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Research Proposal

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL
Steven Alan Samson

I wish to pursue a line of research I began with my Ph.D. dissertation, "Crossed Swords: Entanglements Between Church and State in America" (Political Science, University of Oregon, 1984). The central focus of the research is on the place of religion, particularly Christianity, in nineteenth century American political thought and law.

Although I am interested in exploring changing public attitudes about the place of religion in public life, I am most concerned to examine religion and theology as substantive influences on both politics and law. Questions I would address include the following: What importance did nineteenth century jurists, historians, theologians, and political commentators attribute to religion as a pillar of the constitutional order? What did they believe was -- or should be -- the role of religion in "the public square?" What dangers did they see in sectarianism or in the changing religious composition of the population? How did they respond to these challenges and other cultural changes? How did they propose to preserve a theistic cultural base? How much did the political rhetoric of the period reflect religious or secular values? I would expect that the Civil War era marks a major turning point.

I am especially interested in delineating some of the key issues of the nineteenth century that affected both religion and politics. Among them, I expect to include the perceived impact of French revolutionary thought, Unitarianism, abolition and social reform, industrialization, immigration, public education, the Civil War, Freethought, Darwinism, the rise of the social sciences and graduate education, business and labor issues, populism, and the Social Gospel in nineteenth century political thought. This research could either culminate with the Progressive movement or stop just short of that period.

I have long desired to retrace the paper trail of B. F. Morris's research on the influence of Christianity on American political institutions. Rev. Morris, a Protestant minister from Ohio who served a pastorate in Washington in the late 1850s and early 1860s, gleaned a wealth of material from the national archives for his lengthy sourcebook, Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States of America, upon which I drew in my dissertation research. The absence of specific citations in the work has limited its usefulness to scholars. But Perry Miller cited Morris several times in his posthumous study of nineteenth century intellectual history. With the exception of E. R. Norman, I am not aware of any other recognized academicians who have drawn on Morris's work.

My own research to date has been largely limited to secondary

sources with two major exceptions. One is my collection of United States and state court cases on religious issues. The other is a growing personal collection of works by American political thinkers, legal scholars, historians, and theologians of the period, including Joseph Story, James Kent, Thomas Cooley, Orestes Brownson, John Wingate Thornton, Francis Lieber, George Bancroft, Orestes Brownson, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, Jedidiah Morse, Zachary Montgomery, and many others. I am also acquainted with several organizations upon which I can draw for research assistance.

I did a considerable amount of exploratory research as part of my dissertation research from 1981-1984. From it I have recently drawn a journal article, "Christianity in Nineteenth Century America Law," which is due to be published next month. A related article, "Theological Sources of American Constitutionalism," which is scheduled to be published by The St. Croix Review, deals with the colonial and founding period. I am in the process of preparing other sections of my dissertation for publication. But the recent work of Ellis Sandoz on the founding period seems to make a study of nineteenth century political thought a more timely pursuit at this time.