but the Revolutionary generation knew it had broken with the past. Jefferson, for example, is supposed to have taken more pride in his authorship of the Virginia Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom than anything else he did in his political career.

For most Americans religious liberty has become a virtual shibboleth of American life, used for any number of purposes, including invoking it to distinguish between American democracy and Russian or Chinese communism. And yet, the easy allegiance to religious freedom today should not mask its significance for the American churches and its rather brutal past.

What has been extraordinarily difficult and painful for the American churches to realize is that religious liberty committed the churches to religious pluralism as well. Throughout the nineteenth and for a good deal of the twentieth century, American Protestantism in particular attempted to deny diversity and shape American society after its own image. Catholics, blacks, Jews, Mormons, and other groups were simply defined out of the culture. One nineteenth century Presbyterian gave especially blatant expression to this religious imperialism. “This is a Christian Republic, our Christianity being of the Protestant type,” he wrote. “People who are not Christians, and people called Christians, but who are not Protestants, dwell among us; but they did not build this house. We have never shut our doors against them but if they come, they must take up with such accommodations as we have. . . . As for this land, we have taken possession of it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; and, if he will give us the grace to do it, we mean to hold it for him till he comes.”

Certainly part of our contemporary anguish is due to the legacy of hostility and hatred which this attitude encouraged, and a continuing challenge to American society and the American churches is facing up to the implications of religious and cultural pluralism. Whether this takes the form of prayer in the public schools or open housing, the nation is still confronted with its revolutionary experiment in religious liberty and cultural pluralism.

For the church, this need not mean a relativizing of the gospel into a homogeneous mess of American pottage. In fact, the church’s attempt to dominate American society contributed substantially to the dilution of the church’s prophetic voice and to forming an American civil religion. Rather, religious freedom and the recognition of cultural diversity might free the church to measure American society rather than be swallowed up by it. Liberated from the desire to recreate Christendom, we might recover the resources to proclaim the gospel faithfully.

IV

Closely related to the Revolutionary understanding of power and

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