Twice-told tales

by Mark Valeri in the August 28, 2002 issue

Imagine this: A group of American Protestants uses its numerical superiority and cultural currency to fight what it sees as increasing liberalism and secularization in elite society. Ideological zealots, they demand that local laws and public rituals encode biblical principles. Only Christian morality, they claim, can promote the social virtue upon which the American republic depends. This group attaches itself to the conservative national political party.

But despite the group's efforts, the shifting winds of politics takes its toll over two decades. The progressive political party assumes control of national politics. The conservative clergy begin to fight among themselves. They form new alliances along ideological rather than institutional lines: a sort of ecumenism of the cultural conservatives aligned against liberalism. Rebuffed by national politics, they engage in a protracted effort to reform society through personal evangelization, missionary organizations and moral reform societies. Eventually they channel their efforts away from party politics to a critique of the national government and to the promotion of Christian citizenship on a more local level. Through it all, they are convinced that divine providence uniquely guides American history.

Sound familiar? Isn't this the story of conservative-evangelical politics from the Reagan years through the Clinton administration? It is also the plot of Jonathan Sassi's book, but his subjects are the Congregationalist clergy of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island from 1783 through 1833. Sassi's cast of characters reads like a list straight out of a Nathaniel Hawthorne novel: Eliphalet Porter, Zabdiel Adams, Heman Humphrey, Hosea Ballou and Zephaniah Swift Moore, to mention but a few.

This list may not immediately inspire interest; but Sassi works very hard to make an important point in this competent, well-annotated book. Previous studies of religion and American politics in the early national period, like Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity,* too readily dismiss the standing clergy of New England from the public scene after the American Revolution. But Sassi's study

"challenges the portrayal of the early republic as a period of secularization, individualization, or the withdrawal of religion from public life." His ministers proposed a "public Christianity" that offered "a program for the godly society." Their "ideology became an engine for reform." What Sassi has in mind here is how New England Congregationalism, riven by orthodox-Unitarian debates, first aligned itself with the ill-fated Federalist Party, then lost its establishment status in state constitutions and finally pursued social reform through evangelical revival and moral crusade.

A professor at the College of Staten Island, Sassi began *A Republic of Righteousness* as a doctoral dissertation at UCLA. Like many a revised dissertation, it gives too much space to fighting a historiographical battle (neither Sassi nor Hatch will win the elusive argument about which group was more American or popular). The important lessons here come from the tale itself. How did one group of clergy, which came to represent the mainline tradition in the Northeast United States, negotiate the boundaries between social reform, religious evangelization and national polity in a pluralistic, democratic America? There are no simple answers to such questions. But Sassi demonstrates that American Protestants made important distinctions early on between social reform and partisan politics on a national scale.