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The End of Theocracy in America: The Distinguishing Line of Harry Croswell?s Election Sermon

Neil C. Olsen

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On May 14, 1818, the Rev. Harry Croswell of Trinity Episcopal Church, New Haven, broke a 180 year old tradition and became the first non-Congregational minister to give the Annual Election Sermon in Connecticut. Better known as the free press hero of The People v. Croswell" case in 1804 where Alexander Hamilton argued for the precept that “truth is a defense against libel”, Croswell here 16 years later provides an argument for the separation of church and state. Taking his text from the scriptural precept Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's, he creates a hard “distinguishing line” between church and state. Shortly after he gave the sermon to the Assembly, they voted 81 to 80 to accept a majority vote on passing a constitution – a constitution that would disestablish the Congregational Church in the state. One of the shortest of all the elections sermons, it was also the most powerful. His sermon was at the time considered so important that the Assembly authorized four editions at printers around the state, an unprecedented number. Rather than read private letters and snatch at metaphors for a justification of a supposed “wall of separation” between church and state, Harry Croswell’s sermon provided the intellectual and emotional motivation that ended the last theocratic-democracy in America by voting on it – even if it won by a single vote. Understanding Harry Croswell is vital to understanding the First Amendment’s protection of both religious and press freedom. The book includes the essay, "The End of Theocracy in American: The Distinguishing Line of Harry Croswell’s Election Sermon", along with a transcription with introduction and notes of Croswell’s "A Sermon Preached at the Anniversary Election, Hartford, May 14, 1818".

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