

ESSAY

The Itinerant Passions of Protestant Pastors: Ministerial Elopement Scandals in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era Press

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Abstract

Between 1870 and 1914, at least 266 Protestant ministers abandoned their posts, left their homes and families, and eloped with women who were not their wives. As critics of religion used these elopement scandals to discredit American Protestantism, those sympathetic to religion's hold on American morality attempted to dissuade the press from indulging in the sensational. Though initially hesitant to report on Protestant pastors' immoralities in this period, the press eventually came to an almost universal acceptance of scandal as a legitimate journalistic genre. As the public wondered what the proliferation of sex scandals among the Protestant elites might mean for religion in America, the press used the genre of ministerial elopement as an entrée into larger cultural debates about religion, marriage, and romantic love in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Keywords: religion; scandal; sexuality

In his 1877 trial for adultery, seduction, robbery, and wife desertion, the Methodist minister Alfred Thompson did not appear remorseful. "We all do such things more or less," he reportedly told the court.¹ Though startlingly nonchalant, the minister's assessment was not entirely exaggerated: between 1881 and 1914, one dedicated group of anti-religious freethinkers documented over 3,500 cases of ministerial misconduct. The enterprising infidels found the records of these misdeeds in newspapers across North America and catalogued them in a small volume that underwent ten expanding editions in the four decades of reissue. The book, titled *The Crimes of Preachers in the United States and Canada*, was supposed to serve as a wake-up call for Christians everywhere to the predatory nature of the men (and the occasional woman) who wielded spiritual authority over them.² The exposure of scandal was one way through which critics of the existing religious order sought to undermine the establishment; the press, armed with sensation, was their best ally in this endeavor.³

Among fraud, murder, swindling, and adultery, ministerial elopements emerged as a prominent and intriguing thread in the book and in contemporaneous newspaper reporting. Between 1870 and 1914, at least 266 Protestant ministers abandoned their posts, deserted their wives, and took off in search of better lives with other women.⁴ Frequently, though not always, these women were their significantly younger

parishioners, choir singers, or Sunday school teachers. In some cases, the ministers regretted their elopements and returned home repentant. Other pastors obtained divorces from their wives and married their runaway accomplices. Almost half managed to simply vanish and were never heard from again—at least not on the pages of the newspapers that covered their elopements. Practically unheard of before 1870 (*Crimes of Preachers* listed only six such cases from the 1850s and the 1860s combined), stories of runaway preachers exploded in the press in the following decades.

To be sure, elopers represented a small minority of Protestant ministers—and an even smaller fraction of the American clerical profession as a whole. According to the U.S. Census, there were a total of 43,874 clergy “men” (67 of them were women) in 1870. By 1916, that number would reach 191,796. Considering the proportions, a few hundred runaway pastors hardly represents a trend. Yet on a smaller, more granular scale, the rise and fall of elopement scandals raises important questions about the relationship between sexuality and religion, publicity and anonymity, Victorian gender ideals and notions of romantic love. Proportionally distributed among all manner of Protestant denominations, eloping pastors became a phenomenon serious enough to warrant significant negative attention from the press.⁵ What motivated these ministers to abandon their careers and families? What exactly were they running from? What were they running toward? And why were these particular years between 1870 and 1914 filled with so many reports of pastoral disappearances?

The late nineteenth century introduced unprecedented forms of mobility. The telegraph and the railroad revolutionized the ways in which information and bodies traveled through space. As the historian Lawrence M. Friedman explains, nineteenth-century America was “a society quite literally on the move—a society of men (and, to a lesser extent, women) who tore themselves loose from the soils of their birth, or who created their own rootlessness.”⁶ This mobility extended to the seemingly unlimited possibilities of remaking oneself. Americans, Friedman writes, were “busily engaged in climbing, falling, and maneuvering through and about the many levels of social strata.”⁷ For white men in particular, Gilded Age America presented itself as a blank canvas with virtually limitless potential for reinventing themselves in hopes of a better, more prosperous life. The possibility of constant reinvention, of trial-and-error attempts at securing a better place in society, led many enterprising men to abuse the very system that allowed for such flexibility.⁸ The press responded to these developments by exposing corruption and the potential for the abuse of power as serious impediments for America’s continued success as a democracy.⁹ Sensationalism did more than just propel newspaper sales; it also helped hold public figures accountable for their actions, which is perhaps why so many of them kept running.

Several historians have recently turned their attention to the study of the many kinds of elopement sensations that the Gilded Age and Progressive Era produced. Carolee Anne Klimchok’s dissertation on elite women’s elopements with their coachmen documents the fascinating interplay of race and class that is impossible to understand outside of the framework of the scandalous in the Gilded Age.¹⁰ Paul Emory Putz’s article on ministers who performed on-demand marriage ceremonies for eloping couples reveals how the “marrying parsons” both benefited from and undermined Protestantism’s grip on American culture in the Progressive Era.¹¹ These excellent studies have explicated how scandal—and elopement scandals in particular—allowed Americans to publicly negotiate what counted as legitimate marriage and proper sexuality.

The figure of the eloping minister adds to this historical conversation. Protestantism had long enjoyed the protections afforded to it by being the religion of the majority. Since the days of the early republic, the press had been called on to guarantee the success of the Protestant pulpit. As the *Christian Herald* editorialized in 1823, “The Pulpit and the Press are inseparably connected. . . . The Press, then, is to be regarded with a sacred veneration and supported with religious care. The press must be supported or the pulpit falls.”¹² Within decades, as more ministers got caught misbehaving, even Protestantism’s journalistic allies were beginning to rethink their allegiances. In an era that prized decorum, the very men who were supposed to guard American morality and embody Protestant respectability abandoned their careers and took off in search of better lives with younger women. The press, attuned to the dangers of hypocrisy in the highest echelons of American society, tracked their movements and used their scandals for their own purposes: ranging from publicizing sensational exposés aimed at ruining religion’s credibility to making thoughtful demands that denominational bodies screen and discipline their erring pastors with more diligence.

In the course of ministerial elopement scandals’ rise and fall, the American press underwent three distinct stages in their coverage. In the 1870s, these scandals prompted the press to debate the proper limits of what was morally acceptable to publicize when it came to the sins of Protestant pastors. Once scandal became a widely accepted mode of engaging with the controversial subjects of the day, the press divided into two camps. The first argued that Christian morality was profoundly compromised. The second insisted that individual ministers’ missteps were mere aberrations and did not reflect the overall spiritual health of the American clergy. Elopement scandals were thus variously deployed in the 1880s and the 1890s to teach Americans about morality, sexuality, and religion. Finally, in the early twentieth century, changing legal norms and social ideals around family, marriage, and romantic love, allowed some in the press to present ministerial elopements as case studies for championing more liberal divorce legislation and to portray the previously vilified eloping pastors as victims of their circumstances. In their trajectory, ministerial elopement scandals closely mirrored cultural preoccupations with what kind of religion and what kind of sexual morality were going to rule the day in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Early Elopements and the Tentative Coverage for the Preservation of Public Morals

By the early 1870s, the American press had become an important force in the political, social, and cultural life of the nation. As the editors of the *Washington Union* put it a decade earlier, the press “controls the state and the church; it directs the family, the legislator, the magistrate and the minister. None rise above its influence, none sink below its authority.”¹³ Critics of the press frequently pointed to its unrivaled influence on public opinion as a dangerous, potentially tyrannical political force.¹⁴ Those on the inside of the publishing world likewise recognized the profound influence of the press on the course of American life. For example, E. L. Godkin, founder of the *Nation* and editor of the *New York Evening Post*, argued that newspapers were “able, by their mode of reporting the events of the day, to mould public opinion completely.”¹⁵ Newspapermen, according to Godkin, were tasked with the great responsibility of carefully scrutinizing what they chose to publish. The printed word could build or break reputations. Differentiating his own enterprise from sensational papers like the *New York Herald*, Godkin urged fellow newsmakers to reject the admittedly profitable sensationalism in favor of what was moral, good, and pure when it came to making publishing choices.¹⁶

The concern with preserving the morality of the public by censoring what subjects newspapers covered went back to the 1830s—with the rise of the cheap “penny” papers that dealt in scandal and achieved quick commercial success. For decades, the press and its critics had debated the limits of what was proper to commit to print in order to ensure that the sensitive reading public remained morally uncontaminated by avoiding the obscene. Like other delicate subjects, elopement scandals in the early 1870s were a controversial matter. The sudden disappearances of married ministers were a relatively new development, and some journalists cautioned against sensationalizing such reports. Consider the saga of a Methodist New York minister and the way it played out in the press.

As far as he was concerned, Horace Cooke ran out of love. In January of 1870, he disappeared from New York City, where he had recently moved with his wife and son. All he left behind was this note: “I love Mattie; I will care for her tenderly, kindly, lovingly. Inconsistent as it may appear with my present conduct, I ask for no mercy, but am ready to part with my life for the possession of the woman I adore.”¹⁷ Mattie was a schoolgirl of sixteen and parishioner in Cooke’s Seventh Avenue Methodist Church. Despite the age difference (Cooke was in his late thirties), Mattie Johnson had apparently found Cooke’s affections agreeable—having accepted his company on walks from school and written him romantic notes in the weeks prior to the disappearance.¹⁸ On the afternoon of January 7, Cooke once again met Johnson after school and convinced her to follow him to a hotel in lower Manhattan. “The girl is undoubtedly ruined,” the *Pittsburgh Gazette* mournfully noted in its commentary on the disappearance.¹⁹

It is unclear whether any ruinous activity took place between January 7 and January 12, but a few days after the elopement, Cooke sent a letter to Johnson’s parents disclosing her whereabouts. The pastor had apparently come to the realization that he had made a mistake and decided to make things right by the girl, who still was, he insisted, “as pure as the snow.”²⁰ His infatuation with Johnson Cooke explained by her inexplicable likeness to a girl he had loved in his youth. “Oh fool, fool that I was,” Cooke told an interviewer as he publicly reprimanded his former self for eloping.²¹

Cooke would learn the hard way that no amount of remorse could stop the sensational coverage that rash decisions inspired. Dozens of city newspapers carried the story of his elopement in the days after the disappearance, and one publication in particular dedicated extended column space to the tale. The first page of the January 11 edition of the *New York World* publicized the “priestly scandal.” The *World* wanted to leave no stone unturned in explaining the cleric’s actions, so they ran an article alleging that Cooke’s elopement was just the newest instance in a long line of “irregular” behaviors at Cooke’s previous pastoral posts. Cooke’s standing as a Christian minister scandalized the newspaper the most. His easy access to female congregants and the assumption of moral purity inherent in the post of Protestant pastors troubled the newspaper’s editor. The *World* alleged undue intimacy between Cooke and other female congregants and called him “a faithless shepherd.”²²

The *World* had been known to publish the sensational and the occasionally untrue. During the Civil War, the *World*, run by a Democratic editor, created a “fake news” problem for President Abraham Lincoln. On May 18, 1864, the *World* published a forged document that purported to be Lincoln’s proclamation to add 400,000 troops to the Union Army. Federal agents seized the offices of the paper and tried to halt the distribution of the issue, which contained the offending document. It was too late. The newspaper was shut down by presidential order, but resumed business three

days later—having established to Lincoln’s satisfaction that it took no part in the conspiracy to compose or forge the document it innocuously reprinted.²³ The day after the *World* returned to print, its editor, the outspoken (and now vengeful) Manton Marble, published a scathing pamphlet titled “Freedom of the Press Wantonly Violated,” in which he accused Lincoln of violating the Constitution by attempting to use the forgery mishap to silence his critics in the press.²⁴

In addition to promulgating his political stances through his paper, Marble was also an occasional critic of Protestantism. A Baptist in his youth, his good standing in the church was “being jeopardized by his neglect of duty” by 1864.²⁵ He tendered his request to withdraw from the membership soon after, explaining that he was separating from the church “on the ground” that he could not “in conscience continue to subscribe to some of the articles of faith which when I was baptized commanded my youthful assent.”²⁶ Within a few years, scientific ideas and atheistic leanings of his age would persuade Marble to become an agnostic.²⁷ It is no wonder, then, that stories of Protestant preachers engaging in immoral behavior were at home in the *World*. Marble’s agnosticism did not compel him to dismiss all religion per se; but, from presidents to pastors, Marble felt it was his duty to expose the men who abused their power.

Reading the *World*’s colorful version of his elopement and career, Horace Cooke became enraged. He had planned to return Johnson to her parents and sail for Europe in search of a quieter life, but the *World*’s revelations put a damper on his plans. Flabbergasted, Cooke burst into the editorial offices of the paper and, waving a pistol, demanded to see the author of the offending article. Tragedy was averted when the police arrived and arrested the distressed preacher. Within a month, Cooke would be placed in an insane asylum on account of his crime and expelled from the ministry, with his name “blotted from the records of the Conference and consigned to infamy.”²⁸

If Cooke’s name was blotted from church records, it was not easily forgotten in the press, although the coverage of the case was not universally celebrated either. After all, it was not until 1875, with the sensational adultery trial of Henry Ward Beecher, America’s most famous minister, that the press had fully given itself permission to cover Protestant sex scandals with meticulous detail and exhaustive intensity.²⁹ Cooke’s elopement occurred five years earlier, when American journalists still felt conflicted on the subject of scandal coverage when it came to their pastors. The press was negotiating how much reporting was too much, what was at stake in publicizing the immoral acts of the nation’s moral leaders, and whether public morality suffered when the press covered pastoral sins. Despite the fact that six to ten papers a day devoted their columns to Cooke’s elopement, the media attention it received also had its critics among the press.

The *Philadelphia Day* and Godkin’s own *Nation* condemned the intense coverage of the Cooke case and imbued impure motives for its proliferation. The *Nation* dismissed Cooke’s elopement as a story barely worthwhile of warranting reporting and bemoaned the fact that a “petty scandal [swelled] to the dimensions of a public calamity.”³⁰ The *Philadelphia Day* concurred: “The light, flippant tone, and the reckless disregard of the feelings of innocent parties involved, which characterizes the reports in the offending journals, fastens upon their conductors a vicious motive to put money in their purses, at the expense of truth and decency.”³¹ Without doubt, the editors reasoned, if Cooke had committed the crime of which he was accused, he should be punished. But their issue with the journalists who covered his case was this: “That in place of acting as the conservator of public morals, the offending press alluded to has done its

utmost to shake popular confidence in every profession of religious faith.”³² The *Philadelphia Day* foresaw with keen insight how stories like Cooke’s would be used by critics of religion. But even as it attempted to plead with fellow journalists to scale down the coverage of pastoral misdeeds, it was fighting a losing battle.

Soon, America would begin its years-long journey into the greatest religious saga of the entire nineteenth century: the Henry Ward Beecher adultery trial. The 1870s could, in fact, safely be divided into two starkly different eras in newspaper reporting: before and after “the great Brooklyn scandal.”³³ In 1872, freethinker and women’s rights advocate Victoria Woodhull published an exposé that alleged that Beecher had been having an affair with Elizabeth Tilton, Beecher’s parishioner and wife to his long-time friend and collaborator Theodore Tilton. After an internal church investigation found Beecher not guilty, Theodore Tilton sued the minister for “alienation of affections” in a civil court. The trial, which unfolded over six months in 1875, became a national pastime and the biggest sex scandal of the century—with hundreds of papers dedicating extensive column space to the daily coverage of the titillating details of the affair. A hung jury perfectly embodied the passionately divided public opinion: it vindicated Beecher in the eyes of supporters and cast aspersions on his blamelessness for those critical of his celebrity and power.³⁴ Most importantly, the trial taught American newspaper editors that scandal sold and that exposing religious hypocrisy might be not only consistent with but essential for preserving public morality. Calling out corruption would become secular journalists’ sacred duty.

“Elopement Eccentricities,” 1880–1899

If the newspapers of the 1870s reported on only thirty-one Protestant pastors’ elopements, in the 1880s, that number would swell almost twofold to fifty-seven. In 1881, the *New York World* began featuring a regular column titled “Elopement Eccentricities.” An 1882 installment of the column noted that the “elopement market this winter has been rather more active than usual.”³⁵ The article proceeded to enumerate a total of twenty-two recent elopements: five out of Great Britain, one out of Canada, and sixteen out of the United States. One of the domestic elopements featured an Indiana Disciples of Christ minister Jesse Way, who eloped with his daughter-in-law and whose name the conference struck from its records in the wake of the ordeal. But no amount of internal church discipline could assuage the rise of public skepticism on account of poor behavior among the clergy. As the *Chicago Tribune* put it, Jesse Way’s actions brought “discredit upon the whole theological flock.”³⁶ The editors of the *Tribune*, like other observers, understood that constant reports of ministerial misdeeds hurt the reputation of American Protestantism.

Indeed, even as churches were beginning to take the threat of scandal seriously by rushing to disassociate from erring ministers, journalists employed increasingly harsher language to discuss the reverend runaways. When the married Methodist pastor David Seymour eloped from Janesville, Minnesota, with the wife of a local newspaper editor in 1887, fellow newspapermen were outraged. “The Janesville Sinners,” one newspaper called the elopers, as it explained that “the cloak of Christianity did not cover up all the devilry in this world, not even all within the pale of the church.”³⁷ Another paper referred to Seymour as “a naughty parson” in their article about the case.³⁸ Yet another publication employed the term “reverend Lothario” to describe the minister.³⁹ When Seymour and Mrs. Frances Henry were captured in Liverpool and returned to the United States, the newspapers were satisfied to learn that the Methodist

conference expelled the pastor from the church.⁴⁰ Scandal, as reporters understood by the late nineteenth century, could accomplish things: it could remove immoral ministers from their posts. In this new age, morality would be maintained not by refusing to publish the scandalous, but by leaning into it—so long as the salacious exposés led to real change in the composition of the nation’s religious leader cadres.

Despite this overall consensus, many papers remained resistant to scandal’s appeal as an agent of social change. The *Los Angeles Times* denounced sensationalism in 1883, calling scandalous reports in the press deplorable and pleading for a change of tone (or profession) by journalists who were prone to sensational coverage.⁴¹ Christian newspapermen were equally concerned. An 1885 *Christian Union* article titled “How to Cure the Plague” identified sensational journalism as a menace to public morality and asked Christians to stop buying newspapers that dealt in scandal. “Millions for intelligence, but not one cent for scandal,” the *Christian Union* urged. The article encouraged their readers to withdraw support “from the venders of scandal,” so that their business might “be greatly restricted.”⁴² But putting the money where Christian morality was did not always work, especially as Christian morality itself continued to be undermined from within.

Not everyone diagnosed this period in American religious history as a crisis. Plenty of men (and they were almost always men) defended the reputation of Protestant pastors in print and attempted to plead with the public to view pastoral scandals in a context that showed them to be a product of their age and a side effect of the ministers’ particular professional demands. James Monroe Buckley, a concerned Christian newspaperman and editor of the *Christian Advocate*, penned a long essay on “The Morality of Ministers” for a New York journal in 1887. Although he agreed that the “immoral minister” was “one of the most dangerous men” because of his easy access “without restraint into homes and into society,” Buckley nonetheless cautioned not to give in to the anti-clerical panic that had taken root in “the daily press.” The ministerial profession, he wrote, was loaded with jeopardy and opportunity for temptation. A successful minister enjoyed both the “warmth of the salutations given to him by men” and the “peculiar, delighted, loving smile lavished upon him by the best of women” and was, therefore, likely to succumb to the charms of the attention and flattery he received from both genders. Yet thousands of good Christian men rose above these temptations daily, Buckley insisted; the sensational needed not compromise the quotidian—the majority of Protestant pastors were, according to this church historian, beyond reproach.⁴³

Buckley, like many before him, was fighting a losing battle by appealing to contingency in discussing pastoral scandals. The negative press coverage only intensified in the 1890s. In fact, the decade saw the greatest number of news reports on ministerial elopements—eighty-two Protestant pastors were said to have vanished. So frequent were these and other scandals during the decade, that a Japanese resident of San Francisco allegedly decided to complain to the editor of a local newspaper in print. The *Salt Lake Herald* presented his letter as an indictment of the excesses of the age, preserving the original spelling and grammar.

I came from far east a few months ago, and my purpose to see what you civilized nations are doing. Since I arrived in this city I am reading your valuable paper every day, and I am much surprised because the MURDER is almost daily occurrence in this country besides this Robber, Rev. Dr.’s robbing, eloping with other man’s wife, etc. etc. Such events are occurred every day, shocking! Shocking!

Murder in CHURCH that's awful, awful. Where is civilization? Where is christianity?⁴⁴

Christianity, it appeared, could be comfortably found on the scandal pages. The following list of headlines exemplifies the general register of the coverage: "Another Preacher's Weakness: This One Elopes with a Pretty Marietta Girl" (*Atlanta Constitution*, 1891); "Elopers in Trouble: A Canadian Clergyman and His Companion under Arrest at Lansing" (*Detroit Free Press*, 1891); "He Preached Well, But Wound up Running off with a Notorious Prostitute" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, 1892); "Much Married Divine: A Methodist Minister Said to Have Three Wives Living—He Eloped with Two of Them" (*Washington Post*, 1892); "Another Chicago Scandal: A Prominent Preacher Elopes with a Married Woman" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1894); "Fell from Grace: Rev. Lee, D.D., Disappears with One of His Flock" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1895); "Flees with a Minister: Waterloo, IA., Girl of 15 Elopes with Her Preacher" (*Chicago Tribune*, 1896); "In Sheep's Clothing: A Kansas Wolf Captured in State of Washington—Baptist Minister Eloped with Another Man's Wife—His Own Family Subsisting on Charity" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1899).

Paradoxically, the proliferation of the genre of elopement scandals lessened their sensational appeal. Overall, the tone of scandal coverage became more dismissively sarcastic—a testimony to just how commonplace these stories had become. This was especially true among the explicitly anti-religious media. Consider how the freethinkers' *Boston Investigator* reported on a Methodist minister's elopement in 1893:

The Rev. Leigh Vernon, evangelist, has been conducting a series of revival meetings in Joplin, MO. He met with such phenomenal success, and the power of grace was poured out in such a flood, that it drowned Mrs. J. E. Pearson's affection for her husband and home. Whereupon the Rev. Leigh Vernon, evangelist, revived her affections to such a degree that she eloped with him, and now the good people of Joplin are wondering at the increase of crime.⁴⁵

This was the entirety of the story: bare on the details and full of humorous juxtapositions. The tone, the language, and the allusions to spiritual themes placed in the corrupt reality of the carnal were supposed to undermine religion. By the mid-1890s, freethinkers did not have to cry "sensation" at a new report of a runaway pastor. These stories had become ubiquitous, and required only a gesture—a small, dismissively sarcastic remark—to make their point.

Vernon's case would, of course, be covered very differently in publications not affiliated with the freethinkers. Though common, these stories were a matter of concern among those who felt that Protestant pastors were undermining religion by their conduct. Vernon had been a highly respected evangelist who frequently toured the Midwest. His testimony of abandoning "infidel" ways and finding salvation through deep study of the Bible was reprinted in local newspapers, and his revival meetings that urged men to be better husbands by abandoning drink and turning to Christ were instant hits in the communities he visited.⁴⁶ It was in one of these evangelistic trips that Vernon met young Mrs. Mattie M. Pearson, the recently married daughter of a Methodist minister in Pittsburg, Kansas. Himself a devoted husband and father, Vernon was taking care of his family in his own way: shortly after his wife gave birth to their child, he sent them away on vacation to California. In the meantime, Vernon met Mrs. Pearson in Joplin, where he was scheduled to speak in June of 1893.

Having delivered the promised lectures, Vernon and Pearson took off together in search of a happier life in Canada.

Kansas newspapers, once celebratory of the minister, covered the case widely and reveled in the many ironies of the preacher's career and conduct. The *Wichita Daily Eagle*, for example, pointed out that only two years earlier, the evangelist had delivered a message titled "Be Sure Your Sin Will Find You Out" at a local church. The paper lamented that the minister, "while shielded by the cloak of religion," was able to deploy it "in the furtherance of his designs for securing the object of his desire." Vernon, they wrote, "has proved to be a consummate villain of the deepest dye," a "gambler by profession, a thief and a cold-hearted adventurer." Still, the paper titled their extended article about the preacher "A Bad Egg"—thereby consciously differentiating between the man and the profession whose reputation his elopement might have tarred.⁴⁷

Vernon's coreligionists attempted to spread a similar message: a bad egg did not, they insisted, have to spoil the whole smorgasbord of Protestant religion. A few days after the disappearance, the pastor of Pittsburg Congregational Church gave a lecture titled "Where Is Leigh Vernon, the Late Evangelist." The local newspaper summarized the content of Rev. Martin's remarks: "Shocks threatening destruction come to individuals, communities, and institutions. The church is no exception. Yet the man who concludes, because some standard bearer falls, that her ruin is come and her influence gone, shows not only a lack of confidence in God, but a woeful ignorance of the past." Vernon, pastor Martin proposed, was merely a man given to temptation by the machinations of Satan's tricks. He chose to give up his family and his good work for the allure of newness. God, in turn, would surely punish the minister by condemning him to demon-filled, "yawning" hell that was waiting to swallow him. The scandal had nothing whatsoever to do with the church; the only thing at stake, according to Martin, was the individual salvation of the troubled preacher.⁴⁸

Vernon and Mattie Pearson were arrested in Duluth, Minnesota, a month after they disappeared. As was not unusual with elopement cases, the woman cited hypnotism as her reason for eloping with the minister.⁴⁹ Vernon, during his extradition to the state of Kansas, was said to have attempted suicide by jumping out of a moving train somewhere in Missouri. Sustaining only minor injuries, he was quickly recaptured by the deputy who accompanied him. When asked why he tried to take his life, the minister allegedly replied, "I realized that my influence for good as an evangelist was gone. The shame of coming home manacled and in charge of an officer was more than I could bear. ... I heartily regret the circumstances, and trust they will not conspire to destroy whatever influence for good I may have been able to exert in the past."⁵⁰ Whether or not Vernon actually gave this interview to an *Emporia Gazette* reporter cannot, of course, be established with absolute confidence. At the time, journalists were not terribly opposed to making their stories more colorful by fictionalizing certain sections of their reporting. Indeed, the concern for the work of evangelism and for the reputation of religion more broadly that comes through in the quotation from Vernon reveals more about the priorities of Kansas newspapers than about Vernon's own sentiments regarding his predicament. One thing is clear: ministerial elopement scandals were an extremely delicate matter, and the press reported on scandals according to their own particular leanings with regard to the reputation of Protestantism in the public eye.

At the end of the century, elopement scandals were both uncomfortably familiar in the press and still deeply divisive. If the 1870s saw the press disagree on whether or not they should even be devoting column space to publicizing preachers' downfalls, with Beecher's trial and escalating thereafter, scandal was there to stay. The new dividing

line among the press was not with regard to the volume, but to the tone of coverage. If reporters who were critical of religion used scandal to undermine Protestantism's role as the mainstream American expression of spirituality, those who sought to protect the status quo learned to cast elopement scandals in the light of personal—not institutional—failure. Defenders of the church portrayed the erring divines as mere humans who, being exposed to the privileges of the ministry, proved too weak in their constitution to resist the desires of the flesh.

Changing Social Norms and the Sanctioning of Separation, 1900–1915

In the early twentieth century, disappearing got trickier. Changing laws and new social conventions led to elopements' eventual decline—at least on newspaper pages. Of the ninety-six ministers who were reported to have eloped between 1900 and 1914, fifty-two were eventually either discovered by pursuers or returned home voluntarily, and twenty-two of those were arrested for their crimes. As the government, informed by the advocacy of progressive reformers, responded to the elopement epidemic by introducing harsher punishments for deserters, many of the runaway pastors suffered the consequences of their choices through arrests, fines, and imprisonment. An important piece of legislation—the Mann Act, or the so-called White Slavery Act—criminalized transporting women across state lines in 1910. Simultaneously, divorce legislation throughout the country was becoming more liberal, and Americans found marital separation an increasingly viable option, such that by the mid-1910s, some in the press began to portray elopers as sympathetic victims of unlucky marital arrangements. New cultural ideas about romantic love and the malleability of familial composition allowed the press to paint eloping pastors as tragic figures, not villainous predators. In its cultural trajectory, ministerial elopement journeyed from being, for some, the only conceivable option to a highly dangerous one, only to become obsolete in the face of changing social, religious, and political realities. Several cases illustrate the rapidly changing dynamics of elopements—and their publicized consequences—in the early 1900s.

The twice-eloped Mexican American minister Joseph Francisco Cordova endured arrest and imprisonment before he could finally be united with the young lover who was not his wife. Cordova was a Methodist pastor in South River, New Jersey. His first elopement took place in May of 1904, when he disappeared with Julie Bowne, his eighteen-year-old choir singer. The thirty-nine-year-old pastor left behind a wife and three children. His young accomplice left her job at the local handkerchief company and a set of grieving parents. Rumors about Cordova paying disproportionate attention to Bowne had circulated for some time, and when the girl's father confronted the pastor about the gossip, the couple decided to run in search of a better future. The decision to move was no doubt made easier by the fact that Cordova's wife had recently inherited \$1,500 and deposited the money into the minister's personal bank account. Cordova withdrew the cash shortly before taking off with Bowne. Soon, detectives were on the chase for the girl and the money.

Within a month, Cordova and Bowne were spotted in Canada. In Brampton, Ontario, Cordova got a hotel room by claiming that Bowne was his niece. From there, they went to Toronto. Trying the same strategy in Toronto failed, and the suspicious couple were turned away from a hotel. Eventually, at a different hotel, Cordova and Bowne registered as husband and wife, securing their room at the inn through a false assurance of matrimony.⁵¹ By July, apparently repentant, the couple had made their way south to New York City. From there, Bowne returned home to New Jersey.

Cordova, whose trial for removal from the ministry had already been scheduled in his absence, attempted to defend his reputation by talking to the press and explaining that the fear of scandal—not the desire to sin by eloping—forced him to take off with the young girl. The *New York Evening World* article was titled “Preacher Tells Why He Eloped.” It featured a prominent subtitle that read: “Cordova Says Unwarranted Scandal Made Him Board Trolley-Car and Go Further than He Had Intended.” Cordova must have been aware of the power of the press because he swiftly penned a letter of defense and mailed it to several New York and New Jersey newspaper editors. In the letter, he explained that while he had always enjoyed Bowne and thought highly of her as a parishioner, the two of them had never been more than friends. The fateful evening during which the couple disappeared had been tumultuous, he explained. Bowne’s father, a deacon in Cordova’s church, had heard rumors about his daughter and his pastor. In despair, Cordova panicked. “I was dazed,” the pastor explained, “and by the time I reached the trolley track my only thought was that none would believe any explanation I might give; that all was necessarily lost, even my children; that all the world was against me, that I must leave at once.” In this state, according to the minister, he ran into Bowne, who had been confronted by her father about the rumors of the affair. She, feeling similarly desperate, agreed to run away from the town about to explode with scandal. “We felt hunted, persecuted, chased by anger and vengeance, and so went far, further than we had intended.” When they read newspaper reports of the elopement, the couple became even more desperate. Eventually, letters urging them to return home reached them in Canada, and they decided to come back, hoping for forgiveness and understanding.⁵²

Compelling as Cordova’s story was, it did not stick. To avoid the impending church trial, Cordova submitted his resignation in July. The Freemasons, another organizational body to which Cordova belonged, voted to remove him from their ranks that September. By November, Mrs. Cordova and her husband had separated, and she moved in with her parents.⁵³ Back in South River, things remained quiet for a few months—until late February of the following year, when Julia Bowne once again disappeared from her father’s home. Cordova, too, was missing.

The second elopement was halted much sooner than the first. The pair were arrested in Washington, DC, just three days after their escape. Detectives apprehended the run-aways based on a photograph of Cordova. The five-foot-tall bespectacled and mustached forty-year-old man accompanied by a nineteen-year-old beauty were not hard to spot. The pair were soon extradited to a New Jersey jail—Bowne as a witness, and Cordova as a suspected wife deserter. Bowne stuck by her lover, refusing to leave the jail on bond or go home to her worried parents. Cordova, in the meantime, attempted to fix his situation by writing to his wife and asking her to initiate divorce proceedings.⁵⁴ Mrs. Cordova refused, and the minister was eventually arraigned on two charges: desertion and domestic assault, which his wife alleged took place sometime in April of the previous year, shortly before the first elopement. Cordova pleaded “not guilty” to both.⁵⁵

The crime of desertion had become a serious concern in U.S. law at the turn of the century. According to historian Michael Willrich, between 1890 and 1915, “every state in the union enacted new laws that made a husband’s desertion or failure to support his wife or children a crime, punishable in many locales by imprisonment at hard labor.”⁵⁶ In fact, the grounds of desertion accounted for 39 percent of the 945,625 divorces granted in the country between 1887 and 1906.⁵⁷ Urban areas were most affected, as Progressive Era social relief organizations struggled to keep up with the demand for

assistance from deserted wives.⁵⁸ With husbands gone and charitable aid exhausted, the abandoned wives turned to the state for relief. The government, in turn, introduced harsher punishments for deserters.

Unfortunately for the state, however, no prohibitive legislation could stop the discursive power of the simultaneously emerging new ideas about the relationship between marriage and romantic love. Especially in urban centers, men and women began to challenge Victorian family values. The new generation began to date without chaperones or supervision. They engaged in previously taboo premarital sexual behaviors. And they began to seek partners for emotional intimacy and companionship—undermining the old-fashioned notion that marriage was a lifelong contract whose primary function was procreation.⁵⁹ Marriage as a bond based on love and intimacy was no longer a heretical idea celebrated exclusively by free love advocates and infidels.

Even American Protestants were buying into the new philosophy. A quarter of a century after Beecher's trial, fellow Congregational minister George D. Herron began preaching the doctrine of love-based unions.

I do not believe that the present marriage system is sacred or good. I believe that union is made by love alone and that it is terminable at the termination of love. Love marries us and, as long as our love lasts, love will keep us together. I think it wrong to obey a law that would keep us together when love has ended.⁶⁰

Shortly after working out this new theology of early twentieth-century romance, Professor Herron told his wife that his love for her had ceased and promptly began dating another woman. The Congregational Church was not impressed, and Herron was dismissed soon after issuing his statement.

In the meantime, the New Jersey Methodist Conference met to discuss Cordova's case. To punish the minister for unbecoming conduct, they declined his resignation and expelled him from the church instead.⁶¹ As one reporter put it, "The vote was unanimous, even the minister who came here to defend the divine voting yes."⁶² Within a week, a secular jury of his peers found Cordova guilty as well. He was sentenced to three years in prison for assaulting his wife and to an additional year for abandoning the family.⁶³ Upon hearing the verdict, Bowne, who was in attendance, fainted for her lover's fate. Cordova was downtrodden, but not despondent. As one newspaper put it, "Rev. Cordova, the eloping parson of New Jersey, says he is guilty and glad of it. Even if his religion is a little frayed his optimism is admirable."⁶⁴

Perhaps it was optimism that sustained Cordova during his time in prison. In 1909, the ex-minister and Julie Bowne were married in Welland, Ontario. The surviving marriage certificate reveals important details about the couple's story. Cordova listed his occupation as "bookkeeper"; his place of residence as "Flint, Michigan"; his denomination as "Presbyterian"; and his marital status as "widowed." (His wife would follow suit and list herself as "widowed" in the 1920 census as well; to be considered "widowed" must, to these two people, have still seemed easier than being divorced, despite the growing cultural acceptance of divorce.) That Cordova had changed professions was to be expected, but the denominational shift is curious. Did he adopt Presbyterianism in prison? Did he denounce religion altogether, but the bureaucratic rigidity of Canadian marriage officials forced him to claim some—any—denomination as his own? Whatever the case, ideas of romantic love and companionate marriage won out at the end. With Canada's stamp of approval, the American couple that survived a scandal, two elopements, and four years in prison were finally united in matrimony.

Even as some eloping ministers found happiness through romantic love, their collective choices continued to undermine the public's trust in the ministerial profession. In 1907, when yet another ministerial elopement scandal unfolded in New York, a Kentucky newspaper reported on the sensation with tired enthusiasm: "The Old, Old Story," the article's title resignedly complained. The Rev. Winfield B. King, the piece summed up, had eloped from his Methodist post in Arcade, New York, with "his favorite choir girl" and the pair were arrested within two weeks in Ohio, where they had picked up work at a chicken farm. The moral of the story, for the editors, was this: "O, fool girls, don't marry preachers! This one may now be in Utah or Mexico or some other safe place ready for another job."⁶⁵ As far as this newspaper was concerned, the itinerant passions of Protestant pastors disqualified them from being good husband material.

In the early 1900s, any unexpected disappearance of a Christian pastor was almost universally assumed to be a scandalous elopement. For example, when the Congregational pastor Carl S. Jones mysteriously left his pulpit and home in 1909, a fellow minister acknowledged the suspicion surrounding his sudden departure. "The natural supposition," the Rev. William B. Forebush said, "is that something is wrong. I have my own ideas, but I have no proof. There is no woman missing from the parish. We hope the matter will be dropped and forgotten for the sake of the church."⁶⁶ The article in which Forebush's quote appeared was titled "Search for a Pastor Who Abandoned Family Dropped for Fear of Scandal." The fear of scandal seemed to be omnipresent. By 1909, a Christian minister could not disappear without causing rumors of extramarital affairs.

The first half of the 1910s saw a significant decrease in the reported number of runaway ministers. In the years before World War I, the newspapers surveyed here covered only eighteen ministerial elopements. There were at least three reasons for this decline, all having to do with local and national legislation. First, the fear of being prosecuted under desertion laws must have prevented some pastors from running. Second, the 1910 Mann Act made elopement—however consensual—a much less appealing option for men. The Mann Act, responding to sensational reports on the rise of prostitution, made it illegal to transport "any woman or girl" across state lines "for any immoral purpose."⁶⁷ Third, as state divorce laws became more lax and nationwide divorce rates continued to climb, divorce became more socially acceptable and, consequently, a viable option for some pastors. Relatedly, as women fought for gender equality and asserted their independence, more ministers' wives must have viewed separating from their unfaithful husbands favorable to staying in unhappy marriages.

Newspaper accounts indicate that at least three of the eighteen runaway reverends in the early 1910s were arrested for their elopements. The African American minister R. H. Hightower eloped with a married woman from Kansas in 1910. Upon his capture, he was given a county jail sentence of thirty days and ordered to pay a fine of \$50.⁶⁸ Two years later, the Rev. William F. Dunn eloped from Granite City, Illinois, with his eighteen-year-old organist. Having only made it fifty miles south of Granite City, he was arrested and sentenced to ninety days in jail and ordered to pay a heftier \$200 fine for "immoral conduct."⁶⁹ Another Illinois minister, the Lutheran J. D. Lewis would face even harsher charges for eloping in 1913. Having become infatuated with seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Kohl, who was a member of his congregation, the pastor stole \$500 of his wife's money and \$15 of his daughter's piggy-bank savings. He used the cash to buy a car and drove off to Savannah, Iowa, with the girl.⁷⁰ The couple were eventually captured in Davenport, Iowa, where the minister was jailed. He was

expected to be charged under the Mann Act because he and his female companion had crossed state lines. Eventually, both Mrs. Lewis and Elizabeth Kohl's family dropped the charges against the Lutheran runaway, making the scandal dissipate.

Although Lewis avoided punishment for taking the seventeen-year-old parishioner with him, the fear of being prosecuted under the Mann Act was growing more potent by the month. Most famously, the African American boxer Jack Johnson was charged with violating the Mann Act in 1912, when he was arrested for simply crossing state lines with his fiancé Lucille Cameron. Cameron, who happened to be white, refused to testify against her partner, and the charges were dropped. Johnson's arrest became one of the symbols of anti-black racism and discrimination, as the majority white public attempted to discipline a black man for wanting to marry a white woman. But the threat of the implications of the Mann Act also spread across racial boundaries. By 1917, in *Caminetti v. United States*, the Supreme Court established that the Mann Act extended not only to transporting women for the purposes of prostitution, but for any sexual reason whatsoever—including consensual sex. Ministers contemplating taking their new lovers across state lines were aware of the implications of being prosecuted under this law. Perhaps this is why when the Rev. Charles Huffman, an Ohio minister, was arrested in Denver in 1917 for eloping with seventeen-year-old Gladys Marie Overlander, he insisted that nothing sexual occurred between him and the girl.

It was all my fault. Gladys is pure and innocent—but we loved one another so. I fell almost before I knew it and then to escape the scandal we knew must break about our heads Gladys and I decided to go away. She has not sinned nearly as much as she has been sinned against. I hope it can be arranged to send her back to her people.⁷¹

As harsher punishments were being introduced to prevent the dissolution of marriages through desertion laws and the exploitation of young (white) women through the Mann Act, divorce law was simultaneously becoming more liberal and the practice more socially acceptable. Consider the case of the Episcopal minister Jere Knode Cooke, whose relationship saga unfolded between 1907 and 1915. Cooke left his wife to elope with Floretta Whaley, a seventeen-year-old heiress and member of Cooke's Long Island congregation in May of 1907. A warrant for Cooke's arrest for abduction was issued within days, but the couple were not discovered until eight months later—now living together in San Francisco with a newborn baby. Having been deposed from the ministry, Cooke was working as a painter. In an interview, he explained how his unhappy marriage led him to give up his life of comfort for love.

I awoke to love and everything else was worthless. You know the end. On the one hand was a loveless life with honor and position and wealth, and on the other, love and poverty. I chose this. ... I don't praise myself for the step I took. It was weakness, it was unmanly, but I was only human, and as I am to be judged by humans, it is but right that they should know that I gave up all—all that I had—for this. I am doing a man's work. I have sinned, but I have suffered. Now I beg the world to let me alone with my wife and child. I can live the life of a good Christian. I am a good decorator. ... I asked the world to let me be a painter, nothing more—to do a man's work and enjoy the average sorrows and happiness of the average man.⁷²

In the new century, the average man, according to Cooke, could choose love over comfort—leaving his respectable job, moving to the other coast, living under an assumed name, and being on the run from the law. At least for this Episcopalian, the change in his marital arrangement no longer undermined his Christianity. The average woman struggled to accept this new orientation. Cooke's wife, Miranda Clarke Cooke, read his interview, which was making the rounds across the country, and became enraged with her husband. In her own conversation with reporters, she alleged that she had shielded her husband from rumors of infidelity for years, and that his callous denouncement of their nine-year marriage was now pushing her to sue him for divorce and to speak out against the ungrateful man. "It was an interview that only a coward could utter," she said, "with clear, malicious purpose, so I am forced to believe, he struck with contemptible innuendo at the wife who had crucified her heart to shield him."⁷³ Although divorce seemed like the perfect solution for Mrs. Cooke's problems at first, she soon realized that it would in fact punish the ex-Reverend more if she remained married to him: as long as the Cookes were still legally wed, the erring husband could not marry the woman with whom he eloped.

Eventually, time healed Mrs. Cooke's desire for revenge. She divorced Cooke in 1913, six years after his elopement. By then, the defrocked minister, Whaley, and their two children had moved back to Brooklyn—to claim Whaley's inheritance money and to be closer to family. According to one newspaper report, when Cooke received his divorce papers, he "fell on his knees, and, with tears running down his cheeks, expressed his thankfulness in prayer" for finally being able to wed Whaley and to claim his sons as his own in the eyes of the state.⁷⁴ Pictures of the two Cooke-Whaley children were reprinted in newspapers around the country with the headline "These Two Little Boys Can Have a Name Now."⁷⁵ For the time being, the news of peaceful divorce resolution for the sake of the new family seemed to overshadow the scandal of years past. Divorce, at least for the sake of children, was seen by the press as an honorable solution to the unhappy first union. Cooke and Whaley were married on June 10, 1913, by a justice of the peace in a Connecticut hotel. Cooke's ex-wife gave one last interview on the matter: "In spite of the fact that my church does not recognize [divorce], I decided after much thought to do the big thing. ... My reason was to give Jere Cooke's innocent babies a name and their mother the right to call herself his wife."⁷⁶ In deciding to grant her ex-husband the divorce, the former Mrs. Cooke could show both grace toward his new family and, perhaps, reclaim some self-esteem that his elopement no doubt injured.

Whatever Miranda Cooke's internal motivations were, divorce, by the mid-1910s, had become a viable option for families like Cooke's, even as most Christian denominations continued to refuse to recognize it formally. The press—in both the tone of coverage and the content of the celebratory articles about the resolution of the eight-year Cooke saga—seemed to have softened on clerical elopers. As legislation and social norms around familial arrangements transformed at the beginning of the twentieth century, elopement stories all but disappeared from the vernacular of the press.

Conclusion

The freethinkers' little chronicle of pastoral misdeeds, *The Crimes of Preachers*, saw only two reissues in the 1910s, including the book's final iteration in 1914. By then, a separate publication dedicated to tracking ministerial crimes was no longer necessary. The mainstream media was well seasoned in not only reporting on the facts of religious sex

scandals, but also on providing commentary on what they meant for religion in America more broadly. Scandal had won the day—and the new century. If they press had been hesitant to report on Protestant elopements in the 1870s, they became increasingly more comfortable with them over the next two decades. The debate that raged on in the 1880s and the 1890s was about what elopement scandals meant for American Christianity—and no longer about whether those stories ought to be covered in the press. By the mid-1910s, with changes in legislation and cultural perceptions of what was proper with regard to marriage and religion, ministerial elopement stories acquired a less sensational bend—with some journalists tacitly accepting the choice to elope even when it came to Protestant pastors.

Although reports of ministerial elopements all but disappeared from newspaper pages, scandal continued to be a problem for religion in modern America. The preface to the final edition of *The Crimes of Preachers* summed up the cumulative findings of the project: the ministers featured in the book collectively committed almost 5,000 crimes—with adultery, seduction, and “immoralities with women” being among the most populous categories, followed only by crimes of financial nature, like embezzlement, swindling, and fraud. American clergy were not delivering on the promise of religion being the primary guarantor of morality. As a wide variety of different kinds of sex scandals came to supplement and replace elopements in the new century, denominational bodies got busy developing better strategies for screening the prospective ministerial candidate pool. For the time being, America’s Protestant pastors could finally stop running.

Notes

1 “The Rev. Alfred Thompson,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 19, 1877.

2 M. E. Billings, *The Crimes of Preachers in the United States and Canada*, 10th ed. (New York: The Truth Seeker, 1914).

3 Although Gilded Age and Progressive Era newspapers frequently used the terms “scandal” and “sensation” interchangeably, the two should not be read synonymously. In the history of journalism, the label “sensationalism” has been applied to a variety of news stories that are meant to evoke a strong emotional response and, as Frank Luther Mott puts it, appeal to “fundamental and primitive human desires.” Historian George Juergens provides a helpful definition when he writes that sensational newspapers “expanded the meaning of the human interest story to report what had hitherto been regarded as private, the gossip and scandal about individuals, and discovered a rich source of news in crime and everyday tragedy.” Sensationalism, then, can broadly be defined as a genre that is meant to appeal to the emotions and curiosity of readers by exposing the surprising, the shocking, the scandalous, and the grotesque. Scandal is a narrower category. While often revealed through sensational reporting, scandal has to do with public figures’ private transgressions that become sensationalized and generate significant public interest. See Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 Years, 1690–1940* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 119; George Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), viii–ix; James Lull and Stephen Hinerman, “The Search for Scandal” in *Media Scandals: Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace*, eds. James Lull and Stephen Hinerman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 7. See also John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3–9.

4 In addition to the 121 cases found in the *Crimes of Preachers*, digitized newspaper searches (performed through *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, *Chronicling America*, and *Newspapers.com* databases) supplied an additional 145 instances, for a total of 266 Protestant elopement cases between 1870 and 1914. Although Protestant ministers were not the only denominational group who were reported to have eloped, they were the most representative, with Catholic priests and Jewish rabbis making up a small minority of clerical elopers.

5 M. E. Billings, editor of the *Crimes of Preachers*, provocatively asked whether it might “be possible that the most orthodox are the most criminal, and *vice versa*” and set out to show that such a correlation existed

in his sample. A closer look at the numbers in both Billings's larger project and in the elopers cohort in particular show no such connection. Nineteenth-century church membership and ministerial statistics are notoriously unreliable, but comparing the data found in the 1890 census and the numbers of elopers by denomination shows that the distribution of ministers by denomination was proportional to their numbers as percentage of American clergy. For example, Methodist elopers represent 33 percent of the sample and account for 33 percent of clergy in the census. The second most represented denomination, the Baptists, make up 21 percent of elopers and 28 percent of clergy overall. The same pattern of close correlation applies to the other represented denominations: for example, Presbyterians represent 6 percent of elopers and 11 percent of the census, Congregationalists 4 percent and 5 percent, respectively, etc. See Billings, *The Crimes of Preachers*, 58; United States Census Office, *Abstract of the Eleventh Census: 1890* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1896), 258–63.

6 Lawrence M. Friedman, "Crimes of Mobility," *Stanford Law Review* 43:3 (1991): 638.

7 Ibid.

8 On confidence men, the possibilities of mobility, and the abuses of power in the Gilded Age, see Edward J. Balleisen, *Fraud: An American History from Barnum to Madoff* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

9 On the role of the press in exposing Gilded Age corruption scandals, see Daniel Czitrom, *New York Exposed: The Gilded Age Police Scandal That Launched the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); David B. Sachsman and David W. Bulla, eds., *Sensationalism: Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19th-Century Reporting* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013); Michael Schudson, *Discovering The News: A Social History Of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

10 Carolee Anne Klimchock, "Heiress Weds Coachman: Elopement Scandals and the Performance of Coach Driving in the Gilded Age" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2015).

11 Paul Emory Putz, "Commercializing the Sacred Office: Sexual Revolution and the Scandal of the Modern Marrying Parson, 1895–1930," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17 (Jan. 2018): 56–76.

12 Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 142.

13 *The Washington Union*, quoted in Lambert A. Wilmer, *Our Press Gang; Or, A Complete Exposition of the Corruptions and Crimes of the American Newspapers* (Philadelphia: J. T. Lloyd, 1859), 64.

14 See Wilmer, *Our Press Gang*, for sustained criticism of the unprecedented power the press had acquired by the late 1860s.

15 E. L. Godkin, "Opinion-Moulding," *The Nation* 9 (Aug. 12, 1869): 126.

16 The reliability of late nineteenth-century newspaper reporting is difficult to quantify, yet it is telling that even Godkin, a contemporary concerned with good taste in reporting, was not castigating colleagues for falsifying sensational reports, but for engaging with that type of material. Indeed, while several high-profile newspapers (most notably the *New York Sun* and the *New York World*) were discovered to have published false reports on matters not pertaining to pastoral crimes, historians of journalism have found little evidence of falsification of scandal. To be sure, newspapers were known to reprint each other's stories, occasionally embellishing their details and supplying flowery descriptions of sensational subjects not found in the original, but no evidence of outright fabrication exists. While copyright was not a concern, libel suits were common, so newspapers were likely cautious to publish unsubstantiated reports for fear of litigation. With regard to Protestant pastors in particular, many elopement stories can further be confirmed using census records and denominational conference proceedings that list ministers removed from their posts in the preceding years. On journalistic practices and ethics, see Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Heather A. Haveman, *Magazines and the Making of America: Modernization, Community, and Print Culture, 1741–1860* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 55–105; Frank Luther Mott, *American*

Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690–1940 (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

- 17 Quoted in “Sensation in New York,” *Stark County (Ohio) Democrat*, Jan. 19, 1870.
- 18 “The Church Scandal: Further Particulars of the Cooke-Johnston Case,” *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1870.
- 19 “The Clerical Eloper,” *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Jan. 12, 1870.
- 20 “The Rev. Mr. Cooke in the World Office,” *Buffalo Commercial*, Jan. 13, 1870.
- 21 “Mr. Cooke Interviewed,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 14, 1870.
- 22 “A Priestly Scandal,” *New York World*, Jan. 11, 1870.
- 23 For more on the forgery controversy, see George T. McJimsey, *Genteel Partisan: Manton Marble, 1834–1917* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971), 5255.
- 24 Manton Marble, *Freedom of the Press Wantonly Violated: Letter of Mr. Marble to President Lincoln, Reappearance of the Journal of Commerce, Opinions of the Press on This Outrage* (New York: Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge, 1864).
- 25 Mary Cortona Phelan, “Manton Marble of the *New York World*” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1957), 9.
- 26 Manton Marble’s letter to Rev. H. C. Graves (n.d.), quoted in Phelan, “Manton Marble of the *New York World*,” 10.
- 27 On Marble’s agnosticism, see Phelan, “Manton Marble of the *New York World*,” 9–23.
- 28 Quoted in the *Bolivar* (Tennessee) *Bulletin*, Feb. 12, 1870.
- 29 Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
- 30 “Editorial Perspective,” *Nation* (New York), Jan. 27, 1870.
- 31 “A Growing Evil,” *Philadelphia Day*, reprinted in *Indianapolis News*, Jan. 24, 1870.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *The Great Brooklyn Romance: All the Documents in the Famous Beecher-Tilton Case, Unabridged* (New York: J.H. Paxon, 1874).
- 34 For two book-length studies of Beecher’s career and trial, see Altina Waller, *Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton: Sex and Class in Victorian America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982) and Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 35 “Elopement Eccentricities: Some Recent Notable Instances of Runaway Matches and Curious Family Complications,” *New York World*, quoted in *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Feb. 4, 1882.
- 36 *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 21, 1881.
- 37 “The Janesville Sinners,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Sept. 25, 1887.
- 38 “A Naughty Parson,” *Bismarck* (North Dakota) *Weekly Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1887.
- 39 *Alton Evening Telegraph*, Aug. 12, 1887.
- 40 *The Wichita Beacon*, Oct. 18, 1887.
- 41 “Sensational Journalism,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1883.
- 42 “How to Cure the Plague,” *Christian Union* (New York), Jan. 15, 1885.
- 43 J. M. Buckley, “The Morality of Ministers,” *Forum* (New York), Jan. 1887.
- 44 Anonymous letter to a San Francisco editor, quoted in “Shocked the Japs,” *Salt Lake Herald*, Apr. 18, 1895.
- 45 “Current Opinions,” *Boston Investigator*, Aug. 16, 1893.
- 46 “How He Was Converted,” *Kansas City Gazette*, Feb. 23, 1893; “For Men Only,” *Daily World* (Pittsburg), Jan. 16, 1893.
- 47 “A Bad Egg,” *Wichita Daily Eagle*, June 23, 1893.
- 48 “Leigh Vernon Located,” *Daily World* (Pittsburg), June 26, 1893.
- 49 “Claims She Was Hypnotized,” *Pittsburgh Press*, July 11, 1893.
- 50 “Jumped from Car—Rev. Leigh Vernon Attempts Suicide,” *Emporia Gazette*, July 17, 1893.
- 51 “Elopers at Toronto,” *Morning News* (Delaware), June 2, 1904.
- 52 “Preacher Tells Why He Eloped,” *Evening World* (New York), July 13, 1904.
- 53 “Cordova Leads New Life, Says Wife,” *Central New Jersey Home News* (New Brunswick), Nov. 8, 1904.
- 54 “Divorce Me,—Cordova,” *Central New Jersey Home News* (New Brunswick), Mar. 9, 1905.
- 55 “Rev. Cordova Will Stand Trial on Two Charges,” *Central New Jersey Home News* (New Brunswick), Mar. 8, 1905.

- 56 Michael Willrich, "Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America," *The Journal of American History* 87:2 (2000): 460.
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