

Article

America's "Peculiar Children": Authority and Christian Nationalism at Antebellum West Point

Michael Graziano

Department of Philosophy and World Religions, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614, USA; michael.graziano@uni.edu; Tel.: +1-319-273-6221

Academic Editor: Mark T. Edwards

Received: 2 October 2016; Accepted: 29 December 2016; Published: 6 January 2017

Abstract: This essay examines how the United States Military Academy at West Point developed an explicitly “federal” Christianity to help train the antebellum officers of the United States Army. It begins by examining how the Episcopal Church was quietly “established” at West Point, and how the church allied with the federal government and US Army to encourage a potent Christian nationalism that collapsed the sovereignty of the United States into the sovereignty of God. The case of West Point illustrates how federal officials, Army leaders, and Academy administrators understood religion as a central component of national security.

Keywords: nationalism; military; Christianity; authority; education; antebellum; civil war

1. Introduction

This essay examines how the United States Military Academy at West Point developed an explicitly “federal” Christianity to help train the antebellum officers of the United States Army. It begins by examining how the Episcopal Church was quietly “established” at West Point, and how the church allied with the federal government and US Army to encourage a potent Christian nationalism that collapsed the sovereignty of the United States into the sovereignty of God. The case of West Point illustrates how federal officials, Army leaders, and Academy administrators understood religion as a central component of national security. The informal establishment of the Episcopal church and the subsequent revivals it spawned shaped the political and religious loyalties of a generation of US Army leaders.

West Point grappled with the task of molding an appropriately federal religious culture in an era of rapid and widespread religious disestablishment and political polarization. West Point cultivated a religious atmosphere which prized an unemotional, calculated Christianity informed by the demands of American nationalism. This uniform religious instruction complemented the Academy’s larger mission of producing ideologically homogenized citizen-soldiers: men who, while “neutral” and “non-partisan,” would also be sufficiently nationalist and ready to bear arms. To be a graduate of West Point was to be immersed in the developing Christian nationalism of the United States. The educational experience at antebellum West Point assumed that religion and national security were closely linked. West Point produced a curious product: military officers sworn to uphold the Constitution of a nascent federal government through service in a federal Army that existed largely on paper. Nevertheless, the Academy’s conviction that what cadets believed influenced their ability to defend American interests motivated the Academy to provide exacting training in the political and religious aspects of American identity. The result, as one former student noted, was that West Point cadets were “the peculiar children of the nation.” ([1], p. 15).

If scholars wish to understand how Christian nationalism and the US government interacted in the early republic, West Point is a good place to start. Along with the federal Congress and the Naval Academy at Annapolis, West Point was one of the few existing federal institutions. Even the

army for which it trained its graduates to lead was organized largely by the state. While newspapers, pamphlets, and travel diaries can give historians some perspective on regional interactions between budding nationalism and religion, West Point offers something different. Jeffrey L. Pasley argues in *The Tyranny of Printers* (2001) that decentralized newspaper networks in the early republic offered a way to “filter” news and opinions to suit local tastes while still contributing to a national political discourse ([2], p. 208). A study of antebellum West Point effectively reverses this process, opening a window onto how local religious tastes and political opinions were nationalized in a federal institution during an era of radical decentralization. West Point also serves as a reminder that the antebellum period witnessed a great deal of religious experimentation, differentiation, and innovation in both the structure and practice of American religious groups. The effects of these changes extended beyond religious groups and institutions, however. Their consequences spilled out across American life, influencing ideas about the state and state institutions such as West Point. Amanda Porterfield’s insightful critique that certain “religious institutions grew as much to manage mistrustful doubt as to relieve it...feeding the uncertainty and instability they worked to resolve” could also be applied to the Academy ([3], p. 2). To be sure, as John Fea and others have shown, Christian nationalism meant different things across the North and South in the leadup to the Civil War ([4], pp. 12–21). Even so, the Academy’s interaction with Christian nationalism—while initially haphazard—would grow more focused and deliberate as the war drew closer.

2. A Church in the Service of the State

West Point’s mission was to mold the U.S. Army’s officer corps through devotion to transcendent ideals of Christian nationalism. Chief among these ideals was the sovereignty of the Republic. Sovereignty, as understood at the Point, was the legitimate use of power and military force. The Academy’s unique religious atmosphere came of age in the late 1820s alongside hugely divisive issues such as the Tariffs of 1824 and 1828 (the latter being the so-called “Tariff of Abominations”) and the subsequent Nullification Crises. In this context, the great achievement of the Academy was not simply to imbue the state with theological significance, but to instill in cadets a sense of personal connection to the state as a theological object. Not surprisingly, as the political atmosphere grew more heated and the prospect of civil war became a reality, the Army increasingly relied on West Point’s ability to manufacture a distinctly federal product. Religious ideas were used to build the connection between cadet and state, and this process took place seemingly everywhere across the Academy. The classroom, the chapel, the laboratory, and the drill field were all part of this experience.

A key function of West Point was to stamp out sectional or regional loyalties ([5], p. 10). The rhetoric of the non-sectarian and neutral cadet was taken seriously at the Academy, and cadets were drilled on its importance. Cadet George Strong remembered how his instructors inquired about his politics. Strong responded with what he thought was the safest answer: “I’m an administration man, Sir.” Disappointed, his instructor sighed and replied, “Just as I expected...It is evident you have mistaken your calling. You should have known, ere this, that an officer of the Army has nothing to do with politics” ([6], p. 195). Cadets were taught that to be a proper Army officer was to engage in a delicate balancing act: they must be neutral between administrations (but loyal to the commander in chief) and nonsectarian (yet Episcopal in disposition).

Denominational differences were flattened as well. Rather than deal with a fractious religious atmosphere on post, the Academy’s administration simply made it a requirement that all services were Episcopal. All cadets, including non-Christians, were required to attend the Episcopal chapel service on Sunday ([7], p. 21). Simon Magruder Levy, a Maryland Jew, was an inaugural West Point cadet at a time of pervasive anti-Semitism. Levy graduated second in his class of two, allowing cadets at the West Point Jewish Chapel (built in 1984) to claim that the first West Point graduating class was “50% Jewish” ([8]; [9], p. 415). Additionally, the Episcopal Church’s avoidance of a major pre-war schism made it appear even more attractive to an explicitly federal and tenuously apolitical institution such as the Army ([6], p. 31). Whereas questions over slavery had worked to sunder the Presbyterians

in 1837, Methodists in 1844, and Baptists in 1845, the Episcopal Church kept its theological divisions internal. Even so, membership in the Episcopalian Church did not exempt one from involvement in long running sectional controversies. Episcopalians participated in the debates and, of course, in the eventual war itself. Instead, the Army and the Academy understood Episcopalianism as a proper religion for “gentlemen” ([6], p. 31). They understood it as a religious identity well-suited to emphasize the qualities that they prized in cadets. Chief among those qualities was discipline, and chief among what cadets were to be disciplined in was loyalty to their senior officers and to their country.

The most important aspect of religious life at the antebellum Academy was the working relationship between the Academy’s administration and the Episcopal Church. Begun under the auspices of West Point Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer and Episcopal Chaplain Charles P. McIlvaine in the 1820s, the pseudo-establishment of the Episcopal Church on post served the needs of both the church and state. The church gained a foothold in both the federal government and U.S. Army officer corps, while the Academy could leverage the moral authority of the church in order to teach “proper” notions of American citizenship while maintaining the appearance of a religiously non-sectarian government institution. This relationship culminated in the revival of 1826, cementing the place of a nationalist Christianity as the focal point of West Point’s character education in the early republic.

3. The Revival of 1826

The foundations of West Point’s antebellum religious culture, and its advocacy of Christian nationalism, lay in the revival of 1826. This revival looked different from those led by Charles Finney or Lorenzo Dow, however. It renewed cadets’ devotion to American federal government as much as to any doctrinal claims. Nathan Hatch’s *Democratization of American Christianity* (1989) argued that the Second Great Awakening was a liberating, democratic experience for its American participants [10]. Hatch writes that during this period “common people” worked to spread a sentiment of political and religious freedom rather than reinforce authority or attempt to control the masses ([10], p. 9).

The Revival of 1826 suggests that something entirely different was also occurring during the Awakening. The revival was a story of two figures: Chaplain Charles P. McIlvaine, the religious authority behind the revival, and Academy Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer, who permitted and tacitly encouraged the outbreak of religious enthusiasm on post. West Point witnessed a revival in which the religious authorities were carefully selected, hired, and paid by the federal government of the United States for expressly religious purposes, and its intended audience—the Corps of Cadets—was mandated to listen and sworn to obey the military hierarchy.

When Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer assumed command of the Academy, he inherited a military school lacking basic discipline and respect for authority. Over a period of several years, Superintendent Thayer slowly instituted radical changes in curriculum, decorum, dress, and even eating habits. These changes were promulgated in an attempt to enforce a radical sense of uniformity among cadets. Treated with ambivalence under previous superintendents, religion was also brought to heel. Though attendance at chapel was mandatory, religious instruction was largely ignored by cadets ([11], p. 89). The incumbent chaplain, Thomas Picton, was not popular. The cadets dismissed Chaplain Picton’s lessons as simply “truisms they learned as children” ([12], p. 96).

Rather than reduce cadets’ religious obligations—or, worse, allow a variety of Christian denominations on post and risk religious disunion—Superintendent Thayer chose to enforce the chapel attendance policy and simply replace the chaplain. The new chaplain, the Episcopalian minister Charles P. McIlvaine, arrived shortly thereafter. In his memoirs, Chaplain McIlvaine remembered how the job of chaplain was broached to him by his friend John C. Calhoun, then serving as Secretary of War. While taking tea at Calhoun’s home one evening, the Secretary asked McIlvaine if he might be interested in the position of Professor of Ethics, and thus chaplain, at West Point ([13], p. 286). McIlvaine was interested but worried his young age might be a problem. Calhoun dismissed McIlvaine’s worries in a manner perhaps indicative of Superintendent Thayer’s priorities: “[Calhoun] answered that he preferred a young man who would grow to the place, rather than one whose habits of mind were so fixed

by age that they could not be molded,” McIlvaine later recalled ([14], p. 20). Like other revivalists working in 1825, McIlvaine was young. Yet he boasted an unusual resume for a revivalist. He had just finished serving as the Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, making McIlvaine one of the few explicitly religious professionals with work experience at the federal level.

McIlvaine landed at West Point in the spring of 1825 and quickly learned that he had his work cut out for him. Upon his arrival, he remarked that except for “three or four ladies...there was a most chilling want of any manifestation of sympathy with the Gospel” ([14], pp. 24–25). McIlvaine was warned that religious services were not taken very seriously by either cadets or professors. Friends familiar with the culture of West Point had confided that there was widespread atheism and agnosticism at the school ([15], p. 198). Cadets reported that reading coursework and sleeping during sermons was common ([11], p. 89).

McIlvaine wasted little time. He distributed religious tracts around post and sought out students for conversation. On Sundays, cadets remarked that his sermons became “hotter and hotter” ([14], p. 26). Yet the chaplain had to walk a fine line. West Point was suspicious of emotional appeals. The cadets thought of themselves as Enlightenment thinkers, pursuing education at West Point largely because of the school’s expertise in engineering. Emotionalism was out of place. Chaplain McIlvaine policed himself, writing that he knew “Had I gone on with a sermon which I was preaching to them, I verily believe I should not have been able to moderate or control their feelings. I had to stop, I did stop” ([14], p. 177).

Even so, McIlvaine’s message got through. The first cadet to respond was Leonidas Polk of North Carolina. McIlvaine would later write of Polk’s first meeting that, “I was amazed at the depth and power of his convictions and anxieties, and his readiness for whatever might be required of him as a servant of Christ.” Cadet Polk’s conversion offers a striking contrast to traditional narratives of Second Great Awakening revivalism. Polk would explain his decision as the result of the tracts and McIlvaine’s masterful series of sermons on the evidences of Christianity, which helped Polk ease his “skepticism” [16]. After joining the chaplain in prayer, Polk “became tranquil” and asked for McIlvaine’s help in his conversion ([11], p. 92).

Chaplain McIlvaine instructed Polk to come forward in the next mandatory chapel service. When the call for confession went out, Polk quietly left his seat, walked toward the front of the chapel, and silently kneeled. McIlvaine described the scene from the pulpit: “When the confession in the service came, I could hear his movement to get space to kneel, and then his deep tone of response as if he was trembling with new emotion, and then it seemed as if an impression of solemnity pervaded all the congregation” [16]. McIlvaine later wrote that, “It was a new sight, that single kneeling cadet. Such a thing had not been supposed to be possible” ([11], p. 92). Polk would write to his brother, confiding that “This first step was my most trying one, to bring myself to renounce all of my former habits and associations, to step forth singly from the whole corps acknowledging my convictions of truth” ([17], p. 175). Being the first cadet in the history of the Academy to openly convert on post, Polk understood the challenges ahead of him. McIlvaine instructed Polk that the cadet would now be “watched in chapel” and Polk felt the need for the “greatest circumspection” ([11], p. 92).

Despite Chaplain McIlvaine’s measured tone, the conversion of Polk brought about a whirlwind of enthusiasm on post. Cadets began taking an interest in Polk’s new-found religious beliefs and requested meetings with McIlvaine [16]. So many came to McIlvaine that he began holding group meetings at his home. Before long, however, the meetings grew too large for the chaplain’s quarters. Polk requested, and received, permission from Superintendent Thayer to move the nightly revival meetings into the prison, which was then the single largest room available on post. Cadets and faculty began noticing changes in the campus atmosphere. General Wright observed that:

At length the whole corps was roused as by a thunder-clap at the announcement that Leonidas Polk and others had been ‘converted,’ and that Polk was to lead a ‘praying squad’ in the prison, which was the only unoccupied and quiet room in the barracks. I and many others stood on the stoop to see them go by and find out who they were. Polk, calm and fearless, with earnest anxiety in his look, headed the squad of ‘converted’ men. From day

to day the number increased, and finally it became so large that they were obliged, for want of room, to adjourn to the chapel. There was a veritable revolution in the barracks and the corps of cadets ([11], p. 89).

McIlvaine would write that Polk's "conviction was complete, and in the spirit of the missionary he laboured among his fellows with a zeal which showed the earnestness of his character" ([14], p. 176). Yet this was an unusual revival: a series of sermons on the rational, logical nature of Christianity at an institution which celebrated scientific empiricism brought forth a curious cadet who helped instigate a "solemn" revival, who in turn led a series of "calm" and "fearless" nightly revival meetings in a prison.

McIlvaine's concerns about emotion are understandable in light of how the revival was seen by those living outside of West Point. Neither the Episcopal Church nor the US Army wanted the public to associate wild, unchecked emotionalism or religious fervor with the military. As the revival progressed, McIlvaine sought advice from Episcopal Bishop James Milnor. During a lengthy exchange of letters, Milnor confided in McIlvaine that he heard grumblings about the revival at West Point. Milnor stressed the importance of maintaining the Episcopal Church's mutually beneficial relationship with West Point and the nation's military. Milnor's letters suggest broader military worries about the religious occurrences at West Point. Milnor related a conversation with a Major in the New York militia who felt:

deep regret at your fanatical proceedings. You were, he said, turning a military academy into a theological seminary, and aiming to make young men soldiers in the Church militant, (he meant ministers,) whom the government intended to train for its army; he understood you met them for prayer every morning at daylight, and encouraged them to neglect other studies for that of religion; that the most serious apprehensions were entertained of the consequent degradation, if not ruin of the institution ([18], p. 264).

For Bishop Milnor, this was a dangerous turn of events. Milnor reiterated that McIlvaine must keep religious excess under control and suggested that converted cadets make clear how their newfound religious belief made them better soldiers: "What can even unbelievers object to the operation of inward religion on the minds of these young men, when its practical effects are seen, not in the deterioration, but in the improvements of their character as members of your very excellent and useful institution?" ([19], p. 267). The Episcopal church enjoyed its preeminent position at West Point and was uninterested in risking a scandal which could jeopardize it. "The peculiar circumstances in which you are placed require a course of conduct very different from that followed in ordinary revivals," Milnor wrote, and "if your removal should take place...the effect would be disastrous as it respects West Point, and injurious in a vast variety of ways, which will as readily suggest themselves to your mind as they have to my own" ([20], p. 270). Milnor was well aware of how word of revival at West Point under an Episcopal chaplain could create unwanted public relations problems for the Episcopal Church or the Army as a whole.

For his part, Superintendent Thayer helped the revivals continue. He was interested in the revival because it promoted Christian nationalism and helped keep away hints of larger, national divisions on the horizon. Through his support of Chaplain McIlvaine's revival, Superintendent Thayer made clear that he did not understand religious excitement to promote disunion. On the contrary, Thayer recognized that the religious life of cadets would also have to be uniform if the Academy was to produce soldiers who were ideologically committed to the defense of the Republic. Yet Chaplain McIlvaine was no willing dupe of the Superintendent. He understood the importance of cementing campus unity and obedience to the federal government, and he recognized that his evangelicalism complemented these pursuits.

The taxpayer-funded educational system at West Point negotiated disestablishment by collapsing distinctions between the church and state. West Point accomplished this by quietly maintaining, and even strengthening, its own church and carefully molding this new, quasi-established order to

reflect West Point values and support its military mission. West Point's Episcopal Church became an ad hoc establishment of religious nationalism. It was also an increasingly vocal mouthpiece for religious arguments, echoing most of the Army's officer corps that it served. West Point's Episcopal church preached a religion of union, of *Federal Union*, that prized conformity and obedience to the will of Washington, D.C. while effectively diminishing the authority of individual state governments. The pulpit at West Point's Episcopal Chapel rough drafted many of the theological arguments which would echo throughout the pulpits north of the Mason-Dixon during the Civil War. The starting point for this was the religious revival that McIlvaine helped to spark in 1826. Chaplain McIlvaine wanted souls; Superintendent Thayer wanted obedience to the federal government. Both had a vested interest in making this instance of pseudo-establishment succeed. West Point is one example of how US military leaders sought to harness the political support of religious groups and transform it into a supporting plank of national security policy.

The faculty at West Point were expected to model proper citizenship, and thus proper religious observance, for the cadets. When several faculty members protested that mandatory chapel attendance breached their constitutional rights, for example, Superintendent Thayer quietly forwarded their protest to his friend, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Calhoun replied that "[the Secretary] was farthest from any desire to interfere in the least with their conscientious scruples, and would, therefore, send them where attendance upon Divine service would not be deemed necessary," and reassigned the objecting faculty members to frontier forts, the same locations that the lowest ranking members of each West Point graduating class fought to avoid ([12], p. 152). The message was received and there were no further constitutional objections raised. Informally establishing the Episcopal Church on post had consequences for the Army for decades. Faculty correspondence makes clear that within two decades of Chaplain McIlvaine's struggles to install Episcopal religious services at the Academy, there was an outcry among military officers because the Chaplain provided by Congress for the school was *not* an Episcopalian. Furthermore, school records show that by mid-century, between 80% to 90% of West Point faculty members and their families were registered Episcopalians [21].

Thayer also used McIlvaine to build a space on campus which would transform potentially destabilizing ideas—such as religious emotionalism—into aids for cementing unity and obedience. Thayer may not have anticipated the revival, but he did manage to use it for his own ends. The newly religious environment of West Point was designed to subvert outbursts of emotionalism by channeling the efforts of cadets to buck the system into the very process which sought to mold them into radical equals. Reckless emotionalism suggested that individualism could corrode the culture of West Point if it was not carefully controlled. This was due, at least in part, to the emotionally disciplined culture at West Point. The Academy was known almost exclusively as a school for engineering. As a bastion of Enlightenment thinking, West Point prized scientific thought; emotion was untrustworthy, a poor guide for officers who were taught to be dispassionate in all considerations. This may be in part why, in his own memorialization of the revival, McIlvaine goes to great lengths to portray the revival as powerful yet "solemn" and reasonable ([14], p. 29).

Furthermore, West Point was made up of men who were previously ambivalent about attendance at religious service. Christine Leigh Heyrman's *Southern Cross* (1997) suggests that a Southern culture of manly honor conflicted with religious participation in the first few decades of the 19th century. Heyrman suggests that this was overcome in part because religious leaders began equating religious struggle with military conflict ([22], p. 244). Southern gentleman saw that religion could aid in the burgeoning sectional crisis by "spiritualizing [all] assertions of southern manliness, militancy, and masterly prerogative" ([22], p. 249). Particularly for the first two converts, Polk (of North Carolina) and William B. Magruder (of Virginia), Heyrman's hypothesis helps explain the marriage of the revival with martial imagery and military concerns.

Emotion played a peculiar role in the religious changes at the Point. Judging by the surviving accounts, the most enduring image of the Revival of 1826 is the scene of Polk kneeling at the front of the chapel and responding with a forceful "amen" in response to McIlvaine's call. "Do you remember

the scene of the baptism of Cadet Polk in the chapel,” McIlvaine wrote to Thayer later in life, “...and how, in response to some charge to be faithful, he broke out with a deep ‘Amen’, as if it came from *de profundis*?” ([14], p. 209). This was the dramatic crescendo—such as it was—of the revival: Polk quietly kneeling in front of the chapel. McIlvaine would likely have disagreed that this was a revival “of the head and not the heart,” yet overt emotionalism was warily kept in check by McIlvaine. As the awakening spread from “room to room” and “heart to heart”, McIlvaine wrote that, “Had I gone on with a sermon which I was preaching to them, I verily believe I should not have been able to moderate or control their feelings. I had to stop, I did stop” ([14], p. 177). Similarly, McIlvaine was clear that cadets were involved in the revival as the result of a rational choice on their part. When writing about the baptism of Polk, McIlvaine explained that, “[Polk’s] baptism now was not hurried; due time was given him to try and examine himself, and know it was no mere sudden impulse of excitement that had taken possession of him” [16]. For McIlvaine, it was important that the cadets under his command be understood as acting for themselves and not under the chaplain’s emotional influence.

Yet the tale of a quiet, contemplative revival was not the story that leaked out of West Point in 1826. Bishop Milnor, for one, apparently had heard conflicting tales about “Polk’s ‘Amen’” and found himself troubled. Milnor was unsure if Polk’s exclamation should be read as a hysterical scream or a quiet word, and asked McIlvaine for clarification. After exchanging a flurry of letters with McIlvaine, the Bishop appears to have been calmed. “I thank you for the explanation of that ominous ‘amen’ and hope that every Christian cadet, whatever prudence may direct in regard to the utterance of the *lips*, will always be ready, with the feelings of his *inmost soul*, to make this response to such a desire as that which you expressed at the conclusion of your sermon” [19].

The Academy’s effort to manage religious emotionalism paid dividends almost immediately. Chaplain McIlvaine reported that, before his conversion, Cadet Polk—the revival’s first convert—had been far from a model cadet. Polk was more likely to be found drinking, smoking, or gambling (or, better yet, doing all three simultaneously) than studying. The chaplain was perhaps putting it diplomatically when he said that Cadet Polk was, “not unwilling to join in certain not perfectly temperate frolics with his companions” [16]. After Polk’s conversion, the change in his behavior was abrupt and, from the perspective of both Superintendent and Chaplain, much for the better. Superintendent Thayer made his pleasure known by rewarding those who converted with leadership positions within the Corps of Cadets. Chaplain McIlvaine later recalled asking Thayer why the converts had been chosen for the task at hand.

‘The truth is,’ answered [Thayer], ‘we had to take them...I thought these young men could be relied on to do their duty at all hazards.’ [Thayer] was right. They did it. They were memorialized and threatened, and the alternative was put to them either to resign or allow the traditional right practice to go on. They quietly answered that neither would be right, and after a while they had no difficulty [16].

In other words, the revival continued to receive Thayer’s support because it served Thayer’s ends. A renewed devotion to God enabled a renewed devotion to Nation.

The Academy’s religious practices during the period of disestablishment is one instance of the tension between the categories “religion” and “secular” in the early Republic. The example of West Point suggests that such easy divisions used to identify and assess American religious impulses—*this* religious, *this* not—is complicated by attention to how historical actors understood the role of religion in society. In West Point’s informal establishment, the righteousness of the American military and the justness of American foreign policy were rendered self-evident. This is not to suggest that the process of disestablishment simply swapped long-held established religion for a kind of militarized religious nationalism wholesale. The reality was far more gradual and ambiguous as government-backed Christian nationalism became an increasingly important part of the national security strategies taught at West Point.

4. Assessing the Revival

One way to assess the revival of 1826, and the legacy of Christian nationalism it helped install at West Point, is to consider how well it focused cadet loyalty away from individual states and toward the federal government. Given the politics of the antebellum United States, the Academy was concerned about loyalty to individual states trumping loyalty to the Union. Yet the Academy was reasonably assured that even if cadets first considered themselves a “Virginian” or “Texan”, they each also had an American identity. As John Barnard, a graduate of the class of 1833, described West Point, “The first duty [the U.S.M.A.] requires is obedience. [The U.S.M.A.] is the teacher of the purest patriotism, of the most fervent love of country” ([7], p. 22).

Yet religion presented a more complex problem. Unlike statehood, religious affiliation was a more difficult “loyalty” to track and one that was difficult for the Academy to reliably correlate with political affiliation. West Point was presented with the vexing problem of how to respond to an “invisible” loyalty such as religion. Informally establishing the Episcopal Church on post helped address this problem. The establishment of a religious common ground was, for the Army, the express goal of the Episcopal involvement at West Point. It was intended to mirror the homogenized nationalism inculcated into cadets. Yet for all the Academy’s careful planning, West Point’s pseudo-establishment of the Episcopal Church was not free of division. Much like the Academy’s attempt to enforce egalitarianism, this religious “common ground” was recognized by cadets as one particular political orthodoxy among others. Ulysses S. Grant (class of 1843), for example, wrote that it was doubly “not republican” to be marched to religious service, and an Episcopal one at that ([12], p. 151). Considering the antebellum divisions in American political and religious life, it is remarkable that West Point’s efforts to cultivate unity among its cadets succeeded as well as it did. Ensuring obedience to the federal government in a time of trial was at the heart of West Point’s antebellum mission, and developing a potent mixture of Christian nationalism helped the Academy fulfill that mission.

5. Conclusions: The *Practical Ethics* of Christian Nationalism

The changes wrought by McIlvaine and Thayer shaped the spiritual life of West Point for decades. The position of chaplain, and the role of religion on post, would never again be neglected as they had been before McIlvaine’s arrival. Future chaplains and religious leaders on post included Martin Parks (himself a former cadet and member of the converted during the Revival of 1826) who followed McIlvaine as chaplain in the 1840s as well as Cadet O. O Howard (class of 1854), a devout Episcopalian and the officer responsible for a resurgence of religious piety at West Point in the 1850s. Howard would later be described by fellow cadet Morris Schaff as “probably known more widely among the church-going people of our country than any officer of his time” ([23], p. 70). In the mold of McIlvaine, Parks, and Howard was John W. French.

As the chaplain who served West Point during the Civil War, French was a fitting culmination to this legacy of religious leadership. Serving as Chaplain and Professor of Ethics from 1856 to 1871, French presided over the religious life of West Pointers during a particularly trying time. Following in McIlvaine’s footsteps, French inherited a chapel that was quite unlike any other church in the nation. Hanging over the pulpit was “Peace and Freedom,” a giant mural depicting an eagle protecting the American flag. The eagle was flanked by the Roman Goddess of Peace and the God of War. The bottom of the painting was inscribed with Proverbs 14:34: “Righteousness exalteth a nation; But sin is a reproach to any people.”

Last in the pre-war line of Episcopal chaplains, French worked hard to maintain cadet loyalty to the federal government. French worked with Professor O.O. Howard to encourage a resurgence in Bible study groups and prayer sessions, in the hope that it would help defray some of the rising sectional tensions among cadets. Howard and French were successful to a degree—another revival broke out on post—but it was not enough to deter the growing tension ([17], p. 313). French corresponded regularly with Jefferson Davis, a close friend and former West Point cadet, pleading with him to do what he could to avoid conflict. It was French’s “truly prophetic” soul, according to Howard, that led him to

obsess over the threat of war. Howard recalled how in the winter of 1859–1860 “[French] worked day and night...in correspondence with [Davis] with ever-decreasing hope” ([24], pp. 99–100).

Chaplain French’s work offers an insight into how West Point’s Christian nationalist identity was maintained over time. While teaching at West Point, French developed his own textbook, *Practical Ethics*, which he assigned to his students and which remained in regular use at the Academy until 1877 ([25]; [26], p. 152). Chaplain French, much like his predecessor Chaplain McIlvaine, discovered the most effective pedagogical techniques to be the ones that engaged cadets’ scientific and mathematical schooling. *Ethics* itself is filled with theological equations, breaking down solemn duties and ethical values into rational formulations and logical proofs. Cadet Schaff, who served as French’s teaching assistant, explained that French “seemed to think that, in view of our perpetual use of mathematical symbols, the only way cadets could appreciate anything was by being shown that something was equal to something else. Therefore, in teaching practical ethics he would go to the blackboard and write, ‘Virtue = Morality’ etc.” ([23], p. 106).

For French, *Practical Ethics* represented the fullest realization of what each West Point cadet should be taught. The book is broken down into several categories revolving around “duty”: “Duties Above Us”, “Duties Within Us”, and “Duties Around Us”. One of the most important themes in French’s *Practical Ethics* is the role of authority. Authority is a legitimating force, enabling and justifying actions which a cadet’s duty might require.

French approached the question of authority through a series of orderly flowcharts ([25], pp. 10–12). French placed both the nation *and* God as the highest point of authority: “The Virtues which are first in order are those which regard the Deity and objects, such as Government and Law, which are greater than self” ([25], p. 13). Closely linking the “Deity” and the “Government” in the same chain of command, French was able to outline a very powerful role for the Constitution: “The nation has an organic law, called the Constitution. Being the supreme law, it demands special reverence and obedience from all the members of a nation. The correspondent virtue thus required is called LOYALTY” ([25], p. 14). The ends to which French applied loyalty are illuminating. French wrote:

The nation...exists through centuries, for the welfare of its members, through successive generations. As one of the family of nations, it exists for the welfare of the world. The good which the nation thus promotes is called the public good...The correspondent obligation resting on every member of a nation is, to love that public good more than any private good for himself or others. The virtue which observes this obligation is called PATRIOTISM, or THE LOVE OF THE COUNTRY. It requires that every member of a nation shall be ready to sacrifice his life, property, liberty and inclination, when required for the public defence and welfare ([25], p. 14).

This was the theology of West Point: a divine mandate to uphold the sovereignty of the nation.

Once the authority and legitimacy of the Constitution is established, French begins to craft one of the book’s core themes: a hatred of disunion and the justification of force to prevent it. For example, cadets read that “for a nation to fulfill its great office, harmony and tranquility, amongst its great constituent parts are indispensable” ([25], p. 15). In case there was any doubt, French employed a liberal approach towards capitalization in order to argue that “The faults opposed to these are TREASON, DISLOYALTY, REBELLION, CONSPIRACY, SEDITION, DISRESPECT TO SUPERIORS, SELFISHNESS OR INDIFFERENCE TO THE PUBLIC WELFARE, REFUSAL TO ACT OR SUFFER FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD, AGITATION BY THE DEMAGOGUE” ([25], p. 15). Cadets would also have to be vigilant in guarding against these faults for the duration of their lives: French instructed his students that “Any violation of these reciprocal obligations by one party does not absolve the other party from his obligations. The duties *to* the nation from every member of it, and duties *from* it, remain. They are formed not by a temporary bargain, but by *relations* which the Creator has established” ([25], p. 16). This was totalizing enough to make any tent-pole revivalist proud. The relation between cadets and the nation, cadets learned, was “ineffaceable...except by death” ([25], p. 30).

This sentiment can be seen in the cadets who worked with *Practical Ethics*, particularly as the prospect of civil war became reality. While responses from the cadets who worked with *Practical Ethics* in their curriculum are hard to come by, one surviving letter which mentions the textbook is from cadet Tully McCrea of Ohio. On 12 December 1858, McCrea wrote to his cousin that:

I have just returned from church where I heard a sermon from the text, “Thou shalt not kill”, and I thought that it was a singular one for [Professor French] to select to preach to officers and cadets, but he twisted it around to suit all cases...[French] is no more qualified to fill the place than the man in the moon. He is a very good preacher and a very smart man and would make a very good professor in some theological college, but he is out of his sphere at the military academy. He is always introducing something into the course that is of no practical use. Last year he introduced a work of his own, “Practical Ethics” which is merely a collection of verses from the Bible...It is needless to say that the Professor is very unpopular with the cadets ([27], p. 29).

After a few more years with Chaplain French, however, Cadet McCrea’s opinions underwent a transformation. A mere three years later as the war raged in 1861, McCrea wrote another letter testifying to his changing opinions:

I have just returned from church where I heard a sermon from Professor French to the graduating class. It was very eloquent and affecting and a great many realized the truths it contained. The graduates looked very serious and it is very easy to see that they are awake to the painful circumstances which are the cause of their graduating before the proper time ([27], p. 92).

Throughout the antebellum period, the twin sins of individuality and state-loyalty threatened loyalty to the federal government as well as West Point’s unique religious landscape. The Academy’s culture of Christian nationalism worked to defang these threats by training cadets as radical equals, in politics as in religion.

While reminiscing about his experiences as a West Point student under Chaplain French, former Cadet Morris Schaff paused to consider what he would ask his former professor if he had the opportunity to speak with French again after the passage of decades: “If I could see the old professor now I should like to talk to him...he might make plain the mysterious relations and affinities that a man’s ideals have with his surroundings. What, for instance, have the scenery, the historic associations, the ceremonials at West Point to do, not with the mere matter of its concrete education, but with those high and abstract conceptions connected with it that we call honor and duty and truth?” ([23], p. 105).

Schaff’s question is an important one. From Mark Noll’s “evangelical synthesis” to Harry Stout’s chronicling of how Americans sacralized the Civil War, historians of American religion have investigated how changing ideas about Christianity—as well as about the United States itself—influenced American religious culture in this period [7,28]. The curious religious establishment at antebellum West Point was one important example in this longer history of the development of Christian nationalism during the 19th century.

The example of West Point’s religious revival provides one specific point at which historians can examine the relationship between religion, nationalism, and early ideas about national security. With the case of West Point, Nathan Hatch’s argument that the Second Great Awakening represented “the influence of popular religion in a culture shifting from classic republican values to those of a vulgar democracy and entrepreneurial individualism” becomes forcefully inverted: revivalistic religion was used to keep out “vulgar democracy” and create a space in which “classic republican values” could be nurtured and protected within the state’s own classrooms and chapels ([10], p. 222).

Indeed, these very same “republican values” became weaponized at the Point, and their deadly product was subsequently brought to bear on the same individual manifestations of religious freedom which Hatch holds up for admiration. It was Robert E. Lee (class of 1829) who captured and hanged

John Brown, enraging his abolitionist sympathizers in and out of the black church. Albert Sydney Johnston (class of 1826) led the Federal Army west to punish the Mormons in the Utah War. Both Lee and Johnston were cadets under Chaplain McIlvaine, but there are examples from other periods of West Point's antebellum history too. It was James Forsyth (class of 1854) who, during the Ghost Dance Revival, oversaw the massacre of at least 150 Lakota at Wounded Knee. As these examples illustrate, West Point's sense of Christian nationalism was not uniform. It was not directed consistently at a single target, or understood by its practitioners in precisely the same way. It was, like the country of which it was a part, an idea still under construction. Instead, the religious legacy of antebellum West Point should remind us that revivalistic religion—and Christian nationalism—offered as many opportunities to enforce authority as to challenge it.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Alexander William Doniphan. *Address by A. W. Doniphan, of Missouri, to the West Point Graduating Class of 1848*. New York: W. L. Burroughs, Printer, 1848.
2. Jeffrey L. Pasley. *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.
3. Amanda Porterfield. *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
4. John Fea. *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.
5. John C. Waugh. *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan, and Their Brothers*. New York: Warner, 1994.
6. Glenn Robins. *The Bishop of the Old South: The Ministry and Civil War Legacy of Leonidas Polk*. Macon: Mercer UP, 2006.
7. Harry S. Stout. *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War*. New York: Viking, 2006.
8. "West Point's Centennial." *New York Times*, 11 May 1902.
9. James S. Robbins. *Last in Their Class: Custer, Pickett, and the Goats of West Point*. New York: Encounter, 2006.
10. Nathan O. Hatch. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
11. Leonidas Polk. *Leonidas Polk: Bishop and General*. Edited by William M. Polk. New York: Green and Longmans, 1915, vol. 1.
12. Stephen E. Ambrose. *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1966.
13. Theodore J. Crackel. *West Point: A Bicentennial History*. Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2002.
14. Charles P. McIlvaine. *Memorials of the Right Reverend Charles Pettit McIlvaine*. New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1882.
15. James W. Kershner. "Sylvanus Thayer: A Biography." Ph.D. Dissertation, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA, 1977.
16. Charles P. McIlvaine. "Leonidas Polk, the Bishop-General Who Died for the South. Interesting Reminiscence of Life at West Point of the Gallant Churchman and Soldier." *Richmond Times*, 2 August 1890.
17. George S. Pappas. *To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802–1902*. Westport: Praeger, 1993.
18. "Letter of 8 June 1826." quoted in James Milnor; In *A Memoir of the Life of James Milnor, D.D.: Late Rector of St. George's Church, New York*. Edited by John S. Stone. New York: American Tract Society, 1848.
19. "Letter of 17 June 1826." quoted in James Milnor; In *A Memoir of the Life of James Milnor, D.D.: Late Rector of St. George's Church, New York*. Edited by John S. Stone. New York: American Tract Society, 1848.
20. "Letter of 28 June 1826." quoted in James Milnor; In *A Memoir of the Life of James Milnor, D.D.: Late Rector of St. George's Church, New York*. Edited by John S. Stone. New York: American Tract Society, 1848.
21. Suzanne Geissler. "Professor Dennis Mahan Speaks out on West Point Chapel Issues." *The Journal of Military History* 69 (2005): 505–19. [CrossRef]
22. Christine L. Heyrman. *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*. New York: Knopf, 1997.
23. Morris Schaff. *The Spirit of Old West Point: 1856–1862*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909.
24. Oliver O. Howard. *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General, United States Army*. New York: Baker & Taylor, 1907.

25. John W. French. *Practical Ethics*. New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1860.
26. Sidney Forman. *West Point: A History of the United States Military Academy*. New York: Columbia UP, 1950.
27. Tully McCrea. *Dear Belle: Letters from a Cadet & Officer to His Sweetheart, 1858–1865*. Edited by Catherine S. Crary. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1965.
28. Mark Noll. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.



© 2017 by the author; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).