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The Holy Cause: Church Governance in Revolutionary and Early National New York

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This article explores a key outgrowth of the American Revolution in the law of church and state. The careers of Presbyterian pastor John Rodgers of New York and his congregants bridged pre- and postrevolutionary debates on the law of religion. In early 1784, the inaugural New York State legislature passed a game-changing law, introduced by one of those congregants, which allowed all “religious societies” to incorporate. The new law followed decades of controversy over whether non-Anglican religious organizations could incorporate in British colonies. Just months after the British evacuated, New York transformed an Anglican privilege into a general benefit. The law also mandated significant lay control, vesting elected trustees with authority over salaries, decisions to buy and sell, and more. Other states followed New York’s lead. Lay trustees controlled church finances and property, and they became partners with local governments in state-building infrastructure as they founded universities, hospitals, publishing houses, libraries, etc. Corporate status was a powerful tool, although some groups grew faster than others. Presbyterians’ conservative standards meant that more nimble groups, especially Methodists, could capitalize on the opportunities offered by new settlements in upstate New York and beyond, where revivals burned hot as American settler colonialism exploded in the early republic.