Arguments from Above: 
Dissent in Early Nineteenth-Century 
American Reformist Discourse

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Transcendentalists and reformers of the American Renaissance based their own arguments on education, the struggle against poverty, temperance, women’s rights, abolitionism, etc. to a large extent on gestures of dissent against the rulers of the day that echo the ethos of resistance in the American revolution and even earlier Puritan ‘non-conformity’ in colonial times. Arguing for all kinds of basic rights and change for the good, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Child, Beecher-Stowe, Garrison, John Brown, the Grimké sisters, Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper, Douglass, Garnet, David Walker, and many others use an individualist language of moral dissent that is based on their religious intuition and their own personal sense of right. With few exceptions, they all refer to some higher or abstract metaphysics to justify their cause. Thus a formerly religious attitude of justification ‘from above’ has been secularized in America – not in the sense that it was eliminated, but in the sense that we can also find its conceptual formations in the realm of politics and the state and in cultural attitudes in general. This leaves many open questions about the nature of political debate and decision-making in the United States: How does it reflect on the American separation of church and state? Where or what is the ‘end’ of such dissent? What does it imply for the process of negotiation and what kind of new coherence will you get out of such a framework of oppositionalist change?

1. Introduction: American dissent beyond the Young Republic

“In the nineteenth century, religious revivals […] helped to inspire abolitionism and a host of other reform movements.” (Eric Foner)

“I'm against it!” (Danny Kaye)

In the United States there is a powerful discourse of ‘dissent’, a tradition of oppositional thinking which has developed from religious ‘non-conformity’
against the Church to a political argument for independence against colonial England. Curiously, Americans have continuously applied such an attitude even against themselves and their own state – as if it were an ‘other’ to distance oneself from. This is a fairly paradoxical attitude towards a democratic government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” as President Lincoln would have it in his Gettysburg Address of 1863 (Lauter 2002: 2010), and therefore warrants closer analysis. It points to a mode of political debate in which dissenters, i.e. the citizens with oppositional opinions, situate themselves in a literally ‘separatist’ gesture outside the framework of legal reference, refusing debate and, in particular, negotiation. As a model, this mode of disagreement stands in fundamental opposition to the basic democratic notion of a ‘parliament’, a political institution within which differences are expected to be discussed, views exchanged, and new consensus created.

The history of Christian ‘dissent’ goes back to Puritan theology – a ‘dissenter’ was in disagreement with the Anglican Church. The justification of such Protestant oppositionalism was of course religious; it was based on metaphysical assumptions. Dissent came ‘from above’; it had to do with subtle theological arguments and the ‘liberty’ of religious choice. Secular political and economic conflicts were considered a mere consequence of such dissent against ecclesiastical control. Or rather, for the American Puritans, who envisaged a theocratic regime and wanted to build a ‘City on a Hill’, the political and the spiritual were one and the same.

It is crucial for us to realize that this convergence remained a powerful force in the American Revolution. Thus Robert A. Ferguson emphasizes the importance of “religious anti-authoritarianism” (Ferguson 1994: 393). He observes that in the context of colonial dissent sermons provided “most of the rhetorical tools” that were used “to justify later rebellion” (Ferguson 1994: 354) and explains this as follows:

> Distinctions between American virtue and English corruption constitute an increasing element in colonial discourse, but American leaders quickly grasp that it is safer to express these distinctions in religious rather than in political terms. Ecclesiastical differences are acceptable under liberty of conscience; political disputes raise the unacceptable prospect of faction. (Ferguson 1994: 395)

This does of course have an influence on what he calls “the evolution of a language of dissent” (Ferguson 1994: 392):

> Religious thought brings its own dynamic to the deepening political crisis of the 1760s and 1770s. Christian polarities contribute less to an understanding

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1 Like ‘dissent’, ‘liberty’ is a highly charged term because the political and economic liberties of the middle class were anticipated in Luther’s Protestant arguments for the “Liberty of a Christian” of 1520.
of complex problems in diplomacy and more to explanations based on an absolute difference. (Ferguson 1994: 394).

As a further consequence, according to Ferguson, “[t]he answer, for many of those who seek independence, comes through God’s presence in colonial politics: heavenly authority supersedes an earthly King” (Ferguson 1994: 395). Curiously these not-so-secular arguments of the Revolution as the historical watershed of American dissent in many ways provide a role model for the later domestic reform movements of the American Renaissance.

To be sure, inspired by the Enlightenment, the original Founding Fathers moved away from such inspiration ‘from above’. They even had rather nasty things to say about religion. Thus John Adams writes about the formation of the American governments in Defense of the Constitutions of Government (1787):

> It will never be pretended that any persons employed had interviews with the gods, or were in any degree under the inspiration of Heaven. … it will forever be acknowledged that these governments were contrived merely by the use of reason and the senses. (qtd. in Ferguson 1994: 388, Ferguson’s elision)

And Jefferson writes in a letter of 1817 to Adams about “building a wall of separation between Church and State. […] My opinion is that there would never have been an infidel, if there had never been a priest.” To which he adds: “I join you therefore in sincere congratulations that this den of the priesthood is at length broken up, and that a protestant popedom is no longer to disgrace the American history and character” (qtd. in Ferguson 1994: 419). Still this is mild compared to what Tom Paine has to say in The Age of Reason (1794–1795), particularly in “Chapter VI: Of the True Theology”, where he claims that the Old Testament is

> making God Almighty act like a passionate man, that killed his son, when he could not revenge himself any other way; […] a man would be hanged that did such a thing […] The Jews have made him the assassin of the human species, to make room for the religion of the Jews. The Christians have made him the murderer of himself […] I here close the subject. I have shewn in all the foregoing parts of this work that the Bible and Testament are impositions and forgeries […] (Lauter 2002: 953–54).

These statements bespeak a very secular view of the political debate. Yet it is crucial to understand that the values of the Founding Fathers as manifested in their legacy were soon seen very critically because of the

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2 One of the most memorable examples in Ferguson’s book-length contribution to The Cambridge History of American Literature is his pointing out that the motto “rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God” is neither from Jefferson nor from Franklin (who proposed it for the Great Seal of the United States). The phrase “is already on the lips of John Bradshaw, the regicide Judge who, as president of the parliamentary tribunal in 1649, refuses Charles I the right to speak before he is sentenced” (Ferguson 1994: 395).
conflict over slavery, when enlightened rationality was perverted by apologist arguments. Jefferson, the man who personifies the American Enlightenment and who wrote the Declaration of Independence is at the heart of this contradiction because he was at the same time a slave owner (and worse, as we now know from DNA evidence). Actually, four out of the first seven presidents owned slaves. Thus the federal American state was at the same time reviled both in the South, which asked for more States’ rights, and in the North, which found the Constitution a slavery-condoning document. This renewed resistance to institutional power over the question of slavery was a step back in the sense that it repeated older colonial gestures of resistance against government. Moreover, in the wake of the Second Great Awakening such gestures even hark further back to acts of non-conformity against the established Church. As a consequence the civic sphere remained conceptually entangled with religious motivation.

My particular interest is in the internalized and conceptualized American culture of dissent. In this article I want to discuss how dissent becomes generalized beyond religion and political independence and turns against itself in the many reform movements of the American Renaissance, in which zealous reformers do nothing less than attack their own state. I am particularly interested in how the many reformers active during that period justified their work. The first half of the nineteenth century in America was a hotbed of reform movements that dealt with issues of education, class difference and utopian communities, gender and women’s suffrage, slavery and abolitionism, etc. There was much dissent to be voiced, but how exactly was it expressed? On what kind of arguments was its legitimacy based? Why exactly were certain conditions unacceptable and had to be changed, according to the reformers? What were their motivations?

This survey will mainly focus on equal rights for women and on abolitionism. Its main sources are standard collections such as the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* and survey articles in literary histories. Thus, rather than discovering new or formerly hidden evidence, this article wants to focus on a corpus of representative views in American collections that define the field and provide the ‘American heritage’ with identity, with the very conceptual material that defines its tradition. We will see that the arguments for reform in the early nineteenth century are usually metaphysically grounded rather than based on Humanism, Enlightenment, Rationalism, or even worldly Common Sense. The dominant justification is that God would disagree with the present conditions because they do not conform to the absolute truths of the Bible.
2. Emerson, Noyes, Child

It is important to understand the importance of Transcendentalism for the zeitgeist of the period. Emersonian idealism sets the tone. Crucially it provides no criticism of religious inspiration but criticism of the Church only. Thus in his Harvard “Divinity School Address” (1838), Emerson states that “The Church seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct” (Bode 1981: 82). Yet at the same time he suggests that “the doors to the temple stand open, night and day before every man” (Bode 1981: 76), and later: “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity” (Bode 1981: 88). This transcendentalist argument provides an interesting kind of psychologizing: the external inspiration from a God above is translated into a divine intuition from within. As my examples of the different strategies of reformist argumentation in the American Renaissance will show, the degree of religious literalness varies in the different cases. Of particular interest is the quality of ‘secularization’ achieved.

Among the utopian experiments of the period we find a rather Christian kind of socialism. John Humphrey Noyes (1811–1880), for example, was the founder and head of the Oneida Community – a more successful enterprise than the better-known Brook Farm. In his History of American Socialisms (1870), Noyes describes the ‘perfectionism’ of his project as follows:

[…] they kept their position as simple believers in Christianity, and steadfastly criticized Fourierism. […] the Oneida Community really issued from a conjuction between the Revivalism of Orthodoxy and the Socialism of Unitarianism. In 1846 […] the little church at Putney began cautiously to experiment in Communism. (Inge 1987: 218)

The new enterprise is an interesting combination of orthodoxy and radicalism, ultimately based on notions of an extended Christian family: “Gradually a little school of believers gathered around him” (Inge 1987: 218). This is a far stretch from the atheist ‘Communism’ we find on other continents.

Also when it comes to reforms in the wider society and issues of poverty and class, religious inspiration remained powerful – think of the Salvation Army, founded in Britain but also highly influential in the United States. Religious caritas is also an important motivation of sentimental compassion at this time. Thus in her “Letter 14” (1842) of the Letters from New York, which she wrote for the Boston Courier, Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880) describes the wretched lives of young adolescents and then comments that “angels weep over the slow murder of a human soul” (Lauter 2002: 1796). To her, social misery is a simple outrage to heaven. Human identity is a matter of godly essence rather than one of secularized humanist psychology.
3. **Women’s rights: Grimké, Sojourner Truth, Stanton**

One of the most fertile fields to find good examples justifying reform is the realm of women’s rights. Angelina Grimké (1805–1879) offers the following argument about female identity in one of her *Letters to Catherine Beecher* (1837):

> Let us examine the account of her creation. ‘And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.’ Not as a gift – for Adam immediately recognized her as a part of himself (‘this is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh’) – a companion and equal, not one hair’s breadth beneath him in the majesty and glory of her moral being; not placed under his authority as a subject, but by his side, on the same platform of human rights, under the same government of God only. (Lauter 2002: 2022, original italics)

The equality demanded is equality under God, who is the maker and ruler over this new relationship. An even closer acquaintance with God can be found in Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883), whom Harriett Beecher-Stowe had chiasmically called the “Lybian Sibyl” in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Lauter 2002: 2023). In her reminiscences of Sojourner Truth, published in 1881, Frances D. Gage quotes the black feminist as follows: “Whar did your Christ come from? […] From God and a woman! Man had nothin’ to do wid Him” (Lauter 2002: 2026). Here the demand for equality is based on a woman’s intercourse with God Himself as the very origin of Christianity!

Another good source on women’s rights is the account of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) on the important 1848 Seneca Falls convention, which she organized. She says about the context of this event that it “was held in the Methodist Church” and observes that “a religious earnestness dignified all the proceedings” (Lauter 2002: 2041). The result of this meeting was an interesting document, called “Declaration of Sentiment”, in which the participants basically reformulated the demands of the “Declaration of Independence” – with an emphasis on gender. In this rhetorically brilliant move, “man” was the offender instead of the King of England: “He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God” (Lauter 2002: 2044). This is a good illustration of how the argument, even when it borrows from the republican nationalism of the revolutionary period, takes recourse to God. Though Church and State may be separate entities, the inspirational ethics, the arguments for dissent, remain closely connected. The example further confirms that not even the rhetoric of the American Enlightenment can separate itself from metaphysics.
4. White abolitionists: Stowe, Grimke, Garrison, Thoreau

Turning from women’s rights to abolitionism – the most obvious field of dissent during this period – one often finds the same group of writers dissenting. And again, there is a predominantly religious motivation in their opinions. The most prominent case is possibly Harriett Beecher-Stowe (1811–1896), who came from a family of ministers and who wrote in her preface to the readers of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) that she wanted to “send you off edified as if you had been hearing a sermon” (Lauter 2002: 2477). Her very writing against slavery is like a sermon and makes her assume the male prerogative of a minister. She is also famous for the claim that God inspired her book: “God wrote it” (Lauter 2002: 2477).

In the *Heath Anthology*, Angelina Grimké can be found under the abolitionist heading as well, this time arguing against slavery in her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836). Already the title gives away her metaphysical orientation. Slavery “is contrary to the example and precepts of our holy and merciful Redeemer, and his apostles” (Lauter 2002: 1807). The enemies of abolitionism are simply un-Christian:

> In the great mob in Boston, last autumn, when the books and papers of the Anti-Slavery Society were thrown out of the windows of their office, one individual laid hold of the Bible and was about tossing it out to the ground, when another reminded him that it was the Bible he had in his hand. ‘O! ‘this all one,’ he replied, and out went the sacred volume, along with the rest. (Lauter 2002: 1807-08)

Grimké advises her Southern sisters:

> I would set the slave free, and then go to prison or pay the fine. If a law commands me to sin I will break it; if it calls me to suffer, I will let it take its course unresistingly. The doctrine of blind obedience and unqualified submission to any human power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is the doctrine of despotism, and ought to have no place among Republicans and Christians. (Lauter 2002: 1810, original italics)

Note her depreciating remark about “any human power”. Dissent does not take place within the law but against the law. For her, “Republicans and Christians” merge in a single entity. This is the vision of a religiously charged political system in which protestant dissent and the republican drive for independence together fight institutionalized rules by which both feel oppressed. When Grimké gives the women of the South a long list of role models who have “stood up in all the dignity and strength of moral courage to be the leaders of the people”, Biblical names predominate: Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Mary Magdalene […] (Lauter 2002: 1810–11).

Male abolitionists cite similar patterns of inspiration. Thus William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) also opposes the institutions of the state and calls the
American Constitution a “covenant with Death and an agreement with Hell” (Lauter 2002: 1787). His abolitionism was strongly influenced by the Great Awakening. Note that in this statement he criticizes a document of the Enlightenment by using religious imagery, calling the Constitution a “covenant”. Another famous white abolitionist, John Brown, is not directly quoted in the Heath Anthology but represented in “A Plea for John Brown” (1860) by Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who writes about Brown: “He was one of that class of whom we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at all – the Puritans. It would be in vain to kill him” (Lauter 2002: 1723). This aura makes him immortal – he is above human judgment: “He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist” (Lauter 2002: 1729). Thoreau further describes Brown as “rising above them literally by a whole body, […] the spectacle is a sublime one …” (Lauter 2002: 1729, original italics). The allusion is of course to the ascension of Christ: “Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an Angel of Light” (Lauter 2002: 1736). The martyr of Abolitionism turns into a Christ figure, connected to the son of God through the transcendental circularity of a “chain”. Further below, I will again discuss the conceptual repercussions of such circular causalities in the work of Emerson.


Black abolitionists do not necessarily argue in ways that are very different. Thus in his early “Appeal […] to the Coloured Citizens of the World” (1829), David Walker (1785–1830) states: “Can our condition be any worse? […] wretchedness in this Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!” (Lauter 2002: 1778, original italics and exclamation marks). Like Brown, Walker is cynical about the achievements of the enlightened Republic of the Founding Fathers. And he claims “that God Almighty is the sole proprietor or master of the WHOLE human family” (Lauter 2002: 1779, original italics and capitals). Again God is the ultimate authority who can unsettle the system of bourgeois property ownership.

Henry Highland Garnet (1815–1882), a Presbyterian minister, observes in his “Address to the Slaves of the Unites States of America” (Buffalo 1843): “The bleeding captive pleaded his innocence, and pointed to Christianity who stood weeping at the cross. […] Nearly three millions of your fellow-citizens are prohibited by law and public opinion […] from reading the Book of Life” (Lauter 2002: 1903). Again slavery is criticized as an outrage against Christianity. Moreover, knowledge does not come from Enlightenment progress
but from the Good Book, which is considered the source of true revelation. Garnet continues:

God will not receive slavery, nor ignorance, nor any other state of mind, for love and obedience to him. Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation. [...] Liberty is a spirit sent out from God, and like its great Author, it is no respecter of persons. (Lauter 2002: 1904)

Notice the ontological status of liberty – it is not a matter of humanist definition but a spiritual notion above the respect for persons, “sent out from God”, and thus anchored in the old Protestant definitions of religious autonomy.

Compared with many of the previous dissenters, Garnet’s rival Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) proves an outstanding abolitionist precisely because he does not argue metaphysically. For him, Enlightenment values stand higher than religion. He provides one of the few secular diatribes against slavery, stating in “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (1852):

For my part, I would say, welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything! in preference to the gospel, as preached by those Divines! They convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty, and serve to confirm more infidels, in this age, than all the infidel writings of Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Bolingbroke, put together, have done. (Lauter 2002: 1893, original italics)

This praise of Enlightenment thinkers and values is exceptional among abolitionist activists! Later Douglass even argues that “the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT. Read its preamble [...] plain, commonsense rules, such as you and I, and all of us, can understand and apply, without having passed years in the study of law” (Lauter 2002: 1897, original capitals). These statements stand for a firm belief in secular liberalism, appealing to human values of common sense, as understood by “you and I”. They point to a humanist interpretation of the Enlightenment.

The abolitionist argument returns, however, to a religious ontology with the poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911). She writes in “On the Twenty-Fourth Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society” (1857): “The law of liberty is the law of God, and is antecedent to all human legislation. It existed in the mind of Deity when He hung the first world upon its orbit and gave it liberty to gather light from the central sun” (Lauter 2002: 1936). Again liberty is emphasized as the crucial concern of Abolitionism, and it is subjected to God’s definition as “antecedent” to human organization. The main argument for freeing the slaves is not merely the simple fact that they are human within some worldly framework of secular Humanism, but it comes from above, powered by godly authority as the crucial origin of the law and central focus of liberty.
6. Metaphysical Republicanism: Fuller, Garnet

There is a curious blend of proud American Republicanism and religious legitimation, which shows how strongly these two supposedly separate strands of tradition are entangled in American thought. Thus in her “Dispatch 18” (1848?) to the *New York Daily Tribune*, Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) starts off with a gesture of looking down on a decadent Europe of *ancients régimes*:

Eighteen hundred years of this Christian culture in these European Kingdoms […] Modern Europe is the sequel to that history, […] this hollow England, […] this poor France, […] lost Poland […] – the public failure seems amazing, seems monstrous. (Lauter 2002: 1667)

This is a reason for her to praise the progressive United States: “Yet, oh Eagle, […] Though wert to be the advance-guard of Humanity, the herald of all Progress; […] Liberty of the Press works well, and […] checks and balances naturally evolve from it which suffice to its government” (Lauter 2002: 1668). Still, she ends her ruminations with complaints about this horrible cancer of Slavery and this wicked War, that has grown out of it. […] I! my Country the darkest offender, because with the least excuse, foresworn to the high calling with which she was called, – no champion of the rights of men, but a robber and a jailer; the scourge hid behind her banner; her eyes fixed, not on the stars, but on the possessions of other men.

How it pleases me here to think of the Abolitionists! […] God strengthen them and make them wise to achieve their purpose! (Lauter 2002: 1668–69)

Despite her thorough knowledge of enlightened social organization, Fuller does not dare to leave it there and rely on human understanding. She curiously concludes her Dispatch with her eyes fixed “on the stars” and feels the necessity to invoke a blessing from God.

A similar combination of Abolitionism and Revolutionary rhetoric can be found in the writings of Garnet, who was already quoted earlier. In the same “Address to the Slaves of the Unites States of America”, he also writes: “You had better all die – *die immediately*, than live as slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon posterity. […] *rather die freemen, than live to be the slaves*” (Lauter 2002: 1905, original italics). This is of course a deliberate use of the rhetoric of Pat Henry in his famous speech of 1775, arguing for American independence in the Virginia House of Burgess. But Garnet borrows from more Founding Fathers: “Brethren, arise, arise!” he argues, “Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. […] Let your motto be resistance! *resistance!* *resistance!* […] Trust in the living God. …” (Lauter 2002: 1906-08, original italics). Here the reference is to the urgency of Tom Paine’s revolutionary calls in *Common Sense* (1776): “Now is the seed-time of Continental union, faith and honor” (Lauter 2002: 936). The ideals of the
Young Republic still provide some guidance to follow – yet at the same time Garnet feels the necessity to invoke God.

7. The “universal soul within or behind”:
   Emerson’s Metaphysical Playpen

The conclusion from these examples is that during the American Renaissance attitudes towards the Enlightenment generally remained strongly embedded in religious convictions. A good metaphor to illustrate this convergence of religion and politics may be the image of Emerson’s “Circles” or his notion of “Circumference”, in which everything is interconnected through a chain of feedback loops. This ecological model of interaction is ultimately imagined in a concentric sense of circles that are like the spheres in a Ptolemaic universe. As Emerson writes in *Nature* (1836):

> Throw a stone into the stream, and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful type of all influence. Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, [...] This universal soul he calls Reason: it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. (Lauter 2002: 1524)

The famous Transcendentalist argues in terms of a diluted kind of typology, i.e., of an absolute type of super-individualist reason that does not emanate from dialogic human cognition but merely reflects the qualities of “a universal soul within or behind”. Elsewhere he calls this entity the ‘Oversoul’. The bottom-up humanist reason of the Enlightenment (Kant’s famous *sapere aude!*) and the private inspiration of the Calvinist elect (in the sense of Puritan introspection) merge in the same Transcendental circle of containment.

Thus further on in *Nature*, Emerson writes: “A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or circumference of the invisible world” (Lauter 2002: 1527). The origin is ultimately metaphysical – the ontology Platonic. For Emerson, dialogue is a matter of such circularity rather than interaction. Hence in “Circles” (1841) he writes: “Conversation is a game of circles” (Bode 1981: 233). And later he explains: “The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, [...] things proceed from the eternal generation of the soul. Cause and effect are two sides of one fact” (Bode 1981: 235–36). Interactional influence is suspended – note that this is significantly different from any assumptions on which the Enlightenment ‘separation of powers’ is based. For Emerson, there is but a centered, single force of motivation left. Consequently his individualism is divinely homologized – a pluralism that is based on a common, proto-religious truth. As “fact” is embedded in “spirit”, historical agency is embedded in a playpen of metaphysics.
In view of this reformist discourse of the first half of the nineteenth century, maybe the American Renaissance really was a ‘rebirth’ – in the sense of ‘born-again’ theories, as a step back to pre-Enlightenment values – a lassoing-type of circumference of the American Enlightenment by confusedly (and often less confusedly) Divine powers from above. One gets the impression that for the reformers of the American Renaissance, the main reason for their dissent was like the righteousness of God. The examples of dissent during this period listed above show that the ontology of a religious weltbild of belief has not really been overcome by the Enlightenment values so strongly associated with the preceding American Revolution. Instead there is a blending, a transfer of spiritual concepts into the civic sphere. No wonder Robert P. Forbes suggests that there is an “Evangelical Enlightenment” in America (Forbes 1998).

8. Conclusion: “a majority of one” beyond negotiation

In order to come to some more general conclusions that connect dissent during the American Renaissance with the present, this survey ends with a last example from America’s most famous dissenter, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) and his “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849) – a document that is still being invoked by American political activists of all colors. There he writes:

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectively withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one […] I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors, constitutes a majority of one already. (Lauter 2002: 1678)

Again, God is invoked as the ultimate authority, one that overrules all of the constitutional procedures of democracy. Being a “majority” has nothing to do with human numbers or secular politics but with being “right”. Considering the importance of this document in American political history and its impact on American democracy leads us to a more general set of questions: What kind of coherence results from such acts of non-conformity? Where and what is the ‘end’ of dissent? And how does this influence the functioning of such a democracy of dissent?

This is what Thoreau has to say about participation in American democracy: “Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined” (Lauter 2002: 1681). Like the choice of a religious creed, affiliation with “any incorporated society” (which also stands for ‘the State’ in its most
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3 Gret Haller considers “das Bekenntnis zu (irgend)einer Religion geradezu Voraussetzung für die Integration in das amerikanische Volk” (Haller 2002: 41), i.e., the commitment to some religion is really a condition for integration in America.

4 See Gret Haller’s discussion of the meaning of ‘civil society’ in the United States (Haller 2002: 190). Like German Zivilgesellschaft (but unlike Zivilbevölkerung, which is opposed to the military), the American civil society is opposed to the government institutions of the state.

5 See my on-line article “Volunteers of America: From Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin to the Coalition of the Willing”.

6 She sees this also in the context of neo-liberal demands against state control and hence talks about an “Ideologie der Entstaatlichung” (Haller 2002: 186), i.e., an ideology of diminishing the state.

7 See as a contemporary example of this attitude the “dissent is patriotic :: blog”.

general sense) is seen as a matter of ‘joining’, of voluntary membership. Though like Europeans, Americans are of course citizens of their own nation by default, this example suggests that their attitude towards it is one that very much resembles voluntary affiliation. Thus surprised foreigners have time and again noticed the many exotic rituals confirming and renewing the attachment of Americans to their own American symbols, institutions, and fellow compatriots.3 The ‘Pledge of Alliance’ to the American flag is only the most obvious of these.

A further symptom of this sense of choice and active joining is the fact that Americans are a nation of volunteers. I argue in another paper that this attitude is at the root of the great influence of ‘civil society’ and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in American political life. American volunteerism in turn can be traced back to Cotton Mather’s *Bonifacius* (1710). The original do-gooder in America in turn had a substantial influence on Benjamin Franklin’s schemes for improvement in colonial America. Hence the origins of such ‘civic’ organization4 are in religious missionary work and in social formations that opposed themselves against an alien and incompetent colonial government.5 The problem remains, however, that “NGOs have no democratic legitimation” (as one participant recently put it at a conference on utopia in Freiburg/Br.).

As Gret Haller observes, it may be significant in this context that Americans usually do not talk about the state but merely about ‘government’ and ‘governing’.6 The head of a state is still called “governor”, a term reminiscent of colonial administration. This naming confirms attitudes of negative wariness against government rather than positive identification with the state.7 National identity is rather located with ‘the people’ and a patriotism of certainties often provided by religion – a differentiation which further suggests that the American separation of Church and State is unlike the European one. Whereas in Europe, since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and its rule of *cuius regio, eius religio*, this separation has been a matter of State over Church, in the United States the relationship has been the other way round,
a rule of *noli me tangere!* – in which the Church is prioritized over the State (see Haller 2002: 38–41). Hence from a European perspective, American secularization has been incomplete.\(^8\) As I have illustrated, rather than being eradicated, many religious habits have been transferred into the secular realm of politics, where they still survive. Here is an example of this from Ferguson:

> The primary architect of the separation of church and state, Jefferson is also first to ply the language of civil religion with complete effectiveness. He supplants the clergy by succeeding them in his own inaugural address. [...] Elected, Jefferson delivers his own lay sermon. (Ferguson 1994: 425)

By secularizing the established tradition of an election sermon, Jefferson remained within the discursive habit of the old, religious framework. It can be argued that we still find echoes of this when contemporary presidents end their ‘State of the Union’ addresses with an invocation of God.

In view of such converging formations, the question is not about literal belief here. To be sure, as Paul Lauter has rightly suggested, there is a major difference between the religious convictions of the Grimké sisters and the ones of Thoreau.\(^9\) But in the American type of secularization, this difference becomes fairly insignificant as long as the rhetoric remains basically the same. Whether the attitude of righteousness that motivates dissent is literally metaphysical or transcendentally vague: it remains autonomous in either case, prioritizing moral absolutes. Telling consequences of this proto-religious mode of discourse can be found in the foreign policy of the contemporary United States, which is, like the domestic ethos of ‘commitment’ (which has a much deeper ring in the United States than mere reliability), predominantly moralistically inspired by a rallying around concepts, as the recent effort to create a ‘coalition of the willing’ in the Iraq shows. Rather than the ornery European way of negotiating a solution, the American way is one of finding and implementing the ‘right’ solution – which is precisely beyond negotiation because it is right and supposed to transcend all the Emersonian ‘circles’ of opinion. Its values stand above the procedure – they are not negotiable as a result of procedural outcome. Hence the suspicion that American reform and American political commitment often still remains a

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\(^8\) Powerful evidence of this attitude and its political consequences today can still be found in a recent series of articles by Diana Henriques in *The New York Times*, in which she discusses the privileges of religious organizations in the United States. She illustrates how these groups even stand above the law when it comes to the supervision of schools, safety regulations and professional qualifications, union membership, medical coverage, the use of taxpayer money for religious instruction in prisons, and of course tax exemption for the religious organizations themselves …

\(^9\) Paul Lauter made this remark during the discussion of my paper at the 2006 EAAS conference in Cyprus.
matter of monologic inspiration ‘from above’ rather than a dialogic compromise among human beings – a discursive pattern that often more generally determines the nature of behavioral formation in the United States.

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