had only recently joined the Georgia secessionists.²

By joining together Yancey and Rhett with Stephens and Cobb, the inauguration of Jefferson Davis signaled a momentary political consensus that had made disunion a reality. The Rev. Basil Manly's place on the steps of the capitol was equally significant. Not only did his prayer call for divine sanction on the Confederacy, but his participation symbolically acknowledged the role religion played in the growth of Southern distinctiveness. For religion contributed much to the origins of Southern separatism. It invested the sectional controversy over slavery with moral and religious meaning, strengthening those elements in Southern political culture that made secession possible.

I

The development of antebellum Southern sectionalism centered on the issue of slavery and evolved primarily in the arena of national politics. The Missouri crisis of 1819-20 first laid bare the potential danger of Northern politicians who heeded to the belief that slavery was wrong. The ensuing decade witnessed the emergence of a states' rights philosophy and proslavery argument that would safeguard the South throughout the antebellum era. The nullification controversy in South Carolina, Nat Turner's slave revolt in Virginia, and the appearance of immediate abolitionism brought slavery to the center of Southern consciousness during the 1830s. In 1846, Pennsylvania congressman David Wilmot introduced his fateful proviso banning slavery from all territories acquired during the Mexican War. Southerners grew increasingly vociferous during the 1850s about their rights and honor. By 1860, the sectional conflict had escalated to the point at which Southerners saw themselves as a distinct people. A year later, eleven slave states seceded from the Union and created their own new Confederate nation.3

- 2. For brief accounts of the politics of these Southern statesmen, see William J. Cooper, Jr., and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), pp. 338, 345. On Cobb, see Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism*, 1848–1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), p. 370.
- 3. Two older studies remain perhaps the best introduction to the course of the South to secession: Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism*, 1819-1848 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), and Craven, *Growth of Southern Nationalism*. They must now, however, be supplemented by William W. Freehling, *The*



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The sectional controversy over slavery touched almost every facet of Southern life. The search for a distinctive Southern identity was expressed in the commercial conventions aimed at promoting Southern economic growth, the establishment of such Southern schools as the University of the South at Sewanee, and in the Romantic fiction of William Gilmore Simms. Yet perhaps nowhere outside the realm of politics can the growth of Southern separatism be seen so clearly as in the religious sphere, which acted both as a sensitive barometer of mounting sectional pressures and a decisive influence on a developing Southern identity. There are three compelling reasons to turn to religion in order to understand the origins and nature of Southern separatism.⁴

First, religion was central to the culture and society of the antebellum South. Spurred on by the Cane Ridge Revival in 1800, evangelical Protestantism came to dominate the religious life of most Southerners. Repentance of sin and conversion to a career of holiness, the central message of evangelicalism, gave order and meaning to the lives of all but a few Southern men and women, black as well as white. Christianity and the Bible were the moral foundations of Southern public order as well. The reading of slaveholders included the Bible and other religious tracts. For these men and women, religion sanctioned a hierarchical and particularistic approach to human relations. Proslavery sociologists, political economists, and judges grounded their secular theories in Scripture. If religion was so paramount in a society that was forging a distinctive sectional identity, it is likely that it played a strong role in this process. Donald G. Mathews, in an illuminating study of Southern religion, suggests such a relationship: "During the years when the Southern ideology was taking shape,... Evangelicalism became in the view of many Christian theorists one of the distinguishing marks of what it meant to be a Southerner."5

Road to Disunion, Vol. 1: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

- 4. John M. McCardell's *Idea of a Southern Nation* provides the most recent synthesis of antebellum Southern nationalism. This book is especially valuable in exploring sectional manifestations in economics, politics, literature, religion, and education.
- 5. Eugene D. Genovese, The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820–1860 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p. 4; Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 246. Emory Thomas draws the connection even further: "Perhaps Southern churches are the best place to look for the origins of cultural nationalism in the Old South. There the Southern mind, conditioned by reverence for the concrete and characterized by assertive individualism, blended with a unique religious tradition to mold intellectual and cultural life." The Confederate Nation, 1861–1865 (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 21. Antebellum Southern religion has become a prolific and vibrant field in Southern



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Another reason to search for the development of Southern separatism in religion is the strongly religious character of the sectional controversy over slavery. The earliest Northern attacks on slavery in the 1830s were religious and moral ones. Abolitionists condemned slavery as a sin. In response, Southern clergymen defended the morality of their "peculiar institution" through an elaborate scriptural defense of human bondage. As the antislavery message penetrated the evangelical consciousness of the North, the South continued to rely on Christianity as a necessary sanction of their slaveholding order.⁶

history. On the origins and nature of evangelicalism, see John B. Boles, The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972); Robert M. Calhoon, "The Evangelical Persuasion in the South," in Peter J. Alberts, ed., Religion in a Revolutionary Age (forthcoming); and especially Mathews, Religion in the Old South. The place of religion in the lives of white Southerners can be gleaned from Jan Lewis, The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chap. 2; James Oakes, The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders (New York: Knopf, 1982), chap. 4; and most recently, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 16-20. On Southern women and religion, consult Jean E. Friedman, The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). On the centrality of religion to social theory, see Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society," Georgia Historical Quarterly 70 (Spring 1986): 4-5 and Robert M. Calhoon, Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), p. 176.

Besides religion, honor was another central component of the ethical system of the Old South. The major works establishing this tradition are Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Edward L. Ayers, Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Kenneth S. Greenberg, Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). For a discussion of the relationship between honor and evangelicalism, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "God and Honor in the Old South," Southern Review 25 (April 1989): 283-96; and Edward R. Crowther, "Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South," Journal of Southern History 58 (November 1992): 619-36. In Chapter 4, I suggest that religion reinforced the importance of honor in sectional politics.

6. Of the many works on the religious dimension of the antebellum controversy over slavery, see David Brion Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 49 (September 1962): 209-30; Anne C. Loveland, "Evangelicalism and 'Immediate Emancipation' in American Antislavery Thought," Journal of Southern History 32 (May 1966): 172-88; John R. McKivigan, The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984); David T. Bailey, Shadow on the Church: Southwestern Evangelical Religion and the Issue of Slavery, 1783-1860 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese,



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Finally, the intimate ties between religion and nationalism in early America suggest that religion played a major role in the formation of a Southern national identity. Between the Revolution and the Civil War, American religious nationalism was expressed primarily through the tradition of "civil religion." Secular and religious motifs were woven into the belief that America had a unique role in bringing the Kingdom of God to this world. Millennialism fused with the political ideology of republicanism, convincing Americans that their social and political institutions had a providential destiny to serve as a model for all humankind. Because Southern sectionalism was forged in a period when the issue of American national identity was particularly acute, we might expect that Southern Protestants turned naturally toward civil religion as they created their own version of nationalism.

The centrality of religion in the Old South, the strongly religious flavor of the slavery controversy, and the close affinity between religion and American nationalism suggest, then, the importance of religion in the formation of antebellum Southern distinctiveness. Although several recent efforts at linking religion and sectionalism have been made, the connection between the two has not yet received the comprehensive examination it deserves. *Gospel of Disunion* is an attempt to explore the relationship between religion and the origins of Southern separatism. It examines the ways in which religion adapted to and shaped the development of a distinctive Southern culture and politics before the Civil War, adding depth and form to the movement that culminated in secession.⁸

The term separatism most accurately describes the sectional consciousness and growing distinctiveness of Southerners before the Civil War. It encompasses both sectionalism, the loyalty to a set of values and interests associated with a geographical region, and Southern nationalism, the belief that sectional interests would be best served in a separate nation. Sectionalism is too narrow a term here, for it excludes the religious advocacy of a Southern nation that flowered during the first few months of the Confederacy. Similarly, the use of the term nationalism would be mis-

- "The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slave-holders' World View," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Summer 1987): 211-34.
- 7. For good introductions to civil religion in nineteenth-century America, see Ernest Tuveson, Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), and Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
- 8. C. C. Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), and Calhoon, Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861, are the best and most thorough attempts to link religion and politics in the South.

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leading, for few clergymen advocated a separate Southern nation in the antebellum period.9

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The relationship between religion and politics can be examined from several angles. They have intersected on a variety of levels throughout American history, such as the familiar conflict between church and state and the association between religious affiliation and patterns of voting behavior. It is in the subtle and complex interaction between religious beliefs and public values and activities, however, that the connection between religion and Southern separatism can best be studied.¹⁰

Religion in the antebellum South functioned simultaneously as an institution, a theology, and a mode of discourse. It shaped an emerging sectionalism in all these ways. Moreover, the relationship between religion and sectionalism was reciprocal. Religion worked as an active agent translating the sectional conflict into a struggle of the highest moral significance. At the same time, the slavery controversy sectionalized Southern religion, creating separate sectional institutions and driving theology further toward orthodoxy.

The relationship between religion and Southern separatism can be most efficiently and reliably traced through the thoughts and actions of the Southern clergy. The minister in nineteenth-century America was generally considered the articulate consciousness of society, sensitively attuned to the problems of his time and aware of his persuasive role as moral steward. In the antebellum South, the authority of the clergy was high.

- For a brief and useful discussion of these terms, see McCardell, *Idea of a Southern Nation*, p. 5.
- 10. Mark A. Noll, ed., Religion & American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 3-4. The relationship between religion and politics during the era of the American Revolution suggested useful lines of inquiry. Particularly helpful were Alan Heimert, Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); Nathan O. Hatch, The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly Third Series 34 (October 1977): 519-41; William G. McLoughlin, "Enthusiasm for Liberty: The Great Awakening as a Key to the Revolution," in Jack P. Greene and William G. McLouglin, Preachers and Politicians: Two Essays on the Origins of the American Revolution (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1977); and especially Bernard Bailyn, "Religion and Revolution: Three Biographical Studies," Perspectives in American History 4 (1970): 83-169.



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Ministers enjoyed status in their pastorates. They were the voice of moral authority and powerful molders of public opinion. Southern clerics exerted their influence not only through the pulpit but through their positions as editors and educators. The clergy thus had an attentive audience through which they could fashion the sectional identity of the South.¹¹

The ministers most actively engaged with the sectional controversy over slavery tended to come from a group that one historian has aptly termed the "Gentlemen Theologians" of the Old South. They were the elite of the Southern clergy - well-educated, urbane clergymen with comfortable pastorates among the middle and upper classes of the cities and towns of the Old South. Their ministerial careers were active and varied, usually involving religious journalism or some kind of college teaching. Whether Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, or Episcopalian, they had a strong sense of denominational identity and were active in building the institutions necessary for the growth of their churches. Above all, they represented the professionalization of the clergy, seeking status, influence, and power in their society. This study thus relies heavily on the published writings of the Gentlemen Theologians. To seek a broader sample of religious thought on sectional issues, denominational newspapers and the records of church assemblies have been used to recover the ideas of less elite clerics and less prominent congregations. 12

- 11. On the authority of the clergy in antebellum America, see the quotation by Alexis de Tocqueville in Noll, Religion & American Politics, p. 6. On the influence of the Southern clergy, see Genovese, Slaveholders' Dilemma, p. 14; Drew Gilpin Faust, The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 22; and Cooper and Terrill, American South, pp. 265-6. Important studies of the Southern clergy include Anne C. Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980); E. Brooks Holifield, The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978); James Oscar Farmer, Jr., The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986).
- 12. Holifield, Gentlemen Theologians, chap. 2. On the professionalization of the antebellum American clergy, see Donald M. Scott, From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), and Daniel H. Calhoun, Professional Lives in America: Structure and Aspirations, 1750-1850 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 88-177. The connection I am drawing here does not mean to suggest that all of Holifield's 100 elite were active in sectional politics or that each minister who appears in this book should be included on his list. Still, the association between the "Gentlemen Theologians" and sectional politics is significant. Larry E. Tise substantiates this claim with a much more systematic study. Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840 (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), especially pp. 163-70.



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In using the clergy as the voice of Southern religion, it is important to recognize that the Southern clergy was anything but monolithic. Ministers in the South were distinguished by denomination, region, and class. Episcopalians and especially Presbyterians placed a heavy emphasis on a learned clergy. Their ministers were usually the products of theological seminaries and were hence more likely to emphasize doctrinal preaching and spend more time on sermon preparation. Methodists and Baptists, on the other hand, focused more on their "calling" from God to legitimate their ministry. They were truly evangelicals, more interested in awakening and saving sinners through emotion rather than doctrine. Although they lagged behind the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists steadily improved their educational efforts during the antebellum decades. There were significant differences in the ways denominations structured their ministries. Presbyterian clergymen tended to have established pastorates, most often catering to the upper and middle classes in the towns and cities of the Old South. Methodists adopted a system of itinerancy to reach their following in widely scattered rural areas. Baptists used what was called the once-a-month system, in which a church was supplied by a minister who came once or twice a month to preach. Considering all these differences, it is misleading then to speak of the Southern clergy. 13

Yet in terms of their views on slavery and sectional politics, there was a conspicuous consensus among Southern clergymen. The major denominations in the South – Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian - differed little in their approach to such sectional issues as slavery, abolition, and the protection of Southern rights. In other words, denominational distinctions were not really a determinant of sectional thought. Some differences, however, did exist. Presbyterian ministers tended to be more literate and prolific in their sectional writings. From their authoritative positions as educators and editors, they exerted an influence disproportionate to their relatively small numbers. With a theology and church structure geared toward conversions, the Methodists took the lead in the religious mission to the slaves. Regional variations within the South accounted for the more significant differences between the sectional views of Southern clerics. Ministers most often followed the sectional extremism or moderation of their respective states. Keeping these points of diversity in mind, we can be reasonably confident about the underlying unity of Southern clerical thought on sectional issues. This unanimity was essential in helping mold a moral consensus that could unite the South behind secession.14

^{13.} Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, pp. 45-8. Chapter 2 of this book provides a useful overview of the Southern ministry in the antebellum period.

^{14.} Genovese and Fox-Genovese, "Divine Sanction of Social Order," p. 227. A similar difficulty regarding social role should be mentioned. Clergymen in the antebellum South



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Ш

To incorporate the variety of ways in which religion shaped the growth of Southern separatism, this book has been arranged chronologically, topically, and thematically. It follows in rough outline the progressive course of the South to secession. Chapter 1 explores the role of the Southern clergy and churches in an early episode of the sectional conflict, the abolitionist crisis of 1835. Chapters 2 and 3 probe the crucial relationship between Southern religion and slavery. The material presented here represents the entire time span of the sectional controversy. Chapter 4 moves to the middle of the antebellum decades, examining the denominational schisms in the Presbyterian church in the late 1830s and in the Baptist and Methodist denominations in the mid-1840s. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the period between the late winter of 1860 and the summer of 1861, when Southern clergymen justified secession and created a Confederate national identity.

Within this chronological context, the book is also arranged thematically. Considering the variety of ways religion and politics intersect and the difficulties of establishing causal relationships, it is useful at the outset to sketch out the major themes that best illuminate the points of interaction and lines of influence between religion and sectionalism.

The Southern clergy and the problem of religion and politics

What emerges most often in the sectional writings of Southern clergymen is the persistent effort to clarify and define the proper boundaries between religion and politics. It shaped almost every public discussion of slavery, informed political sermons delivered on public occasions, and even infused private diaries and correspondence. It remained a consistent concern from the 1830s through the secession crisis, occupying clergymen of all denominations and regions of the South. There is a seeming paradox in the way Southern clergymen wrote about this issue. On the one hand, they vigorously accepted the principle of separation of church and state

were Democrats and Whigs, slaveholders and nonslaveholders, Virginians and South Carolinians, but always churchmen and Southerners. These various personas complicate the task of understanding the role of religion in the creation of Southern separatism. It is difficult to know precisely the factors and roles that determined the sectional thought of Southern clergymen. This problem is met largely by focusing on the public statements of the Southern clergy in their self-proclaimed role as clergymen. These are easily accessible in the denominational newspapers that served the South and in sermons delivered at public events. The private writings of clergymen most often reflected their public statements.



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and insisted that slavery and abolition were political questions that lay outside the realm of religion. But at the same time and often from the same voices, Southern ministers maintained that slavery and abolition involved moral issues that were the rightful domain of the clergy. They vehemently objected to abolitionist preaching from Northern pulpits while they freely defended slavery from their own. This contradictory approach can be partially, if not fully, resolved through carefully reconstructing the distinctive way Southern clergymen understood the role of religion in sectional politics.

The ideas of Southern clergymen on the boundaries between religion and politics depended first on how they defined politics. They condemned clerical involvement in the political sphere when pragmatic questions of policy or especially party were involved. In these cases, politics was deemed particulary unworthy of Christian consideration. Yet if a political issue was perceived as possessing any kind of moral significance, Southern clerics claimed that it fell within their realm and justified their attention. The Rev. James A. Lyon, a Presbyterian minister from Mississippi, clearly explained this conception of the issue. Political questions, he maintained, "I leave to the politician, except when politics cross the line into the domain of Christian morals, and invade the territories of religion: then I will discuss so called politics, since it thereby becomes a question of morals, and a legitimate subject for the pulpit." Southern clergymen followed this reasoning throught the antebellum period. They endowed the sectional conflict with religious significance by extracting and articulating the moral dimension of political issues. 15

Southern clerical thinking about the proper relationship between religion and politics was also directly related to the slavery controversy. What clergymen really objected to was a specific mixture represented by the abolitionist assault on slavery. Southern clerics believed that slavery contained two distinct realms, the civil and the religious. The existence of slavery itself was considered a political, or civil, question. Within the institution of slavery, however, were certain moral issues, such as the relationship between master and slave, that properly fell within clerical

15. James A. Lyon, Christianity and the Civil Laws: A Lecture on Christianity and the Civil Laws by Rev. James A. Lyon, D. D. of Columbus, Mississippi (Columbus: Mississippi Democrat Print), p. 11. There were, of course, exceptions to the general disinclination of ministers to engage in politics. William Winans, a Methodist clergyman from Mississippi, was a vociferous supporter of the Whig party. Jesse Mercer, a Methodist elder, of Georgia also had a yearning for politics. He was a member of Georgia's constitutional convention of 1798 and ran for the state Senate in 1816. See Ray Holder, William Winans: Methodist Leader in Antebellum Mississippi (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1977), especially pp. 132-34, and Charles D. Mallory, Memoirs of Jesse Mercer (New York: Printed by John Gray, 1844), p. 54.