

Deriding the Devil in American Political Caricature and Preaching

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The Kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord, and against his annointed,
saying, Let us break their bands asunder,
and cast away their cords from us.
He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh:
the Lord shall have them in derision. (Psalm 2:2-4)

And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto
the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying,
Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war
with him? (Revelation 13:4)

As those supported by “the moral majority” speak for military expansion and deregulation and decontrol of many powers “to preserve freedom and prevent war,” it is time to remember earlier American preaching that derided the military expansion and the sanctity of “the majority” and identified the devil with a quest for unfettered freedom by the powerful. After reviewing how the devil was identified and derided in American political caricature and preaching, we will return to contemporary American issues that preaching may address with a similar strategy of ridicule.

When ridiculing leading political powers and identifying them as the devil, eighteenth and nineteenth century American sermons frequently cited Psalm 2 or Revelation 13. As much humor in the Old and New Testaments is prophetic use of derision or ridicule often directed against idolatries, it is understandable that many preachers used ridicule to lay low the idolatries of power, wisdom, and wealth they identified in American life.¹ The identification of the devil with those idolatries had biblical precedent in the temptations to Jesus. But to see the king or the president as the devil was distinctive to American expressions when compared to European expressions of the same period. In European caricature, the political leaders might be seen as in league with the devil but not the personifications of him. And the devil appeared much more often and much more centrally in American expressions invariably directed against those presidents associated with military expansion and power.

The continuing dominant Protestant character of American religion accounts for those associations of power with the devil. While the devil had become an insignificant ape-like trickster who trafficked in less public sins during late medieval Catholicism, the Reformation identified the devil not only with

more elevated human aspirations but also with powerful institutions and persons such as the papacy and the pope himself. And by 1667, Milton's *Paradise Lost* had raised the devil still further as the embodiment of the highest desires for freedom and liberty subject to no limitations.²

American Puritans read Revelation in a way that differed from the Catholics or the Anglicans. While Catholics were inclined to see Revelation describing periods before the dominance of the papacy, the Anglicans saw the papacy as one of the final beasts in the book (and saw the Anglican church as standing blissfully at the end of the book). But the Puritans who had fled the "beastly" Anglican church saw Revelation describing the persistent demonic nature of human leaders and institutions.

In his sermon on Revelation 13, Boston's leading seventeenth century divine, John Cotton, observed, "All rulers are the beast. . . . If you tether a beast at night, he knows the length of his tether in the morning."³ The moral was to make short tethers and keep them tight in relation to leaders of all institutions.

In nineteenth century preaching, humor is directed most often at powerful presidents and politicians as the devil or as in potential league with the devil; but less significant presidents receive little or no attention. Thomas Jefferson's strong political organization that dominated the first quarter of that century evoked the following prayer from Massachusetts' Congregational minister Samuel Eaton: "O Lord, Thou hast commanded us to pray for our enemies, we would therefore pray for the President and Vice-President of these United States."⁴ Less partisan is the comment of Peter Cartwright, a Methodist who supported Andrew Jackson for president but nonetheless was willing to ridicule another minister's efforts to honor Jackson who arrived during a worship service:

My fastidious preacher whispered a little loud, said: "General Jackson has come in, General Jackson has come in." I felt a flash of indignation run all over me like an electric shock, and facing about to my congregation, and purposely speaking out audibly, I said, "Who is General Jackson? If he don't get his soul converted, God will damn him. . . ."⁵

And New Englanders could also ridicule those for whom they voted as Yale's champion of new theology, Nathaniel Taylor, showed in supporting Whig Henry Clay against Democrat Polk:

If two devils are candidates for the office, and the election of one is inevitable, is it not one's duty to vote for the lesser devil, in order to secure the greater good?⁶

Polk went on to win the election and to be portrayed as a devil in political caricature; but Clay's power in Congress qualified him to be portrayed as a devil also as we will see later in this essay.

Only those with strong popular followings needed to be ridiculed, for as Unitarian Theodore Parker noted, "Men are continually led astray by misplaced reverence."⁷

For instance, Jackson, Polk, and Jefferson Davis were all portrayed as the

devil while other important political figures are portrayed as influenced by the devil. In one lithograph of 1834, Jackson's facial characteristics identify him as the devil flying overhead to the acclaim of his enormous popular following to whom he distributes the spoils of office. The artist clearly drew upon Delacroix's sensual illustration of Mephistopheles from an edition of *Faust*.⁸ A dozen years later, Polk becomes the chosen child of the devil in a lithograph where Jackson's features are simply a facade behind which the devil plots war to expand American power.⁹ Less powerful presidents are seen as merely worshippers of the devil; for instance, President Pierce kneels and bows before the devil.¹⁰ Other politicians such as Henry Clay sometimes appear as in the pay of the devil or as the devil's lawyer.¹¹ The non-presidents who came closest to being the devil were those who threatened the union seriously. Tom Paine, who did much to undermine the Federalist government of John Adams, is portrayed as so intertwined with the devil in pulling down the pillar of government that he is half devil;¹² and Jefferson Davis was portrayed as the devil ruling over the earth.¹³ When George McClellan's campaign against Lincoln in 1864 was at the height of its potency, that general was portrayed in a prominent position with the devil at center stage; but after Lincoln's re-election, the devil and McClellan are shown to the side of lithographic attention.¹⁴ In the nineteenth century, the last portrayal of the devil at center stage is with Senator Sumner during the height of his power over reconstruction in the southern states. (And that portrayal was a copy of another Delacroix illustration of the devil in *Faust*.) The devil virtually disappeared from political caricature during the decades of inconsequential presidents and politicians from Grant through McKinley; and the devil reemerged in political caricature along with the next powerful president, Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁵

As powerful presidents were usually associated with increased military might and territorial expansion to the acclaim of the American majority, a few leading preachers extended their ridicule to the military and finally to the supposed virtue of the majority. In "A Sermon On War" given at the onset of the Mexican American War, Theodore Parker ridiculed every aspect of military glory from recruits to generals.¹⁶

Of previous military ventures, Parker noted the glorious war with Florida Indians which he estimated cost the country between \$30,000,000 and \$40,000,000 "in fighting five hundred invisible Indians!"¹⁷ And Parker used ridicule to reduce to infamy the famous "victories" which General Zachary Taylor won in destroying villages when he invaded Mexico even before Congress declared war:

To butcher men and women and children, when they are coming home from church, with prayer books in their hands, seems an aggravation even of murder; a cowardly murder, which a Hessian would have been ashamed of. "But 'twas a famous victory."¹⁸

During the same war, Horace Bushnell used a different imagery in ridicule:

One race there is that figure in these heroics of war, in a small way, viz., the tiny race of ants whom God had made a spectacle to mock the glory and magnificence of human wars.¹⁹

And Bushnell traced the cause of war to idolatry of self; for on the ruins of war, man raises "himself into the attitude of a god, before the obsequious ages of mankind; for who of us can live content, as we are tempted, without some hero to admire and worship."²⁰ While Parker and Bushnell ridiculed war at a time they opposed a particular war, Henry Ward Beecher ridiculed the glories of warriors at the time of the Civil War that he supported. As the smartly uniformed troops marched off to war and were cheered as heroes by crowds along the streets, Beecher noted:

The papers do represent them as being made up of quite another class of men and that they will leave New York wonderfully purified when they go forth. . . .²¹

Reflections for Today

For the contemporary preacher, the foregoing survey of derision in political caricature and preaching suggests these strategies. We should direct ridicule at the most powerful politicians including those we support. We should use little ridicule toward those of little power. Those idolized by large popular followings need especially to be ridiculed along with any claim of a mandate in virtue of numbers. Arguments based on what is normal or abnormal should attract sharp ridicule in an age when it is abnormal to be a church member in the world. And in an era when church reunion is obstructed by polity differences (and a final nuclear war is threatened to protect democracy), we should ridicule any claim that the Bible ordained our form of government in church or state.

Albert van den Heuval, who served in the 1960's as secretary of the division of communications for the World Council of Churches, observed that that at which we cannot laugh has become for us an idol. He urged churches to develop "liturgies of ridicule" to put down potential idols.²² Because it is the essence of idolatry to be too serious about the idol, ridicule is the needed strategy. As Methodist Sam Jones observed, "Some men open their mouths to laugh, and you can drop a great brickbat of truth right in."²³ Amen.

NOTES

1. Cf. Doug Adams, *Humor In The American Pulpit From George Whitefield Through Henry Ward Beecher*, Rev. ed. (Austin, The Sharing Company, 1981), 54ff., 109ff., *passim*.

2. Cf. Christopher Hill, *Antichrist In Seventeenth Century England*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1971); Craig Harbison, *The Last Judgment In Sixteenth Century Northern Europe: A Study of the Relation Between Art and the Reformation*, (New York, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976); and Aletha Gilsdorf, *The Puitan Apocalypse: New England Eschatology In The Seventeenth Century*, Yale University Ph.D. dissertation, 1965.

3. John Cotton, *Exposition on the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation*, (London, 1656), 77.

4. Letter, Alpheus Packard to William Sprague, (January 18, 1855), *Annals of The American Pulpit*, ed. William Sprague, (New York, Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 1:616.

5. Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, The Backwoods Preacher*, W.F. Strickland, ed., (London, Arthur Hill, Virtue and Company, n.d.) 192.
6. The power of Daniel Webster in the senate evoked similar ridicule. Adams, *Humor In The American Pulpit*, 118-122.
7. Theodore Parker, "Daniel Webster," in *Historic Americans*, Samuel A. Elliott, ed., (Boston, American Unitarian Association, 1908), 7:275.
8. "Office Hunters For the Year 1834," lithograph published by Imbert, 1834.
9. "Polk's Dream," lithograph published by J. Baillie, 1846.
10. "Position of the Democratic Party In 1852," lithograph entered by William Leach, 1852.
11. "Old Harry Senior and Old Harry Junior," lithograph, 1843; and "Whig Appeal For An Excuse," lithograph by J. Baillie, 1844.
12. "Mad Tom In A Rage," etching, 1801.
13. "I adjure All Men To Obey The Behests of King Cotton Under Penalty of Hell Flames," lithograph by F. Meier, 1861.
14. "McClellan's Crafty Policy With the Traitorous Chicago Platform In Full Bloom," lithograph (Harry MacNeill Bland), 1864; and "The Great Majority," lithograph (Harry MacNeill Bland), 1864.
15. Victoria Woodhull was one woman portrayed as the devil with her free love campaign: "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!" *Harper's Weekly*, February 17, 1872, 140.
16. Theodore Parker, "A Sermon on War," *Speeches, Addresses, and Occasional Sermons*, I, (New York, D. Appleton & Company, 1864), 75-76.
17. *Ibid.*, 78.
18. *Ibid.*, 149.
19. Horace Bushnell, "Dignity of Human Nature Shown From Its Ruins," *Sermons For The New Life*, (New York, Charles Scribner, 1858), 56.
20. *Ibid.*, 57.
21. Henry Ward Beecher, *Freedom and War*, 144.
22. Albert van den Heuval, *Celebration*, (Chicago, Argus Communications, 1970), tape recording No. 4136, Tape I, side 2.
23. Sam Jones, *Sermons: Wise and Witty*, (New York, Cheap Publishing Company, 1885), 34.