

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
800-521-0600

UMI<sup>®</sup>



## **NOTE TO USERS**

**This reproduction is the best copy available.**

UMI<sup>®</sup>





NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of History

By

Chris Beneke

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

June 2001

UMI Number: 3011952

Copyright 2001 by  
Beneke, Chris

All rights reserved.

UMI<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 3011952

Copyright 2001 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© Copyright by Chris Beneke 2001  
All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### **Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism** Chris Beneke

This dissertation traces the cultural transformation that swept colonial British America, turning ostensibly seditious dissent into benign differences of opinion. It begins in the early eighteenth-century, at a moment when all religious differences were regarded as forms of dissent and all dissent was suspect. Well into the eighteenth-century, erroneous beliefs were likened to plagues, passed on from corrupt mind to corrupt mind. However, as early as the 1730s, few would openly deny that there was a right of private judgment. The disruptive physical movement that accompanied the evangelical revivals of the 1740s extended the meaning of private judgment and revealed that belief could no longer be bound to particular geographical areas, nor individuals to particular churches. Whether they created their own churches or reformed their old ones, provincial Americans rejected the practice of permitting others to describe their religious experiences. Some even suggested that their self-descriptions receive institutional expression in the form of minority rights. As the contingent character of religious identities became evident, religious association was increasingly regarded as a matter of individual choice.

Over the next two decades, colonial institutions opened themselves to white men of all religious persuasions. An ecumenical language, emphasizing the shared fundamentals of faith, gained currency. At about the same time, Americans showed

themselves increasingly sensitive to criticism. Late eighteenth-century polemicists complained of “misrepresentation” and polemical “violence.” With the penalties for religious dissent having been relaxed and with a much larger range of groups participating in public discussions, the scope of “persecution” was widened to include the intangible slights that once would have gone unnoticed. The sometimes shrill demand for recognition was the cost of religious inclusion. Indeed, late eighteenth-century writers extended the boundaries of legitimate faith to include all Protestants, most Christians, and occasionally, people of other faiths. Piety itself, rather than the institutions and beliefs of a particular church, became the guarantor of a good society. By the end of the eighteenth century, Americans were inclined to recognize all religions as legitimate forms of religion—as long as they remained compatible with the fundamentals of republican government.

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation is better than it otherwise would have been because of the many hours spent in heated, though always cordial, argument with the late Robert H. Wiebe. Professor Wiebe will be remembered as a devoted teacher, father, and advisor, as well as a great historian. Even at the age of seventy he was a model of imaginative scholarship and personal discipline.

Throughout my graduate career, I have benefited from the constant mentoring of T.H. Breen. As rigorous a teacher as he is an historian, Professor Breen has offered the tough criticism that I so often required. Among other things, he taught me the art of the active verb and the virtue of a strong thesis. My failures have proved him right more times than I can count.

Before he left Northwestern, James Oakes took the time to liberate me from many a foolish misconception. From him, I have learned to regard ideas as something more than abstractions and to think of social change as something more than the dross of intellectual life. I have yet to deliver a lecture or write a chapter that does not bear his imprint.

During the past two years, I have been fortunate to have been able to turn to James Merrell for friendly advice and criticism. Professor Merrell possesses the rare virtue of being a preeminent scholar and a decent human being. His vast knowledge of early American history and his subtle appreciation for the complexities of historical argument have continually informed my teaching and writing.

In revising this dissertation, I have also profited from the insightful comments of Martin Burke, Stephen Foster, W. Clark Gilpin, Christopher Grasso, Timothy Hall, Philip Hamburger, Leo Hirrel, Pauline Maier, Larry Moore, Mark Noll, Gordon Wood, and Alfred Young. During these last few critical months. I have received generous support from Thomas William Heyck and Josef Barton. Their timely assistance ensured that this project would be completed.

I would like to thank my colleagues at Northwestern who have endured far too many instances of my intellectual peevishness—James Brennan, Seth Cotlar, Ryan Dye, Christopher Front, David Gellman, Patrick Griffin, Michael Guenther, Karen Leroux, Karen O'Brien, Graham Peck, Ross Rosenberg, Meredith Rusoff and Chernoh Sesay. I'll miss our days in the library, even those spent in front of the antiquated microcard readers.

There are a few people who seldom receive the thanks they deserve. The History department's assistants—Carmelita Rocha, Krzysztof Kozubski, Paula Blaskovits and Susan Clothier—have saved me from my own ineptitude on an embarrassing number of occasions.

My extended family, which consists of Jews, Protestants and Catholics could very well serve as a model of how a religiously plural community can work. My mother and father-in-law, Jean and William Von Ancken, have demonstrated again and again that faith is compatible with tolerance. My own parents, George and Cathy Beneke, have always served as examples of diligence, kindness and charity. I have only myself to blame for having not practiced what they so often preached *and* practiced themselves. I would be surprised to learn that any mother and father devoted

more time and energy to their children. My sister, Amy, who suffered through her older brother's teasing without ever altering her genial demeanor, is a tribute to their parenting.

My wife Christa has displayed enough tolerance, benevolence and sympathy over the last seven years to impress any eighteenth-century moral philosopher. If this book were about the nineteenth century, I might also have to note that she embodies the virtues of both the home and the workplace. Her seemingly endless labor at "real" jobs has permitted me to pursue this less than lucrative career. The number of hours she has spent supporting us is only slightly less extraordinary than the compassion she has exhibited toward everyone around her. I hope that she knows how grateful I am.

\*\*\*\*\*

An earlier version of Chapter One was presented before the Omohundro Institute of Early American Culture's colloquium. An earlier version of Chapter Two was presented at the Newberry Seminar on Early American Culture. Various parts of the dissertation were presented at the meetings of the Society for Historians of the Early Republic, the American Historical Association, The Historical Society, the Society of Church History, the Southeastern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and the Midwest Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies.



## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1. THE PLAGUE OF DISSENT: RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA .....	12
CHAPTER 2. PARTIAL JUDGEMENTS AND DIVIDED CHURCHES: AMERICA'S FIRST GREAT AWAKENING .....	43
CHAPTER 3. OPEN TO ALL PARTIES: ECUMENISM AT MID-CENTURY .....	85
CHAPTER 4. THE END OF DISSENT: RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES AND THE IMPERIAL CRISIS .....	125
CHAPTER 5. A UNION OF THE PEOPLE: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE FOUNDING OF THE REPUBLIC .....	165
EPILOGUE .....	223
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	230

Introduction  
**Beyond Toleration:  
The Religious Origins of American Pluralism**

*Amos 3:3. Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*

Eighteenth-century Americans were not multiculturalists; only in rare instances did they recognize diversity as an inherent good.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, they took the first crucial steps toward the creation of a pluralistic society. And they did it, of all places, in the realm of religion. During the eighteenth century, religious differences represented the only sort of difference that received systematic treatment. Before colonial Americans ever thought of condemning bigotry in matters of race, they condemned it in matters of religion. Before they could sanction faction in politics, they sanctioned it in religion. When they first began to think about getting people of various opinions and practices to live in the same society, to cooperate peacefully, even lovingly, in the same voluntary endeavors, they were thinking about religion.<sup>2</sup>

The following pages trace the trajectory of American thought beyond mere toleration. They describe the remarkable confluence of religious diversity and egalitarianism that created a pluralistic culture. They attempt to explain how it was

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the unsatisfactory term “Americans” here and throughout, instead of colonial British-Americans, which would only be a suitable substitute up until perhaps 1776 (and no later than 1783). There were of course others, namely the Indians, who could rightfully claim the term “Americans.” I use the equally un-satisfactory term America to delineate the thirteen colonies that became the United States.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say, as the great religious historian Sidney E. Mead argued, that religious freedom was not often bestowed “grudgingly and of necessity.” I am arguing that the substance of public discourse changed, thereby making it possible for colonial Americans to live in an integrated religious environment. See Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 37.

that a people who still cared deeply about the fate of their immortal souls could manage to live with those who held widely differing beliefs about God and His church. They seek to understand, in other words, how Americans learned to live with differences in matters of the highest importance to them. Although contemporaries sometimes attributed this achievement to their sincere faith and although many commentators since have attributed it to the loss of that faith, this study demonstrates the shaping influence of a wide ranging, and permanent, cultural transformation.<sup>3</sup>

Why concentrate on eighteenth-century America? After all, the tradition of religious pluralism was by no means an exclusively American phenomenon. Nor was it an exclusively eighteenth-century one. During the seventeenth century much of Europe relaxed penalties on religious dissent. The oft-cited appeals for toleration made by liberal English writers such as the philosopher John Locke, the Anglican bishops William Warburton and Benjamin Hoadley, and the essayist Thomas Gordon were all written before 1730. Many solutions posed to the problem of religious difference in eighteenth-century America—the most important of these being the distinction between essentials and non-essentials of belief—had already been a part of

---

<sup>3</sup> Many contemporaries were also convinced that it was, in fact, a diminished faith that accounted for the “fashionable liberality” of the late eighteenth century. On this view, Americans indulged their neighbors and fellow subjects/citizens in their disagreements *over* religion because they thought less *about* religion. But if there was secularization in America, it is not evident from America’s church-going practices. According to Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, church adherence rates remained extremely high throughout the century. See, “Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. Ser., 39, no. 2 (April, 1982). Roger Finke and Rodney Stark’s study of religious adherence challenges the work of Bonomi and Eisenstadt. Finke and Stark argue that religious adherence rates actually rose dramatically between 1775 and 1850. Admittedly, their work also suggests that colonial Americans were considerably less attached to their churches than historians have traditionally believed. See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

English, Scotch and Irish vocabularies for several decades. But whereas English, Scottish and Irish laws continued to treat dissent as a crime well into the eighteenth century, Americans radically extended the boundaries of religious inclusion.<sup>4</sup> It was one thing to tolerate the dissent of a few subordinated minorities. It was another thing to insist, as Americans did by the end of the century, upon equal recognition for many different faiths. The eighteenth century saw this cultural backwater convert itself into a model of pluralism.

By almost any measure, the area that became the original United State was a religiously diverse land. On a church census taken in 1775, the number of congregations appeared as follows: Congregational, 668; Presbyterian, 588; Anglican 495; Baptist 494; Quaker, 310; German Reformed, 159; Lutheran, 150; Dutch Reformed, 120; Methodist, 65; Catholic, 56; Moravian, 31; Congregational-Separatist, 27; Dunker, 24; Mennonite, 16; French Protestant, 7; Sandemanian, 6; Jewish, 5; Rogerene, 3.<sup>5</sup> By themselves, these numbers may be misleading. In fact, there were large concentrations of Congregationalists in New England, large concentrations of Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, and large concentrations of Anglicans in the

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Mark Goldie, "Restoration England was a persecuting society." See Goldie, "The Theory of Religious Intolerance in Restoration England," *From persecution to toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, ed. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel and Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 331. As Richard Ashcraft portrays it, English latitudinarianism was merely "the acceptable face of the persecution of religious dissent." See Ashcraft, "Latitudinarianism and toleration: historical myth versus political history," in Richard Kroll, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin, eds., *Philosophy, Science, and Religion 1640-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics cited in Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 38.

South.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in many areas—particularly New England and the Middle Colonies—these denominations were divided among themselves.<sup>7</sup> The formation of a new church remained a preferred method of resolving doctrinal disagreements well into the nineteenth century. American's seemingly limitless capacity for separation continually extended an already exceptional religious diversity. Choices proliferated and differences multiplied well into the nineteenth century.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Americans throughout the original thirteen colonies embraced a pluralistic ideology that conferred religious privileges upon (white) individuals far exceeding the right to passively dissent. In addition to removing the legal barriers that prevented them from practicing their religion freely and speaking their views openly, American culture increasingly deferred to the descriptions that individuals and churches offered of themselves. Throughout this book, the phrase “self-description” has been employed to characterize this emergent ideal. As it is used in the ensuing pages, self-description entails the following: Believers enjoyed the right (1) to make and explain religious choices in terms set by themselves, (2) to be free from external constraints in expressing, both physically and linguistically, those choices, and (3) to be free of injury, broadly construed, as a

---

<sup>6</sup> The historian Jon Butler estimates that, in relatively homogenous New England, three-quarters of all congregations were Congregationalist during the 1770s (this total would have been even higher in the past). In the Middle Colonies, by contrast, there had long been an impressive amount of religious diversity. The largest group in that region, the Presbyterians, made up only one-fifth of the total number of congregations, with German-speaking congregations making up a large portion of the rest. In the South, where Baptist and Presbyterian preachers made significant inroads during the second half of the century, only about one-third of all congregations were Anglican by the time of the Revolution. See Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 191-192.

<sup>7</sup> Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic*, 38.

consequence of that expression. As early as the Revolutionary period, a rough consensus prevailed that all people were indeed entitled to their own self-description.

To substitute the concept of self-description for the familiar eighteenth-century phrase, “the right of private judgment,” is to acknowledge that the legitimization of private judgment accompanied increasingly demanding restrictions on what could be judged.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the right of private judgment that was vigorously advocated at the end of the eighteenth century was not the same right that was quietly uttered at its beginning. From mid-century onward, the activity that people called private judgment began to look more and more like private *expression*, upon which no one but the believers themselves possessed the right to cast judgment. In other words, as people acquired greater freedom to narrate their own religious experiences, their liberty to criticize other people’s religious experiences diminished. A pluralistic society required nothing less.

The culture that had developed by the end of the century thereby conceded as much to the principle of equal recognition—the recognition of an individual’s right to religious self-description—as it did to the claim of individual autonomy.<sup>9</sup> This

---

<sup>8</sup> The historical literature on toleration and eighteenth-century America has always privileged the struggle for religious liberty, or the relations between church and state, over the problem of religious differences. Some fairly recent examples include William Lee Miller, *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1986), Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and William J. Frost *A Perfect Freedom: Religious Liberty in Pennsylvania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). That my own emphasis is different by no means diminishes the significance of this work, nor its significance to eighteenth-century life. Indeed, Curry and Frost will be cited repeatedly throughout the following pages.

<sup>9</sup> The term “equal recognition” is Charles Taylor’s. See Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 234. I have employed Taylor’s phrase “equal recognition” in the later pages of this book, when discussing the

demand for recognition possessed a decidedly subjectivist character. Individuals were entitled to describe themselves on their own terms, it was argued, because only they possessed genuine knowledge of their own beliefs and intentions. Such a notion was hardly new. Since the Reformation, philosophers and Protestant theologians alike had insisted upon the stubborn impenetrability of the individual conscience. But eighteenth-century Americans invested individual expressions of belief with a legitimacy that their European ancestors could not have contemplated, let alone endorsed. In addition to hosting an unprecedented collection of different religious groups, eighteenth-century Americans brought many of those groups together into the same institutions. And, while the concrete existence of diversity made changes in religious affiliation possible, American culture sanctioned the changes that were made.

The developments outlined here did not occur together, or in one linear sequence. They came in fits and starts. This study details the winding paths, which mark out its major lines of analysis. Changes emerged only to disappear, then emerge again in a new context and with different implications. The problem of private judgment, for instance, remained a contentious issue throughout the eighteenth century. By the late 1720s, the “right of private judgment” had achieved the status of

---

late eighteenth century. Taylor argues that the language of equal recognition developed alongside an increasing commitment to the ideal of “authenticity.” Other historians have described this phenomenon as an ideal of “sincerity,” the notion that the best expressions are those which genuinely represent the true intentions of the writer or speaker. See John Martin, “Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 5 (December 1997), esp. 1333. The literary historian Jay Fliegelman argues that an associated “elocutionary revolution” swept mid-eighteenth century America. At the core of this revolution was a paradox, Fliegelman contends: speech now had “to be both particular, referring back to the sincerity of a specific speaker, and general, articulating the auditors’ feelings to themselves.” See Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 64.

an unquestioned assumption. A persistent source of debate thereafter centered not on the existence of such a right, but on the question of whether it belonged to individuals or to religious societies, to each church member or only the majority in each church. A second major theme is the scope of “harm,” or “injury.” Seventeenth-century arguments for toleration were premised on the conviction that unless an individual’s belief caused tangible injury, the believer should go unpunished. As the penalties for religious dissent eased, and as American institutions were opened to white men of all persuasions, the definition of “injury” expanded to include such things as prejudice and misrepresentation. That is, a concept intended to protect civil order now functioned as a protection for minorities. This development would have significant implications for the discussion of religious differences. A third interweaving theme involves ecumenical thought. From mid-century, those who wrote about religious matters repeatedly suggested that conflict would dissipate if everyone simply focused their attention on the shared fundamentals of faith. But whose fundamentals were these? Protestant fundamentals, Christian fundamentals, or religious fundamentals? Who defined them? Above all, in an era of self-description, did such ecumenism threaten the particular beliefs that only believers had the right to define?

Chapter One sets the early eighteenth-century background. It suggests the extent to which religious differences nearly always represented *dissent from* a particular religious authority. At a time when geographic lines defined the boundaries of the church, those neighbors who attended other churches could not be described as anything but dissenters. Erroneous beliefs and practices were likened to plagues, passed on from corrupt mind to corrupt mind. Their subversive effects could best be



contained through their enunciation, whereby well intentioned parents and ministers could treat them with the antidotes of sound doctrine. Although rare instances of vocal dissent were condemned, the private judgments that lay undisclosed within the bosoms of fickle churchgoers presented the most pervasive threat. Well into the first third of the eighteenth century, ecumenical language was rare, religious self-description was suspect, and the greatest injuries were suffered by the souls of those ignorant enough to embrace erroneous beliefs.

Chapter Two treats the mid-century religious revivals, known as the First Great Awakening. Itinerant preaching and open air sermonizing, as well as the emotional conversion experiences that would come to characterize evangelical religion, marked the revivals. During this period, newly converted individuals demanded recognition for the transformative religious experiences that so many of them were now undergoing. Whether they created their own churches or reformed their old ones, they rejected the practice of permitting others to describe their religious experiences. Some even suggested that their self-descriptions receive institutional expression, in the form of minority rights. No church was legitimate, they argued, that did not allow every member to speak for him or herself. Meanwhile, opponents of the revival called upon the “New Lights” to curtail their “rash judging.” They implored them to restrain their judgment of other people’s souls. Thus, unwittingly, supporters and opponents of the revivals contributed to the notion that believers were responsible for his own self-description.

Chapter Three describes a new social development, the opening of provincial institutions, and introduces a new theme, the rise of ecumenism, both of which were in

evidence from the late 1740s onward. Focusing on religiously inclusive social organizations such as the Freemasons and the colonial colleges, this chapter suggests that mid-eighteenth century Americans confronted two alternatives: they could maintain an open, critical discussion of religious differences, or they could commit themselves to the fundamentals of faith and keep their particular judgments to themselves. As it turned out, open debate lent itself better to the discussion of politics; whereas private restraint became the preferred method of dealing with religious diversity. Self-description required appropriate deference to the rigorous standards of sociability, as well as the essentials to which every Christian was supposed to agree.

Chapter Four examines the major religious controversy of the 1760s and early 1770s: the debate over colonial Anglicanism. The fact that the debates of the 1760s and 1770s often centered on the meanings of words themselves points to a significant shift toward the ideal of self-description. Both the Anglicans and their independent opponents accused the other side of distorting the traditional meaning of toleration. And both sides took umbrage at the other's "misrepresentations." In this integrated religious setting, language was capable of doing harm. Misrepresentation was a kind of violence. Prejudice verged on persecution. With the penalties for religious dissent having been relaxed and with a much larger range of groups participating in the discussion of public problems, the scope of "injury" was widened to include the intangible slights that once would have gone unnoticed.

Chapter Five follows the problem of religious differences through the Revolution and into the founding period. As the state and national constitutions were

being drawn up, the search for an inclusive ground of belief and practice, the fundamentals of faith, had never seemed more pressing. How could the equal protection of the laws be made compatible with the discipline required by a fragile new republican society? What institutions and beliefs were essential to such an endeavor? Late eighteenth-century writers extended the boundaries of legitimate faith to include all Protestants, most Christians, and occasionally, people of other faiths. Piety itself, rather than the institutions and beliefs of a particular church, became the guarantor of a good society. Many late eighteenth-century Americans feared the absence of belief more than they did the presence of erroneous beliefs. They were inclined to recognize all religions as legitimate forms of religion—as long as the groups themselves remained transparent and their beliefs and institutions compatible with republican government. The demands for equal recognition had never been so insistent, the possibilities of self-description never so extensive. In this context, even Catholics enjoyed a reprieve from the heretofore unrelenting charge of “popish” intrigue.

Not every problem was resolved, not every contradiction reconciled. However, we can say that by the time the United States became a nation, it was more acceptable to cast judgment upon a neighbor’s political opinions than his religious opinions. Here was a testament to the cultural revolution that the country had undergone over the previous decades. Above all, this was a testament to the extraordinary force exercised by equal recognition in late eighteenth-century religion. Americans had not lost their faith, just the sanction to indict other people’s. Early republican Americans still dreamed of religious unanimity—more than ever.

perhaps—but no country in the world had gone so far to recognize the legitimacy of the differences that made such unanimity a passing dream.

**Chapter 1**  
**The Plague of Dissent:**  
**Religious Differences in Early Eighteenth-Century America**

*Eph 4:14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive*

“But how can [Synods and Councils] be honoured, when no Authority is allowed them, and consequently no warrant for what they do? ... [This amounts to] an agreement to agree in nothing; which looks like a conspiracy, against the Church of GOD ....”  
Hugh Fisher, *A Preservative from Damnable Error* (1730)

Religious diversity presented an ominous spectacle to early eighteenth-century Americans. Within the prevailing structure of thought, every difference constituted some form of dissent, and nearly all dissent was associated with bodily contagion. Religious disagreement was seen as best confined to private conversation or syllogistic reasoning, uniformity remained a cherished ideal, and both religious doubt and alterations of religious belief were regarded as inherently dangerous. This conceptual framework represented the legacy of an age that elided the distinction between towns, parishes, and communities, which incorporated all of God’s people into a single imaginative body. It coexisted, sometimes uneasily, with enlightened liberal justifications for toleration and the right of private judgment. No one challenged the believer’s right to read Scripture for him or herself. But reading was not speaking, and the right to judge did not always entail the right to dissent. In early eighteenth-century America, vocal religious dissent carried the same metaphoric associations as political criticism. Both appeared to operate through subterfuge. Both seemed to threaten the

foundations of church and state. And, as the volume of print swelled, both seemed on the verge of a worrisome expansion.

In a 1730 pamphlet titled *A Letter from a Minister of the Church of England to His Dissenting Parishioners*, the New York Anglican James Wetmore laid down two propositions that must have seemed preposterous to his American audience. First, he claimed that “his dissenting parishioners” were obliged to receive him as their minister. Second, he declared that they were obliged not to receive any other “*in Opposition*” to him. By the standards of the “Presbyterians,” the “Independents” (Congregationalists), or even the “Quakers,” Wetmore maintained, he qualified for ministerial service. Moreover, he enjoyed the “*Apostolical Designation*,” which brought all of these groups within his jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> Wetmore shared his perspective with the Connecticut Anglican Samuel Johnson, who, three years later, published a tract with an identical heading: *A Letter from a Minister of the Church of England to His Dissenting Parishioners*. “Give me leave,” Johnson requested of “his” parishioners, “to observe to you, that there are some very weighty Points of Religion wherein you grievously err in separating from us, besides others of less moment, and to offer them as so many Reasons, why you should return into the Bosom of the Church and come into our Communion.” Those to whom Johnson addressed his epistle had probably never entered an Anglican church. But they were nonetheless “His Dissenting Parishioners.” And Johnson chastised them for their “talk of

---

<sup>1</sup> [James Wetmore], *A Letter from a Minister of the Church of England to his Dissenting Parishioners* (New York, 1730), 7-10.

[Anglican] Persecution,” when they well understood that they had “for almost 50 Years enjoyed a free Liberty and uninterrupted Toleration.” Given the oppression Anglicans had confronted in the colonies, dissenters would “shut [their] Mouths, if [they] had any Modesty.”<sup>2</sup>

Astonished at Johnson’s presumptuousness, Presbyterian minister John Graham wondered to whom the good rector referred when he used the phrase “his dissenting parishioners.”<sup>3</sup> “It cannot be your own Hearers, or Disciples, as appears from the Scope of your famous Epistle,” Graham noted, “nor can it properly be the Presbyterians, for these are here of the established Church.” He continued: “it is no less absurd to call a Presbyterian, a Dissenter, in *Connecticut* (or any other of the *American* Charter Governments where Presbytery is established) than it would be to call him so in *North-Britain*.” Johnson, he argued, had mistaken America for England. In Connecticut, the Presbyterians were as established as they were in Scotland. Moreover, he contended, only the Toleration Act secured Johnson’s right to preach. It was Johnson, in fact, who dissented. He, and not his non-Anglican parishioners, required the indulgence of the government. Graham went on to contend that the “Spirit” of Persecution was still alive and well in the Anglican church, pointing to “those scurrilous Libels and Pamphlets, which by that Party are Printed and Scattered

---

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Letter from a Minister of the Church of England to his Dissenting Parishioners* (New York, 1733), 7.

<sup>3</sup> [John Graham], *Some Remarks Upon a Late Pamphlet Entitled, A Letter from a Minister of the Church of England to His Dissenting Parishioners* (Boston, 1733). The subtitle of Graham’s pamphlet included the following words: “Recommended as a seasonable Antidote, to all those into whose Hands the said Letter may come.”

... on purpose to Ridicule the Ministers of Christ, and make a Mock of all serious and practical Godliness.”<sup>4</sup>

Who was it that the printed word addressed? Graham’s question haunted published discussions of religious difference throughout the century. The church? The community? Could they be same thing? The local claims advanced by Wetmore, Johnson, and Graham in the late 1720s and early 1730s addressed this larger dilemma. They engaged the same question that another Presbyterian minister, Jonathan Dickinson, asked a few years later: “[W]ho is it that dissent from the original and legal Establishment of the Country, they, or we?”<sup>5</sup> Who dissented? Who, if anyone, possessed the privilege of tolerating others?

Johnson, Wetmore, and Graham all made the traditional assumption that someone had to tolerate and someone had to dissent. But this framework never quite worked in America. The spread of print widened the chasm between the inherited ideal of authority and the actual conditions of America’s social and political existence. Printed works embodied the fragmented authority that characterized colonial religious authority generally. In this land, the course of toleration was no more self-evident than the intended audience for the printed word. Print addressed at least as many kinds of people as there were establishments. A decade earlier, the Presbyterian Thomas Walter dismissed his Anglican opponents’ claim that the mutual condemnations hurled back and forth between the various dissenting groups

---

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *A Letter*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> John Dickinson, *The Scripture-Bishop Vindicated* (Boston, 1733), 43–44.



discredited them all. For, as Walter observed, none of them “pretend[ed]” to constitute one church.<sup>6</sup> It would take some time before the imaginations of America’s writers—shaped as they were by the relative uniformity of seventeenth century religious life—were conditioned to the realities of a land that could contain many churches and a world of print that would recognize them all. Until then, dissent would retain its association with diversity, and diversity would maintain its association with rootless indeterminacy.

Johnson, Wetmore, and Graham wrote with the conviction that different beliefs were dissenting beliefs. On their view, disagreement with the church was a subversive activity; it threatened to undermine the very hierarchy upon which their authority rested. To justify his claims, Samuel Johnson cited distant, imposing authorities. “That you are my Parishioners,” he wrote, “is as true, as it is that I am appointed Minister of this Town and the Places adjacent, by the Honourable Society incorporated by Royal Charter for providing Ministers for the Plantations, and by the Bishop of London to whom the Ecclesiastical Government of them is committed by the supreme Authority of our Nation.” Then he added: “And for this I can produce my Instructions.”<sup>7</sup> The insistence that religious disagreement could be settled through official instructions, the idea that ministers of other denominations constituted some form of “Opposition,” and the assumption that authoritative arguments on ecclesiology

---

<sup>6</sup> [Thomas Walter], *An Essay Upon that Paradox, Infallibility may sometimes Mistake* (Boston, 1724), 90.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Second Letter from a Minister of the Church of England to His Dissenting Parishioners* (Boston, 1734), 7-8.

might “shut ... Mouths,” distinguished the writing of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries from that which came after. When another Anglican minister Arthur Browne declared that “we think it ... consistent with the spirit of the Gospel, to forbear opposing private Opinions to publick Authority,” he voiced the sentiments of his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

Within the imagination of the age, dissent lurked menacingly outside the walls of the church. Like a plague, it threatened to deprive the inhabitants of this community not of their mortal bodies but of their immortal souls. The metaphor of plague or infection applied to a wide range of nefarious mechanisms during the early modern period, but seemed particularly well suited to the description of religious dissent. Deadly contagions were no distant memory for those living in the eighteenth century. Early modern society was continually beset by the ravages of communicable disease. As recently as 1721, over one-half of Boston’s population was stricken during a smallpox outbreak.<sup>9</sup> Especially malicious epidemics could depopulate entire towns in a matter of weeks. Until the introduction of sanitary measures, isolation, exclusion, even execution, seemed the only viable remedies. As much as it said about the persistent ideal of the purified church, the metaphor of disease aptly represented the early eighteenth-century sense of how erroneous opinions were transmitted. It suggested, in fact, that error was conveyed corporally, by the very proximity of its source. It suggested too, that the ordinary mind was helpless in fending it off. The

---

<sup>8</sup> [Arthur Browne], *The Scripture Bishop* (Boston, 1733), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Maris A. Vinovskis, *Studies in American Historical Demography* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 183.

best hope of escaping a “contagion of corrupt opinions” lay in the possibility that the disease itself might be quarantined, that its bearers might be banished or its corrupting tendencies contained through the purification of its membership. John Winthrop’s published account of the antinomian crisis that struck the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the mid-1630s was titled *A Short Story of the Rise, reign, and ruine of the Antinomians, Familists & Libertines, that infected the Churches of New-England*. Fittingly, after their concerted efforts to convince Anne Hutchinson of her “dayngerous Opinions” failed, the General Court banished her to Rhode Island.<sup>10</sup>

No good could come from debating erroneous doctrines in the open air of public discussion. And the best a minister could do was prevent his congregants from even considering them. In a 1733 indictment of Quakerism, John Graham wrote: “Every Error is a plot of the Devil to suppress some Truth. and is very spreading & infectious.” Graham referred to his injunction against being “*carried about with divers & strange Doctrines*,” as a “dehortation”—as an attempt at *dissuasion*. His aim was not so much to persuade his audience of the delusion that called itself Quakerism as it was to explain the danger that such irrational sentiments presented and to suggest modes of resistance. Those with corrupt opinions, Graham dehorted, must be cut off even from conversation and other forms of ordinary social interaction; nor should their books be read or their ministries attended. Children, those least firm in their understanding of doctrine, were most susceptible to infection. Indulging his disease metaphors, Graham observed that “[I]f Parents are poisoned, the Children are

---

<sup>10</sup> David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 366.

exceedingly exposed to infection.” The best that parents could do to preserve their children from “infection” was to remain fixed in their orthodox beliefs. They themselves “must not be Children in understanding, ever learning, never coming to the knowledge of the Truth.” For Graham, the truth of any belief was directly proportional to the fixity with which it was held. There was no time to reflect impartially on the evidence that impressed itself upon us, as enlightenment writers such as John Locke recommended. Nothing good came from an indifferent attitude toward knowledge, from a state of suspended belief. Indeed, it was at that moment, in the bleak nothingness of indecision, that Satan conducted his business.<sup>11</sup>

The child’s catechism, which consisted of rudimentary questions and answers on the nature of faith, was designed to assist parents in their efforts to bring their children to a right understanding of the Bible—as soon as, or even before, they were capable of articulating the questions themselves. In the introduction to the catechism he originally published in 1708, the Congregational minister Cotton Mather contended that error must be combated as if it were an enemy army. Employing the martial metaphors that substituted easily for the metaphor of disease during this period, Mather insisted that the “*Armour of Christianity*” was required to fortify the young “*Christian Souldier*” against the multiplying errors, the “*Storms of Temptation*,” which would besiege his soul. “Yea, we will descend so *Low*, in our Proposals,” Mather intoned, “as to propose it for a *Family Exercise*; That the *Religious*

---

<sup>11</sup> John Graham, *The Christian’s Duty Against Error, and Establishment in the Truth: Opened and Urged in a Lecture-Sermon Preach’d at New Milford on Wednesday, August 23, 1732* (New London, 1733), 5.

*Householder* would Read the *Questions* unto his capable Young People. and ask their *Opinion* of the matter therein mentioned; Then Read the *Answers* with the *Proofs*. and Lead them to, and Fix them in, the Right Opinion.” The “*Proofs*” contained in his book, Mather suggested, could be employed to bridge the gap between the child’s opinion and “the Right Opinion,” between the child’s wavering, uninformed individual judgment and the truth, which never changed. Of course, he concluded, “[w]ere the Truth more Practised, it would be less *Disputed*.”<sup>12</sup>

The fantasy that dissent from the Truth might be so easily contained is probably as old as organized religion itself. But here, on the threshold of an age that witnessed the blossoming of printed debate and the proliferation of doctrines and modes of worship, this fantasy took on particular significance. Conversations that had once been confined to the home or quietly resolved within the church were increasingly conducted before a wider audience. It was still universally hoped that all might “be of one mind,” but the traditional method of silencing disagreement would have to be re-thought when the differences were already matters of public discussion.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cotton Mather, *The Way of Truth Laid Out* (Boston, 1721) 2, 4-6. The first edition of Mather’s catechism was published in 1708. The notion that the contagion of error could be contained through the use of child catechisms certainly did not end with Mather. Three decades later, Samuel Niles expressed his intention to put “a Stop to the prevailing Contagion of Arminian Errors and other loose Opinions among us, which threaten to banish vital Piety out of the Land.” And, Niles thought that the catechism was the best means of accomplishing the task. “For, if by such Helps,” he wrote, “they become well acquainted with the great Doctrines and Duties of Christianity, as they will the better understand the Sermons of their Minister on these Subjects, so they will be the more capable of distinguishing between *Truth & Error*; and if they should sometimes hear any Thing advanced in Discourses from the Pulpit, *contrary to sound Doctrine*, or leading to *dangerous Errors*, the well-instructed *Youth* would be less exposed to receive *ill Impressions* therefrom, or at least their more judicious and faithful *Parents* would be able to fortify and guard them, and I hope would take Care to do it seasonably and effectually, as knowing that they (as well as the Minister) must give Account.” See Niles, *A Vindication of Divers Important Gospel-Doctrines* (Boston, 1752), 1-2, 8.

The printed “conversation” represented a transitional genre in the expanding realm of published discourse. Such a display of opposing views would, Jonathan Dickinson argued, retain the qualities of a privately settled dispute. In a 1732 pamphlet defending Presbyterian ordination, Dickinson employed an “interlocutory way of writing.” According to Dickinson, this style “approaches the nearest to personal Consequence, which is ordinarily the most eligible manner of managing a Dispute; as it carries this on in familiar Language, prosecutes it by short Periods, and when the Disputants are wise to preserve a just Temper, gives the best Opportunity of settling the determinate sense of one another’s Terms.” Fortunately, he announced, “[t]he like Advantages now attend this manner of discussing a difficult and controverted Point, by way of written Dialogue.” The one drawback of interlocutory writing, Dickinson conceded, was that it lent itself to the unfaithful “represent[ation]” of the individual or group against whom the author was arguing. To get the terms of debate fixed, the author risked distorting the argument of his opponent. Dickinson assured his readers that his piece “naturally represented” both sides.<sup>13</sup>

Real dialogue was considerably more dangerous. John Bulkley’s *An Impartial Account of a Late Debate at Lyme* (1729) revealed the challenge of getting actual disputants to settle on “the determinate sense of one another’s Terms.” Bulkley, a Congregational minister, chronicled his debate with the Baptist elder Valentine Wightman. During a preparatory conference, Wightman’s group proposed that “the present English Version of the Bible might be adhere’d to on both sides.” Bulkley’s

---

<sup>13</sup> [Jonathan Dickinson], *The Divine Right of Presbyterian Ordination &c. Argued* (Boston 1732), i-ii.

group, which included Cotton Mather, declined. “The Second thing [the Baptists] insisted upon,” Bulkley noted, “was, That no Argument should be Propounded Syllogistically, it being they said, a way of reasoning they did not understand.” Bulkley’s group again refused. Their object, according to Bulkley, was “to avoid all such Rambles & Excursions from the Argument on Hand which had rendered debates of the like nature unprofitable heretofore.”<sup>14</sup>

Bulkley himself had been reluctant to engage in a debate, believing that such events rarely did much good for anyone, until he discovered how “bold and audacious” the “Sectaries” had become. “By Sectaries,” he wrote.

there intend certain persons among us of a various and uncertain Principle & Denomination, and who, perhaps, agree not among themselves in many things, besides an Opposing the Truth and them that stand for it: And are therefore ordinarilily [sic] spoken of under the different Denominations of Seventh Day, First Day and No Day Baptists, Quakers, Seekers, &c

Bulkley thus denied the Baptists a single name, assigning them an identity that was both plural and indeterminate. For, as he viewed it, they were as little inclined to agreement among themselves as with those whom they opposed; their principles were as “various” as they were “uncertain.” To Bulkley, the Baptists—like all dissenters—seemed united only in their opposition to the truth.<sup>15</sup>

For the moment, it appeared that Bulkley’s group successfully quelled the carping “Sectaries,” and returned quiet to the church. Bulkley noted that when he asked the Baptists in attendance if they could “Answer...the Arguments offer’d,” they

---

<sup>14</sup> John Bulkley, *An Impartial Account of a Late Debate at Lyme* (New London, 1729), 5. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 1.

spoke “not a word ... but all remained in a Dead Silence.” However, Bulkley also hinted that neither he nor his established brethren had needed to justify their principles until the debate at Lyme. “[B]y what is contained in the fore-going Pages,” he wrote, “its hoped Persons will see We of the Established Ministry in the Country, have something to say for our Opinion and Practice in those Points.” If the Baptists were indeed reduced to silence by his authoritative words, it was their vocal dissent that had compelled his speech—as well as his written account of the proceedings. Nonetheless, the idea of a single voice left speaking, even a voice spoken in anticipation of dissent, is emblematic of a conceptual framework that left little room for differences of opinion.<sup>16</sup>

In the early eighteenth century, dissent might be justified as an instance of “the divine right of private judgment,” a phrase used synonymously with the less popular term “liberty of conscience.” Two centuries before, the Protestant Reformation had elevated private judgment to a sacred ideal. The seminal reformer, Martin Luther, had insisted upon every believer’s right to interpret scripture independently of outside authorities. The emergent ideology of enlightened liberalism, which increasingly made its way into both Anglican and non-Anglican writings, reinforced this Protestant conviction.<sup>17</sup> Liberal writers such as John Locke

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>17</sup> See John Dunn, “The Claim to Freedom of Conscience: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Thought, Freedom of Worship?,” *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, eds. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel and Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 174; and James Tully, “Governing Conduct,” *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 51.



made an influential case for the autonomy of individual conscience, while insisting that all legitimate social relationships were formed through the voluntary consent of their members. By the late 1720s and early 1730s, colonial Americans from Massachusetts to South Carolina had embraced these Protestant-liberal ideals. If the right of private judgment was not always welcomed with enthusiasm, it could no longer be denied. Eventually, such rights sanctioned displays of public dissent that would have been severely constrained in the past. Before the divisive religious revivals of the 1740s, however, they were put to less radical uses.

Sometime in 1729, the Rev. Hugh Fisher delivered a sermon to the presbytery of Charlestown, South Carolina. In attendance was Josiah Smith, a fellow minister, who thought he heard Fisher deny “a Liberty in People to judge for themselves.” Appalled, Smith promptly crafted a short discourse of his own that vindicated the right of private judgment, noting its importance to the Protestant Reformation and lamenting the contemporary “imposers” who left the Bibles in “our Hands” only to “pluck out our eyes.” When word spread that he had spoken a “Heresie,” Smith published the sermon.<sup>18</sup> Fisher’s response soon followed. In typical clerical form, both ministers professed their reluctance to enter into public debate. As Smith later noted, these same points that had been thoroughly argued in the past. But to ignore Fisher’s controversial thrust, to let it run unchecked, would be to invite the risk of further contamination. Left unchallenged, Fisher’s “Performance” might be thought “unanswerable” and thereby, “perhaps infect others.” Fisher justified his own entry

---

<sup>18</sup> Josiah Smith, *Humane Impositions Proved Unscriptural Or, The Divine Right of Private Judgment* (Boston, 1729), ii-iii.

into printed debate by pointing to the danger of permitting Smith's arguments to "fall in the street" without an available antidote. Moreover, for Fisher, it was not simply Smith's conception of church government that was infectious. Erroneous theology, skepticism, and infidelity could be contracted through contact with the heretical. Only the "unction" of faith provided the "Antidote against such Errors."<sup>19</sup>

The liberal Smith seems to have lost the contemporary debate. In a pamphlet titled: *No New Thing to be Slandered* (1730), Smith insisted that those who abandoned his communion had done so because of the principles that were unjustly attributed to him. His defensive tone throughout suggests that he came under a good deal of criticism for his failure to subscribe to all of the articles prescribed by the Presbytery in Charlestown. Nonetheless, the arguments Smith advanced during these two years (1729-30) anticipated the writings of the more radical latitudinarians of the next half-century. In particular, Smith denied that any earthly being was capable of infallible judgments; instead, he contended that humans have little choice but to rely on the probable knowledge that everyone, even "Papists," might acquire. The imposition of "*Humane* [Human] Schemes," Smith contended, interfered with the obligation of every Christian "to follow his *Tho'ts*." Given the malleable nature of all opinion, Smith expressed his hope that Fisher not be compelled to "pronounce, *Nonsense* or *Heresy*, upon every Sentence, that differs from his *former* Belief." For Smith there was as much justification for an individual to differ from the convictions of his fellow

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., ii, 10-11, iii, 5; and Hugh Fisher, *A Preservative from Damnable Error* (Boston, 1730) 33. Smith employed the same justification almost word for word.

church members at any particular point in time, as there was reason for any particular member to alter his beliefs over time.<sup>20</sup>

Fisher affirmed the existence of a right of private judgment, but he maintained—as John Winthrop had a century earlier, that “no man ever had a right to judge wrong.”<sup>21</sup> Or, as Fisher put it in a second pamphlet on the subject, “a right of judging, contrary to the true doctrines of the Gospel, ... was no more than a right, to perish everlastingly, for their unbelief of the Gospel.”<sup>22</sup> Those Presbyterians, like Smith, who opposed mandatory subscription to the creeds contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith were but skeptics who assumed the pretence of faith. To experience “divine faith,” to enjoy “the unction of the Holy One” was to possess “an absolute certainty; being founded ... in the testimony of GOD, that cannot lie.” “[W]hatever a man believes with a divine Faith,” he continued, “he has an absolute certainty of the truth of it.” Fisher dismissed the notion that religion was a matter of “probability,” and denounced those, such as Smith and John Locke, for whom Truth was a mere appearance, something to be determined by the rational subject, rather than something that always existed, something that need only be recognized by the faithful.<sup>23</sup>

The right of private judgment, Fisher noted, did not imbue everyone with an “equal right to divulge their opinions.” And those who did so should not expect to

---

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment Vindicated* (Boston, 1730), 45, 4, 24, 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher, *A Preservative* (Boston, 1730), 26.

<sup>22</sup> Fisher, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment, Set in a True Light* (Boston, 1731), 25-26.

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Fisher, *A Preservative from Damnable Error* (Boston, 1730), 11, 39.

retain their privileges within the church. In fact, Fisher insisted, no one had the right to publicly misinterpret scripture, which amounted to little more than “a right to...declare, or vomit out Blasphemous Sentiments against our Blessed Saviour.”<sup>24</sup> The right of private judgment was simply that: a right to keep one’s belief to oneself.<sup>25</sup> To dissent openly from the church was to reveal one’s own iniquity, to demonstrate beyond a doubt one’s unworthiness for communion. Fisher rejected the distinction he claimed that Smith made between “a man’s speaking *upon* a truth ... and declaring sentiments *against* the truth.” In Fisher’s view, to dissent was to criticize, and to criticize was to slander. One who experienced doubts regarding “a truth,” he allowed, might “propose his difficulties in order to be instructed,” but he possessed no right “to declare, that in his opinion, the thing is false.”<sup>26</sup> According to Fisher, Scripture possessed an immediacy that made it identical with the faithful’s “sense of Scripture.” and thereby to separate the true believers from the unbelievers.<sup>27</sup> In fact, he maintained, to refrain from denying heretics the privileges of church membership, to refrain from marking them with their “proper names and Characters” was to expose the church to the seduction that was heresy.<sup>28</sup> Fisher, then, regarded Smith’s question

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>25</sup> “As for private Christians; their private judgment of discerning, is only for their private use.” Fisher, *A Preservative*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment*, 34, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Fisher, *A Preservative*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 20.

“who shall be judge?” as disingenuous, posed “as if there were none to determine controversies, between persons disagreeing in their Sentiments.”<sup>29</sup>

Smith and Fisher agreed that Scripture should serve as the “rule,” the measure of theological validity. But for each minister, that injunction meant something different. As Fisher pointed out, Smith’s non-subscribing position made Scripture a “directing rule,” a matter of sincere inquiry, a matter of procedure rather than substance. To Fisher, this rule was “no rule at all.” By contrast, Fisher maintained that Scripture must serve as an “obliging rule,” a duty laid upon each Christian to assent to the truths it contained.<sup>30</sup> In Smith’s eyes, Fisher failed to comprehend what an “Examination” of the Scriptures actually entailed. “Examination,” Smith argued, “implies a Right, both to *embrace* and *reject*.”<sup>31</sup> It implied a choice that even children should be allowed. How else, he asked, could a “Mahometan” become a Christian?<sup>32</sup> Fisher, he contended, created a false distinction between inquiry and judgment, reducing the act of scriptural interpretation to a mere affirmation of authority. Fittingly, Smith suggested that ministers should “*search* the Scriptures, and then ... give their Hearers the Reasons, that induce them to think, that the sense they have

---

<sup>29</sup> Once again, this the quotation is taken from Fisher, not Smith. In fact, I have not been able to locate this quotation in Smith’s three published pamphlets of 1729-1730. Fisher, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Fisher, *A Preservative*, 56-57.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment*, 19. Appropriately, Smith left the “Reader to judge” whether it could mean anything else.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *No New Thing to be Slandered* (Boston, 1730), 5-6.

fix'd upon, is *indeed*, the sense of the Spirit."<sup>33</sup> In response, Fisher asserted that to give reasons for belief without demanding assent is to leave the meaning of biblical passages "still undetermin'd."<sup>34</sup> But herein lay the tension that continually undermined traditional assertions of Protestant authority. Fisher's argument that confessions of faith were justified because Scripture's meanings were readily discernible to all who possessed "eyes to see, and ears to hear its Sentence" threatened the very mediatory system it was intended to vindicate. If all were capable of certain judgments, then what reason was there for not making private judgment the rule of every institution? Those who argued on behalf of creeds would have to find another means of justifying their position. And they would.

A dispute similar to the Smith-Fisher debate had been raging within the Synod of Philadelphia for the past decade. In 1722, and again in 1729, the Synod confronted many of the same issues that Smith and Fisher confronted in Charlestown (and for that matter, that Presbyterians in Ireland and Scotland confronted almost continuously between 1717 and 1738). Jonathan Dickinson, now a pastor in the New Jersey parish of Elizabeth Town, articulated the non-subscriptionist position in both 1722 and 1729. Ministers need only abide by one rule, Dickinson argued in 1722, and that was Scripture. Not the misinterpretation of Scripture, but the introduction of "HUMANE INVENTIONS and INSTITUTIONS" was responsible for the growth of "numerous Sects and Factions among Christians, and even among Protestants." Unnecessary

---

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Fisher, *The Divine Right of Private Judgment*, 58.

impositions had turned religion into “a subject of Debate.” Like Smith after him, Dickinson maintained that ministers should merely point their listeners in the direction of true belief, without obliging them to walk toward it. Ministerial authority added nothing to the interpretation. In the case of evidently scandalous or heretical individuals, he noted, the “Light of Nature,” as well as “all the different Sects of Christians” sanctioned their exclusion. Mandatory subscription would do no more.<sup>35</sup>

The Synod made do without a Confession of Faith until 1727 when the issue was again raised by the Irish born minister John Thomson. Thomson conceded that Scripture s<sup>t</sup> uld be the rule of faith, but argued, like Fisher, that “the bare Letter” of the Word could not by itself prevent divisions within the church. An authoritative interpretation must be attached to it, one that each member would explicitly affirm. Thomson proposed his overture as an “Antidote against Division” as a means of bringing the body to “one Mind, and one Judgment,” even, paradoxically, if it meant splitting it in two. For him, there could be no church without unity, no unity without unanimity, and no unanimity unless the Word of God were fixed in its “proper Sense and Meaning.” Ecclesiastical governments, like other “Politick Bod[ies],” required a substantive “Bond of Union,” which the Synod now lacked. Anticipating an argument made by apologists for the Synod in 1735 and again in 1741, Thomson contended that a policy of non-subscription actually constituted an “imposition” upon those who desired that all be compelled to subscribe.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *A Sermon Preached at the opening of the Synod at Philadelphia, September 19, 1722* (Boston, 1723), 3, 1-2, 19-21.

<sup>36</sup> [John Thompson], *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod* (Philadelphia, 1729), 13, 22, 20-21.

Neither the volume nor the stridency of dissenting opinions seems to have worried Thomson. Instead, he feared that which remained undisclosed and unspoken. Thomson urged vigilance against “secret Bosom Enemies to the Truth” lurking within. “[B]y searching them out, discovering them, and setting a Mark upon them” their nefarious ends might be thwarted. If indeed their silence preserved them, then they should be compelled to speak. Unfortunately, the Synod contained “too many” faithful members whose “Zeal against prevailing Errors of the Times” had been “very much blunted.” “[P]artly by a kind of Indifferency, and mistaken Charity,” he continued, “they think that they ought to bear with others, tho’ differing from them in Opinion, about Points that are mysterious and sublime, but not practical nor Fundamental.”<sup>37</sup> The problem, as Thomson saw it, was not bold speech but quiet dissent, not excessive “Zeal” but cowardly indifference. Ever changing, the erroneous belief traveled furtively from corrupt mind to corrupt mind until it was exposed to the knowledge of the truth. From these premises, it followed that the Synod could not be purged of dissent until the dissenters were identified, and with them the errors that otherwise eluded detection.<sup>38</sup>

Fisher and Thomson would not be the last ministers to hold that the right of private judgment was compatible with the authority of churches to obligate their

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26-7, 30-1.

<sup>38</sup> In a published response to Thomson, Dickinson reiterated many of his earlier arguments. As Dickinson saw it, the “Necessary” elements of faith were “clearly revealed.” Prescribing additional articles of faith merely deferred conflict from the interpretation of Scripture to the interpretation of the articles themselves; meanwhile, it made “hypocrites” of those who subscribed despite their reservations.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *Remarks Upon a Discourse* (New York, 1729), 13, 27.



congregants; nor were Smith and Dickinson the first to hold that truth was the product of free inquiry. Seldom again, however, would the tensions between the older network of assumptions, which excluded, isolated or eliminated dissent, come into as sharp a contrast with the newer conceptual framework, which recognized expressions of dissent as legitimate differences of opinion. Once the right of private judgment was established as the foundation of all religious discourse, it was considerably more difficult to treat dissent as a mere object of disdain. Over the ensuing decades, traditional assumptions would occasionally intrude into religious debates, but even the most reactionary of colonial writers usually stopped short of comparing those views they disliked to malevolent plagues. Indeed, as printed words and itinerant ministers made their way across parish boundaries, the categories of dissent and conformity could no longer encompass the religious diversity that a liberal world presumed.

In his critique of the subscriptionist position, Jonathan Dickinson asked a question that he may have later come to regret: “Why mayn’t every one enjoy his own Opinion, and act according to his Conscience in this Matter without a Separation?”<sup>39</sup> This was precisely the stance taken by the Irish immigrant minister, Samuel Hemphill and his American apologist Benjamin Franklin. The first sustained debate within American liberalism took place in 1735 when the Synod of Philadelphia prohibited Hemphill from preaching in its churches. According to Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Hemphill “delivered with a good voice, and apparently extempore, most excellent

---

<sup>39</sup> Dickinson, *Remarks*, 30.

discourses, which drew together considerable numbers of different persuasions, who join'd in admiring them."<sup>40</sup> Within a few months of his first sermon in the colonies, Hemphill's "erroneous teaching" had drawn the ire of the Synod. The Adopting Act, which passed the Synod in 1729, required ministerial subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. However, it permitted subscribing ministers to profess whatever "scruples" they possessed at the time of the declaration. On these grounds, Hemphill claimed a right to speak his radical "Arminian" opinions. In April, 1735, the Synod brought formal charges against the popular preacher.<sup>41</sup>

Franklin rushed to Hemphill's defense. In his *Observations on the Proceedings against The Rev. Mr. Hemphill*, he contrasted the secretive methods of the Synod with its counterpart in Scotland, whose members "debate amongst themselves publicly, and the Members of which it is compos'd do separately give Reasons for their Opinions."<sup>42</sup> Shortly afterward, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission of the Synod* appeared. Its primary author was Jonathan Dickinson. According to the Vindicators, the Church of Scotland customarily met in "Private." Moreover, they argued that a society, like an individual, possessed a "natural Right of Man of Judging," a (private) right to differ with one of its own members, and "Declare" its "Opinions." The modesty of the Vindicators' language reveals more

---

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996), 77.

<sup>41</sup> See Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the formative years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 46-48.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Some Observations on the Proceedings against The Rev. Mr. Hemphill: with a Vindication of his Sermons," 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1735) in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 49.

than just their capacity to assume a shrewd rhetorical posture. Their language illustrates the extent to which the ideal of private judgment had penetrated this society. Of course, since its founding, Pennsylvania had guaranteed its inhabitants liberty of conscience. But the chasm separating a culture that tolerates dissent and a culture for which dissent functions as a governing principle is vast indeed. When a dissenting member of the church could only be excluded on the grounds that he was offending someone's "Right to Judge" for themselves, an important shift had occurred.<sup>43</sup>

The Vindicators' language also reveals a fundamental tension within liberal thought—between the rights accorded consensually formed societies and the rights accorded the individual members of those societies. It is significant that Jonathan Dickinson, who had opposed the imposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith during the 1720s, played a leading role in the Synod's opposition to Hemphill one decade later. Both here and in an anonymously written pamphlet of the same year, Dickinson insisted on the rights of societies to make their own judgments. As he now saw it, there were some utterances that religious societies could not forbear. Without the right to place limits on its members' speech and to exclude those who did not comply with its rules, no church could survive. "[E]ach Christian Society," he argued, "have a Right to judge for themselves ..." At the end of his pamphlet, Dickinson cited no less an authority on rights than "the accute and ingenious Mr. *Lock*, in his *Letter concerning Toleration*." Locke had maintained in the seventeenth century, as

---

<sup>43</sup> *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission of the Synod in Answer to Some Observations On Their Proceedings against the Reverend Mr. Hemphill* (Philadelphia, 1735), 14, 4-5.

Dickinson did in the eighteenth, that religious societies enjoyed the right to determine their own membership.<sup>44</sup>

The liberal framework within which Dickinson and the authors of a *Vindication* constructed their case against Hemphill proved compatible with a rigid antagonism toward his doctrines, which they regarded as “Unsound and Dangerous.”<sup>45</sup> Among the other claims advanced in his pamphlet, Dickinson argued that the apostles had suppressed erring ministers. Those spouting “false Doctrines,” he observed, “were ... Silenced, that the destructive Gangreen might be stopt.” He then invoked a supporting scriptural passage: “*For there are many unruly and vain Talkers and Deceivers, especially they of the Circumcision, WHOSE MOUTHS MUST BE STOPPED. ...*”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the *Vindicator*’s condemned Hemphill’s efforts “to amuse the Multitude, and divert them from considering the Merits of the Cause.” Hemphill

---

<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, Dickinson never seemed comfortable with the equation he and his fellow *Vindicators* made between individual rights and the rights of societies. Amid an elaborate explication of the right of private judgment, Dickinson inserted the phrase “religious Society” in such a way as to make it possible for the entire structure of the paragraph to stand on its own without it. “[E]very Person, and every religious Society,” he wrote: “have the same Title to suppose themselves in the Right, and to stedfastly adhere to their own Sentiments whatever they be. ... [I]t is impossible for any Man to have greater Evidence of any Doctrinal Truth, than the full and firm Persuasion of his own Mind. And every one that has attained this *Persuasion*, how different soever from the Truth, has all the Assurance that he can have, or that any Body else can have, of being in the Right; and is therefore utterly incapable, without new Conviction, of thinking otherwise as he does. From whence follows the necessary Liberty of *private Judgment*, to all Men, and to all religious Societies in the World: since the Faith of one Man can no ways affect the Safety of Another; but every one must Believe and Answer for himself.” Dickinson thus mustered a compelling case for individual private judgment, but never actually made a case for societies. He suggests an unquestioned identity between the two of which he does not himself seem convinced. See [Jonathan Dickinson], *Remarks Upon a Pamphlet, Entitled, A Letter to a Friend in the Country* (Philadelphia, 1735), 4.

<sup>45</sup> As well as “inconsistent with many of the essential Truths of the Gospel.” *A Vindication*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> [Dickinson], *Remarks*, 12-13.

was guilty of having “stirred up his meek and excellent Spirit (that is so much boasted of) to cry out of our Injustice and Inhumanity, with as loud a voice as if” they intended to make him a Protestant martyr. Within the *Vindicators*’ theoretical imagination, “loud” dissent, theological uncertainty and popular credulity were inextricably linked. The biblical passage John Graham had cited in his dehortation against Quakerism—“Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth”—appeared on the pamphlet’s title page. Moreover, the way in which the *Vindicators* characterized their treatment of Hemphill reiterated the traditional stance toward dissent. Although the authors confessed that they did not know why this Irishman had left his homeland, they had “Silenc’d him in America.”<sup>47</sup>

The dispute between Franklin and the Commission elicited two contrasting visions of colonial America, as well as two very different conceptions of dissent. For the authors of the *Vindication*, America represented a refuge from “the Epidemical Corruption of the Age.” Until Hemphill’s arrival, they had hoped that “these remote corners of the Earth” would escape those pestilent “Errors that have overspread so great a part of the Church.” For Franklin, America was a refuge from another sort of European-born contagion, that of “slavish and arbitrary Principles.” But “even in these remote Parts of the Earth, (where they thought themselves secure).” Franklin lamented, people seemed susceptible to the disease. Fortunately, he noted:

[i]n this free Country, where the Understandings of men are under no civil Restraint, and their Liberties found and untouch’d, there is nothing more easy than to shew that a Doctrine is false, and of ill Consequence, if it really be so:

---

<sup>47</sup> *A Vindication*, 5, 2.

but if not, no Man, or Set of Men can make it so, by peremptorily declaring it unsound or dangerous, without vouchsafing to shew how or where.

Like Josiah Smith, Franklin was confident that sound procedures would lead to the attainment of truth. Indeed, he expressed the wish that religious disputes might be as amicably conducted as scientific controversies. In Franklin's America, only the use of reason could legitimately subdue error.<sup>48</sup>

In more ways than one, Franklin represented the incipient print culture that would render it difficult to silence any person or group. His contrarian sentiments complemented his professional ambitions. Franklin's role as a printer immersed him in the language and practices of the medium within which religious disputes would increasingly be argued. Franklin was in the business of providing new forums and larger audiences for different kinds of written address. Fittingly, he suggested that it would take more than bad names to damn false doctrines. In the realm of print, as the literary historian Michael Warner has argued, authority was deferred.<sup>49</sup> The theoretical responsibility for determining a text's validity—for damning or endorsing its doctrines—lay with the variety of readers who would consume words, rather than the limited range of writers who would produce them. In this realm, erroneous doctrines were purged through persuasion, in the free air of public debate, rather than through a minister's "dehortation" against error.

Yet, at a time when only large colonial towns were fortunate enough to have a printer, the space of published debate remained constricted. In addition, criticism of

---

<sup>48</sup> Franklin, "A Defence of the Reverend Mr. Hemphill's Observations," 92, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 53.

legitimate political and religious authorities—a broadly defined category—still constituted a criminal offense. Not long after the Hemphill dispute broke out, the New York publisher John Peter Zenger was charged with having libeled the Governor. A local jury acquitted the printer. Nonetheless, Zenger’s celebrated trial testified to the persistent association of criticism with sedition.<sup>50</sup> New York’s Chief Justice instructed Zenger’s jury to only consider whether he was responsible for printing the offending articles, not the verity of the criticism contained therein. No matter what its content, public opposition to political authorities, like the denigration of an established minister or the denial of God, was thought to “alienate the affections” of both church members and government subjects. A decade and a half before the Hemphill dispute, the historian Thomas Curry notes, Massachusetts authorities reacted to the anti-congregational pamphlets of the Anglican convert John Checkley “by harassing him, trying him for propagating material that reflected badly on ‘the ministers of the Gospel Established in this Province,’ and fining him L50 and costs.”<sup>51</sup> Although prosecutions for seditious libel had declined during the seventeenth century, the principle endured: by its nature, criticism diminished the dignity of public office and weakened the ties

---

<sup>50</sup> Zenger’s lawyer, Alexander Hamilton, made the dubious case that truthful criticism was exempt from the purview of the law. He also invoked New York’s tradition of forbearance toward religious dissent. “There is heresy in law as well as in religion,” Hamilton argued, “... and we well know that it is not two centuries that a man would have been burnt as an heretic for owning such opinions in matters of religion as are publicly wrote and printed at this day.” Given that he could not recall anyone being prosecuted for religious heresy in the colony, Hamilton continued, it seemed “pretty clear that in New York a man may make very free with his God, but he must take special care what he says of his governor.” *A Brief Narrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger*, ed. Stanley Nider Katz, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), 87.

<sup>51</sup> Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 89.

that bound every community together. Not until the end of the eighteenth century would a substantive justification for such criticism emerge.<sup>52</sup>

The Synod's reaction to Hemphill conveyed the early eighteenth-century understanding that believers could not be detached from their nefarious beliefs. Errors were as closely tied to the misguided souls who embraced them as state policies were to the honor of the officials who enforced them. In response to Franklin's charge that two Presbyterian ministers had condemned Hemphill by name, Obadiah Jenkins insisted on the importance of marking the source of the error. "There is no warning People against destructive Errors," Jenkins wrote, "without pointing out *Hemphill* to the Audience, as the guilty Person."<sup>53</sup> Too many souls hung in the balance for the contagion to be politely distinguished from its perpetrator. As the Synod's apologists saw the matter, there was ample warrant for censuring the man as well as the man's beliefs. They were not denying Hemphill's rights, for no one had the right to judge wrong. If anyone was being imposed upon, Jonathan Dickinson argued, it was the society of believers that made up the Synod.<sup>54</sup> Hemphill's public dissent, like political

---

<sup>52</sup> According to the historian Leonard Levy, pre-Revolutionary America "produced no broad concept of freedom of expression, none that rejected the suppressive idea of the common law that government, religion, or morality can be criminally attacked just by bad opinions." Leonard W. Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 119. Larry Eldridge has challenged Levy's points, claiming that, while colonial law changed little during the seventeenth century, "attitudes toward it" changed dramatically. So that seditious libel was prosecuted less frequently and harshly in 1700 than it had been earlier in the century. See Larry D. Eldridge, *A Distant Heritage: The Growth of Free Speech in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), esp. 41.

<sup>53</sup> Obadiah Jenkins, *Remarks upon the Defence of the Reverend Mr. Hemphill's Observations: In a Letter to a Friend* (Philadelphia, 1735), 16.

<sup>54</sup> Dickinson, *Remarks*, 14-17.



criticism, posed a danger to every member of the community. The Synod's defenders thought it their duty to exorcize this infected portion of its body, lest the whole be contaminated. To forbear Hemphill's mischievous practices would expose everyone to the eternal injuries that such societies were formed to prevent.

In the matter of religious differences, as in so much else, Franklin seemed curiously detached from his time. At one point in the Hemphill controversy, he observed that Philadelphia alone was home to "half a Dozen, for aught I know half a Score, different Sects." And, he continued, "were the Hearts of Men to be at once opened to our View, we should perhaps see a thousand Diversities more."<sup>55</sup> Traditionalists like the Synod's Vindicators, Franklin suggested, suppressed the true diversity of religious opinion. Whereas John Thomson treated disclosure as an instrument of doctrinal uniformity and denominational unity, for Franklin, disclosure made transparent differences that had not yet even been articulated. Whereas Cotton Mather subscribed to the position that dissent could only be corrected when it was enunciated, Franklin indicated that the true extent of Philadelphia's diversity would only become evident were everyone's private sentiments autonomously revealed. Whereas Hugh Fisher had observed that "heretics" should be publicly marked with their "proper names and Characters," Franklin noted that only the believers themselves could properly describe their own faith.

The young printer's role in the Hemphill dispute sheds light on the relationship between liberalism, printed debate and the problem of religious differences in early

---

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "A Letter to a Friend in the Country" (Philadelphia, 1735) in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 84.

eighteenth-century culture. According to Franklin, a doctrine's validity was independent of the person who embraced it. Likewise, printed opinion attenuated the corporeal associations that made the metaphor compelling. At first, of course, it must have reinforced the metaphor of contagion by circulating dissent more effectively. In the long-run, however, it performed a service similar to that of liberal ideology—separating people from the damage their opinions had once been thought to engender. Anonymously written essays represented only the most extreme form of the disembodied opinion that pamphlets and newspapers publicized. The imaginative function of print thereby complemented the legal function of liberalism. Like Franklin himself, both served to create a social and ideological space for the maintenance of difference.

Americans would gradually distinguish people and the damage that had once been thought to be caused by their opinions. And they would gradually endorse Franklin's idea that each believer possessed a faith that only he or she could properly describe. But change came gradually, through arguments and counter-arguments, never in the triumph of a transcendent principle. Traditional assumptions died slowly. Liberal ideals of individual judgment and mutual consent acquired widespread currency in a culture that continued to evince a great deal of hostility toward disagreement. Indeed, for the next several decades, religious dissenters in both the New England and Southern colonies were prosecuted for itinerant preaching, nonpayment of ecclesiastical taxes, and failure to acquire state certification. And nearly every colony denied equal religious privileges to Catholics—whose spiritual commitments were thought to oblige them to outside political authorities. But whether

or not eighteenth-century Americans made consistent and concrete provisions for the rights they espoused, there was no disavowing the rights themselves. The ascendancy of these ideals coincided with the expansion of printed debate and a growing awareness of the religious diversity that printed words addressed. After mid-century, those who wrote about religious issues would often do so with diverse audiences in mind, and increasingly, upon the premise that every believer deserved equal recognition. In the intervening years, however, a religious revival swept the Anglo-American world. This "Great Awakening" sent both preachers and lay people across church boundaries in search of spiritual satisfaction. Their movement would upset the fragile consensus that accorded rights to individual judgments and pose yet another problem for colonial American culture: What if dissent did not present itself in the form of a contagious error transmitted from person to person, but in the sheer movement of people themselves?

## Chapter 2

### Partial Judgments and Divided Churches: America's First Great Awakening

I Cor. xi. 18. *I hear that there be Divisions among you, and I partly believe it.*

“Let not such powerful arguments as *I think, I am afraid, I believe, and I verily believe*, hinder us from thinking and believing for our selves ...”

John Caldwell, *An Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this Part of the World* (1742)

#### Introduction: Mutual Persecution

In 1739, the Baptist minister John Callendar published a revisionist history of the colony of Rhode Island and Providence.<sup>1</sup> He respectfully dissented from the revered congregational historians who charged the colony's earliest inhabitants with the sin of sectarian excess. Callendar was particularly troubled by the historical aspersions cast upon the most maligned of the English religious outcasts who settled early seventeenth-century Rhode Island—the “Antinomians.” These religious radicals were banished from the Massachusetts-Bay colony in 1637, following the so-called Antinomian Controversy, which pitted the Bay colony's leading magistrates against a small circle of individuals gathered around the charismatic figure of one Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson accused the existing church establishment of preaching the

---

<sup>1</sup> John Callendar, *An Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence* (Boston, 1739). According to William McLoughlin, Callendar's pamphlet represented “the first history of the colony ever written by a New England Baptist.” See McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 298. The book was apparently much “praised” among “the educated class of that and the next generation.” See John Langdon Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts*, Vol. 7 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1945), 254.

efficacy of human works, a doctrine known as “Arminianism,” and thereby slighting the determining force of God’s grace. Callendar noted the intolerance of the Puritan magistrates, including the venerable John Winthrop, who had worked “strenuously ... to crush and exterminate the Opinions he disapproved.” Seventeenth-century Puritans had treated the Rhode Island’s founders according to that “Rule which will make every *Dissent* from, or Opposition to a Majority in any religious Affairs, to be Sedition.” However, Callendar conceded, it was hardly “peculiar in those People ... to think themselves bound in Conscience, to use the Sword of the civil Magistrate to ... cut them off from the State, that they might not infect the Church, or injure the publick Peace.” Since those early, intolerant times, “Greater Light” had entered the world and “all Parties by Turns, experiencing, and complaining aloud of the Hardships of Constraint, they are come to allow as reasonable to all others, what they want and challenge for themselves.” The mutuality of persecution, together with the complaining that accompanied it, made mutual forbearance appealing.<sup>2</sup>

Callendar insisted that “GOD” had made “ready a Placed prepared as an Asylum” for Massachusetts exiles in Rhode Island. Though the English had experienced some hardship in that place, they had been spared the “Diseases, and some other infectious Distempers” that afflicted the Native Americans there. Callendar recounted how:

A few Years ... before the *English* came to *Plymouth*, the *Indians* had been dreadfully wasted away by devouring Sickness, from

---

<sup>2</sup> John Callendar, *An Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence* (Boston, 1739) 20-21, 27, 16.

*Narranganset* to *Penobscut* [sic]. So that the Living sufficed not to bury the Dead, and the Ground was covered with their Bones in many Places. This wonderfully made Room for the *English* at *Plymouth* and *Massachusetts*, and those colonies protected the rest.

God's intention, it seems, had been to afflict the native peoples with punishments ("infectious Distempers") commensurate with their sins, and in doing so, to provide refuge for dissenters from an established church. But if God "wonderfully" brought a plague upon the non-Christian Indians who once inhabited it. He seems to have left the relationship between Christian peoples wonderfully contingent. Their mutual toleration emerged as the result of the concrete experience of persecution, rather than the *a priori* determination of a fatal disease. While He providentially secured space for their worship, and perhaps even conferred "Greater Light" upon them, it was their own persecution of one another that persuaded them of the value of forbearance.<sup>3</sup>

Callendar's account might serve, in the language of his time, as a "type" of the cultural transformation that colonial America was experiencing. The early seventeenth-century flight of religious dissenters, aimed at preserving God's saving remnant from the ravages of corrupt oppressors, was reproduced in miniature during the mid eighteenth-century religious revivals known as the Great Awakening. Supporters and opponents of the revival even revived the same terminology that had been employed in New England a century earlier—supporters of the Awakening were accused of Antinomianism, its opponents of Arminianism. The revivals were characterized by the constant movement of itinerant preachers between towns, lay

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-93, 69.

people between old parishes, and church minorities into new parishes. As itinerants like George Whitefield gathered large interdenominational crowds and marginal religious groups extended their influence into previously uncontested parishes, colonial Americans were prompted to reflect upon how their religious societies had been put together. In particular, they were compelled to consider whether the dissent of vocal minorities should be recognized as the legitimate expression of equal individuals, or dismissed as easily the dry bones of devastated tribes.

Historians have long focused on the Awakening's role in liberating individual consciences from external restrictions. They have treated the revivals as extended contests between those who wished to extend the scope of private judgment and those who wished to contain it. While acknowledging the significance of the many new religious alternatives available to individual believers, the ensuing pages will suggest that those "converted" during the revivals were less harshly reprimanded for the independent exercise of judgment than they were for their tendency to judge others "rashly." Unjust criticism, opponents of the Awakening argued, interfered with every believer's right to describe his religion on his own terms. Likewise, the newly converted—those most often accused of rash judging, and most often criticized for their "enthusiasm"—complained of oppressive restrictions on their capacity to move about freely and describe their spiritual experiences authentically. Mid-century Americans of all persuasions acknowledged that individuals were responsible for describing their own religious experiences. In this sense, it was not so much a novel sense of autonomy as it was a newfound sensitivity to criticism that made the revivals the transformative events that they were. Mutual "complaining," as John Callendar

might have put it, revealed the extent to which recognition was demanded for nearly every self-description.

### **The Partial Judgment**

In the 1739, the same year that Callendar published his history of Rhode Island and Whitefield began his tour of the colonies, a Boston Congregationalist named Charles Chauncy published one of the few systematic defenses of individual conscience to appear in eighteenth-century America. Chauncy, who would later play a leading part in the opposition to radical revivalism and, later still, in the resistance to British imperial policies, contended that when Christ directed a servant to “*compel them to come in*” (Luke 14:23) he enjoined nothing more than “Compulsion by sound Reasoning, good Argument.” Echoing seventeenth and early eighteenth-century English writings on behalf of toleration, Chauncy insisted that the mind and the body required distinct modes of compulsion. While the body might be moved through physical force, the mind was subject only to the “gentle Methods of Persuasion.” The decision to accept or reject gospel truths, Chauncy contended, resided exclusively with the “*free Choice*” of “rational, free Agents.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite his indictment of the clergymen who still zealously imposed creeds, Chauncy’s theoretical endorsement of individual choice and his insistence on a metaphysical divide between body and mind did not carry radical implications.

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles Chauncy, *The Only Compulsion Proper to be Made Use of in the Affairs of Conscience and Religion* (Boston: 1739), 2-3, 4, 10.



Hardly any contemporary colonists would have disagreed with him. However, over the next several years, as countless churches divided, hundreds of new churches came into existence, and dozens of itinerant preachers made their way between legally distinct parishes, Chauncy's injunction acquired a disquietingly concrete character. In town after town, new spiritual choices erupted onto the plane of colonial Americans' social and intellectual existence. Judgments that had been securely anchored to particular places, confined by particular institutions, defined by particular people, would come to roam as ceaselessly as the bodies that traveled to hear different preachers and attend different services. In place after place, geographical location no longer served as a barrier to spiritual satisfaction. To use a common contemporary expression, the Spirit was quite literally "moving" through the land.

During the late 1730s and early 1740s, parish lines came under nearly unrelenting assault—and established ministers came under nearly unrelenting criticism—as "New Light" preachers spread across New England and the middle colonies. For the New Lights, faith was measured by the experience of grace and inward piety, rather than doctrinal knowledge or external conformity. The New Lights subordinated the obligations of church allegiance to the delights of sincere faith. The itinerants' physical movement, their blatant disregard for parish boundaries, complemented the New Light's sometimes evident general contempt for theological forms and church affiliations. Those whose isolation prevented them from hearing particular preachers could read about them in the many new printed works, which appeared at the time. Connecting the itinerants promiscuous visits with the explosion

of print, the Anglican minister Timothy Cutler grumbled: “The presses are ever teeming with books and the women with bastards.”<sup>5</sup>

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-centuries, colonial Americans had learned to accommodate the sincere, preferably quiet, dissent of a socially and geographically, distinct minority, but had never before confronted the range of spiritual alternatives that the Awakening presented. Many “Old Light” ministers, who frowned on the New Lights excessive emotionalism, came to regard the itinerants, even those of their own denomination, with the same hostility once reserved for “sectarians.” The Reverend Nathaniel Eells noted that, in the past, he successfully “guard[ed]” his congregants against men of “Men of corrupt Principles,” staving off both “Anabaptism” and “Quakerism,” and was not about to permit a prominent revivalist to preach from his pulpit.<sup>6</sup> To their critics, the itinerants wanderings was a metaphor for the literal groundlessness of the arguments they advanced. To their adoring audiences, however, their appearance was not unlike the unpredictable, miraculous movings of the Holy Spirit.

The man who Rev. Eells pulpit refused to admit to his pulpit was the charismatic revivalist George Whitefield. In 1739, the same year that Callendar published his history of Rhode Island, Whitefield arrived on the shores of colonial

---

<sup>5</sup> MS letter from T. Cutler to Z. Grey, 24 September 1743, Boston Public Library. Cited in Susan O’Brien, “Eighteenth-Century Publishing Networks in the First Years of Transatlantic Evangelism,” *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, eds. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Eells, *A Letter to the Second Church* (Boston, 1745), 4.

America for his celebrated first tour.<sup>7</sup> No itinerant minister drew more attention than the man referred to as the Grand Itinerant. Crowds of several thousand sometimes gathered to hear this animated Methodist preach the joys of the New Birth. Whitefield urged his listeners to prepare their hearts to receive the grace bestowed by their omnipotent creator, to turn their lustful, world-burdened thoughts toward the perils of divine justice and the inimitable bliss that accompanied divine mercy. People of every conceivable church joined the throngs of worshipers. Whitefield welcomed them all. During a conversation with a fellow minister, Whitefield observed that he “saw regenerate souls among the Baptists, among the Presbyterians, among the Independents, and among the Church folks,—all children of God, and yet all born again in a different way of worship,” and asked, “who can tell which is the most evangelical?”<sup>8</sup> Whitefield prided himself on being as inclusive in his criticism as he was in his theology. “As I love all who love the Lord Jesus, of what communion soever,” he noted his journal, “so I reprove all whether Dissenters, or not Dissenters, who take His word into their mouths, but never felt Him dwelling in their hearts.”<sup>9</sup>

The Grand Itinerant frequently preached out-of-doors, in the streets and in the fields. In those open spaces where Whitefield spoke, his audience could freely weep, gasp, or swoon at his graphic depictions of redemption and sin, heaven and hell. They

---

<sup>7</sup> An ordained Anglican, Whitefield formed part of the burgeoning Methodist movement within the Church of England. During Whitefield’s early visits to America, the Methodists had not yet been established as a distinct denomination.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745*, ed. Richard L. Bushman (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 29.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the formative years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 117-118.

could succumb to the feverish tremors that seemed to take hold of their bodies. The emotional response, particularly the alleged “bodily effects,” Whitefield and his fellow itinerants generated conformed to what learned individuals knew about those possessed of strange or heretical beliefs, or those under the influence of malicious forces.<sup>10</sup> The popular itinerant James Davenport’s habit of tossing his clothing into a bonfire only reinforced this notion. However, for the mass of lay people, and for a growing number colonial preachers, sincere belief was increasingly signified by the outward effects that it induced, the uncontrollable, unconscious movements of a body freed from its dependence on the carefully measured authority of the tutored mind.<sup>11</sup>

What irked contemporary critics almost as much as Whitefield’s emotional brand of preaching, was the mutability, as well as the multiplicity, of his attachments. To some observers, Whitefield was damningly promiscuous. A Boston broadside *Mr. W---D’s Soliloquy, or a Serious Debate with Himself what Course He Shall Take* published in 1745, sarcastically represented the choices—both of affiliation and place—that Whitefield confronted:

Swarms of *Moravians* would have done,  
Had Brother *Tennant* [sic] held his Tongue.  
Should I go back to the Church Party,  
They never would receive me hearty:  
The *Quakers* won’t admit me now,

---

<sup>10</sup> The phrase “bodily effects” appeared in “The Testimony and Advice of an Assembly of Pastors of Churches in New England, at a meeting in Boston, July 7, 1743, occasioned by the late happy Revival of Religion in many parts of the Land.” Quoted from Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston, 1842), 296.

<sup>11</sup> On the performative aspects of New Light preaching, and that of Whitefield in particular, see Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

Since I am charg'd with breach of Vow;  
 Who, tho' like me they do not pray, Pay Rev`rence to a *Yea* and *Nay*.  
 The *Separatists* yet are few.  
 Tho' they alone, of all, are true

To those of the church to which Whitefield formally belonged, the Anglican church, his alleged promiscuity represented an insult to the Church, as well as the state. One Anglican minister deplored Whitefield's "Practice ... of itinerating over all Parts of the British Dominions," as well as his readiness "to preach the Gospel to any Sect, Party, or Faction, that shew Willingness or Desire to hear [him]."<sup>12</sup> In addition to the "corrupt principles" he advanced, the "enthusiasm" he displayed in preaching and the passions that he tended to incite in his listeners, Whitefield's supposed infidelity warranted his exclusion from at least one church. The Congregationalist Nathaniel Henschman prohibited the Grand Itinerant from preaching in his pulpit on account of Whitefield's "frequent changing Sides, (In one Country he is a true Son of the Church of England, in a second, a stanch Presbyterian, and in a third, a strong Congregationalist) ...."<sup>13</sup> A Pennsylvanian Presbyterian expressed the widely-held sentiment that Whitefield proved "*inconsistent with himself*."<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Prescott, *A Letter To the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, An Itinerant Preacher* (Boston, 1745), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Nathanael Henschman, *Reasons Offered by Mr. Nathanael Henschman* (Boston, 1745), 7

<sup>14</sup> George Gillespy, *Remarks upon Mr. George Whitefield, Proving Him a Man under Delusion* (Philadelphia, 1744), 2. The assaults became so insistent that his friend Thomas Foxcroft felt compelled to compose a sermon in defense of Whitefield's "UNIFORMITY with his own Subscriptions and Ordination-Vows." See Thomas Foxcroft, *An Apology in Behalf of the Revd. Mr. Whitefield* (Boston, 1745).

It was not only the multiple attachments, but the persuasive authority that Whitefield exercised over his audience—particularly the observed physical influence on his female auditors, some of whom experienced “strange unusual Bodily Motions”—that earned him a reputation for promiscuity.<sup>15</sup> A pamphlet signed “A Number of Laymen” portrayed Whitefield, as an unlearned seducer, referring to him as “the Rev. Batchelor of Arts.” The criticism aimed at Whitefield, who did in fact remain a bachelor his entire life, was not particularly novel. Dissenting sects had long been accused of committing the most aberrant of sexual acts. Likewise, anticlerical polemics had long accused ministers of abusing the affection of their female worshippers. But romantic suasion seems to have posed an especially urgent problem for an era that witnessed such a radical reconfiguration of both authority and community.<sup>16</sup> With so many available alternatives and so few legal restrictions on religious affiliation, there was no telling what damning forms of self-description might result.

The persuasive power of most itinerants was measured by their success in bringing their listeners to the comprehension of their own vileness and their desperate

---

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Blair, “A Short and Faithful Narrative of the Late Remarkable Revival of Religion in New-Londonderry” (1744), *The Great Awakening*, 73-76. The quotation appears in Susan Juster’s book on the role of gender in the development of New England evangelism, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Probably not coincidentally, the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of the seduction novel. Such works often featured an innocent but deluded heroine, lured away from the protection and authority of her parents, and at some point deflowered by a cunning suitor. As the literary scholar Jay Fliegelman has argued, the Anglo-American world seems to have been less impressed with the idea that human beings are inherently corrupt than with the notion that human beings are inherently corruptible. See Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American revolution against patriarchal authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 2, 15.

need for God's saving grace—in other words, to convert them. When an individual converted, she turned toward God, unreservedly embracing Him, her church and the obligations imposed by her community. Some churches, such as New England's congregational churches, had traditionally demanded that individuals demonstrate evidence of their conversion as a condition of membership. However, over the previous century such requirements had been significantly relaxed. New Light preachers like Whitefield offended their fellow clergymen not only because of the emphasis they placed on the possibility of immediate conversion, but because of their indifference to the beliefs and affiliations that resulted from such a spiritual transformation. By contrast, as Old Light ministers saw it, changing beliefs and attitudes at the prompting of an enthusiastic preacher subordinated the wisdom of the centuries to the inclinations of the moment. The pious soul, shorn of its attachment to a particular doctrine, submission to a particular authority, and love toward a particular community, moved at the behest of rhetoric, swayed almost as a mind without a body.

In Virginia, where the Anglican Church was established by law and where the revivalistic spirit took hold several years after it made its mark in the North, the itinerant Presbyterian Samuel Davies drew the ire of local and imperial authorities for “disturb[ing]” the consciences of the colony's newly settled peoples. Virginia's Attorney General noted his dismay at seeing “schism spreading itself through a colony which has been famous for uniformity of religion.” A letter from the Bishop of London to one of Davies' correspondents suggested that Davies and his fellow Presbyterians were claiming “a natural right to propagate their opinions in religion,” something for which the Act of Toleration surely did not provide. According to the

Bishop, the Act of Toleration was intended to “ease” dissenting consciences, the very consciences Davies was now “disturb[ing].” He accused Davies (as Whitefield had been accused before him) of traveling vast distances to proselytize members of the Bishop’s own legally established church, in a land where there were almost no dissenters just a few years before.<sup>17</sup>

Davies endorsed the same interdenominational piety that Whitefield had so welcomed and defended his right to “spread” his opinions. While insisting that ministers might preach outside of their “*particular Places*” if the “*general*” good required it, Davies claimed that he had “not used *one Argument* with *one Person*, since I came into this Colony, to persuade him to join with us as a *Party*.”<sup>18</sup> Davies wondered “whether the laws of England forbid men to change their opinions, and act according to them when changed.” Were members of the established church forbidden to alter their views, he asked?<sup>19</sup> Davies professed “a sincere zeal ... to propagate the catholic religion of Jesus in its life and power.” without consideration of the particular “denomination its particular members assume.” In fact, he maintained, he would rather have seen “a pious [Anglican] than a graceless *Presbyterian*.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Davies concluded that the “*Confederacy*” between George Whitefield and

---

<sup>17</sup> William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical* (Philadelphia: 1850), 176-178.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Davies, *The Impartial Trial, impartially Tried, and convicted of Partiality* (Williamsburg, 1748), 26, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Davies, “To the Bishop of London” [un-submitted letter] William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical* (Philadelphia: 1850), 193, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Davies, *The State of Religion among the Protestant Dissenters in Virginia* (Boston, 1751), 7.



the itinerant Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent resulted from their “*unanimous Concurrence to do good ... among all denominations.*” But he objected to the way the Bishop lumped him “promiscuously with the methodists, as though [he] were of their party.”<sup>21</sup> The New Lights, according to Davies, had not done away with denominational distinctions, just the intolerance that characterized relations between members of different religious parties.

To those who opposed the revivals, the sudden change that Davies and Whitefield endorsed still represented a childish error with irremediable consequences. The anti-New Light sermon Isaac Stiles preached on election day, 1743, condemned the “changeling” who whimsically embraced whatever principles suited him at the moment (“like Children tossed to and fro”). Appropriately, Stiles insisted that the changelings of the present day were too infinite in appearance to be described at once: their true vileness could only be represented “in *Miniature.*” What he could say was that they spread “like the Plague of Locust or Lice brought upon the Egyptians.” Stiles also likened changelings to “a common Prostitute, whose Love is never fix’d” an identification they would make themselves if they were only to “behold their Face & proper Features as in a Glass.” To capture the image of the changeling in a glass would be to objectify their wretchedness, to match their capricious self-descriptions against the impartial display of the mirror. Stiles warned against entrusting “the Sword of civil Government in the hand of one that is Delirious or in a Phrensy.” Changelings routinely demanded that they, “like Self-Conceited & Rebellious

---

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Davies, “To the Bishop of London,” 199.

Absalom,” be “*made Judge in the Land*” imposing their fickle perspective on the rest of the community.<sup>22</sup>

“A Number of Laymen,” attributed the present “Confusions and Divisions” to the clergy’s seemingly “contradictory” positions on the revival, which had become all too evident in May of 1743 when two separate ministerial conventions constructed strikingly different accounts of recent events. As they viewed the matter, the presence of so many alternatives led to changed opinions, and changed opinions led to unjust criticism. Their world, the Laymen claimed, had been transformed with the arrival of the Grand Itinerant, whose followers “pronounc’d this, that and the other Minister. Unconverted, Pharisee, Dead, dry Bones. . . .” The Laymen also condemned the “irreverent Behaviour of the People,” who could once “bear with each other in Charity,” and who had not always felt compelled to judge the “Hearts of their Neighbours.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps nothing caused more consternation among colonial American clergy than this now seemingly widespread practice of judging “Hearts.” No one was more closely associated with such uncharitable judgments than the Irish-born Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent. As early as 1737, the Tennent, along with several graduates of the one room school Gilbert’s father had established, began preaching regularly in New Jersey and Pennsylvania churches other than their own. These young itinerants harangued clergymen who seemed more interested in inculcating doctrine than

---

<sup>22</sup> Isaac Stiles, *A Looking-Glass for Changelings* (New London, 1743): 16, 12, 26, 18, 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> *The Testimony and Advice of a Number of Laymen Respecting Religion, and the Teachers of it* (Boston, 1743), 1-2, 6.

converting souls. Criticism of the established clergy culminated in Gilbert Tennent's inflammatory sermon, *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, which he delivered in March of 1740. Tennent directed his wrath against the "Pharisees" of the world, the "Hypocrites" who dwelled all too comfortably in their professed spiritual accomplishments. He defended the right of the laity to pursue spiritual satisfaction wherever they could find it. Tennent also defended the right of those who had experienced God's saving grace, to cast judgment on other souls. "Tho' he cannot know the States of subtil [sic] Hypocrites infallibly," Tennent wrote, the sanctified individual was entitled to venture "a near Guess." Hypocrites opposed "all Knowing of others, and Judging," he observed, "in order to hide their own Filthiness." To rely on traditional means of demonstrating faith, the external forms and codified doctrines of the church, was to dwell pridefully on the margins of true, sanctifying devotion, to remain hopelessly of the world. Tennent urged individuals to bind themselves to one another by means of that faith which could hardly be spoken. The "Unity" of individuals bound by something other than their sincere love for God "would be like the Unity of the Devils." So, he demanded a form of association that would separate the true believers from the false.<sup>24</sup>

The entire discussion of "rash judging" as it was called, marked a dramatic turning-point in the way Americans talked about their religious differences. In contrast to the discursive conventions that prevailed just a decade or two earlier, according to which religious dissenters argued that no one could determine the truth

---

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (Philadelphia, 1741), 30-31.

with any certainty, dissenters now presumed the liberty to judge based on the certainty they attributed to their own judgments. Meanwhile, those who defended the established churches insisted, in good liberal form, that all knowledge was irremediably partial. “The Associated Ministers of the County of Windham,” for instance, rejected the notion that the Saints could recognize one another because of some exaggerated “inward Feeling.” The converted, the saintly (“a Man who has himself had Experience of a Work of divine Grace upon his Heart”) might come to a “probable Judgment” regarding others own relations of their experiences, but could not “pretend to any other Kind of certainty in this matter.”<sup>25</sup> Mainstream Calvinists had long counseled against judging other men’s souls, but the demand had never been as public or as urgent.

A fellow member of Gilbert Tennent’s Philadelphia Synod, the anti-subscriptionist Jonathan Dickinson, also warned against such “rash judgments.” Dickinson called for an end to precisely the sort of judgments that Tennent was encouraging. Human judgments, Dickinson insisted, could only be made regarding outward behavior, not inward motivation. It was “one Thing to find Fault with Men’s Conduct, and another to censure their State.” Dickinson posited an association that would become common during this period: between the verdicts of “indifferent Judges” and the judgments of God. He asked his audience whether their “dividing Practices” would “stand the Tryal of indifferent Judges or of that Judge who had required you to *obey them that have the Rule over you, to submit your selves to them*

---

<sup>25</sup> *A Letter from the Associated Ministers of the County of Windham* (Boston, 1745), 26-27, 31-32.

*that Watch for your Souls; and to be at Peace among your selves,”* whether they would “stand the Tryal of the great Day, when all Disguises will be removed; and you and I must be judged according to what is written in the Book of God.” If they would not obey the judgments of “indifferent” persons or the divine Judge’s injunction to obey their superiors in this world, perhaps they would consider their practices in light of the account that would be taken of their behavior in the next.<sup>26</sup>

Impartial judgments were particularly necessary at this moment, the Reverend John Caldwell noted, “when such Diversity of Sentiments about Religious Principles Prevail.” Not simply diversity by itself, but the way “Men of contrary Principles equally pretend[ed] to the Direction of the Spirit,” and how they were “equally censorious and uncharitable to such as differ from ‘em” rendered an “Impartial Trial” necessary. The fervent self-righteousness of the newly converted, Caldwell contended, had rendered them incapable of enduring criticism, unwilling to bear the judgments of anyone else but their fellow enthusiasts.<sup>27</sup> The practice of rash judging rendered the behavior of the evangelized especially troubling. These enthusiasts, Caldwell argued, were attempting to penetrate the secrets to which only God was privy. Although we might judge an individual’s opinion to be false, Caldwell noted, no further judgments were warranted. He joined other opponents of the revival in contending that the rightful sphere of judgment extended only to that which might be

---

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *Danger of Schisms and Contentions* (New York, 1739) 21, 33-34. On Dickinson’s sermon, see Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Formation of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1949), 84.

<sup>27</sup> John Caldwell, *An Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this Part of the World* (Boston, 1742), 6, 27.

observed with the senses. We knew all that we could know by the external evidence we observed. As a consequence, our Spiritual zeal was no more a sufficient condition for judging other souls, than it was evidence that saving grace resided within one's own soul.

Established clergymen such as Stiles, Caldwell and the Associated Ministers, thus challenged the evangelical contention that the saints should seek one another out. What the New Lights took as an act of mutual recognition, their opponents regarded as the expression of prostituted judgments, bent to the pliable will of the enthusiastic convert. Stiles' "glass" embodied the same ostensibly objective judgment that Caldwell enjoined. Here was an instrument of judgment, considerably more reflective and impartial than the New Lights ever changing standards for recognition. The Old Lights interpreted the effort to locate fellow saints as an act of self-inflated promiscuity. On their view, the evangelicals fabricated church unity through indiscriminate imitation rather than rigorous devotion. They substituted subjective *expression* for private judgment. "Let not such powerful arguments as *I think, I am afraid, I believe, and I verily believe,*" Caldwell entreated his audience, "hinder us from thinking and believing for our selves." The challenge, he continued, was to avoid letting "such common Place Talk as will prove all Doctrines equally good, have any Influence upon our Minds."<sup>28</sup> By sanctioning rash judgments and by conferring so much authority on individual expressions of belief, Caldwell suggested, the

---

<sup>28</sup> Caldwell, *An Impartial Trial*, 48.

evangelical movement had actually diminished the individual autonomy for which the liberal right of private judgment provided.

New Light supporters of the revival saw the matter differently, of course. For them, the individual right of private judgment represented a right both to describe one's own sincerely felt convictions and to determine who else shared them. America's most famous theologian, the Congregational minister Jonathan Edwards, published a systematic defense of New Light practices in 1743. Edwards had provoked some of the very earliest stirrings of the Great Awakening in his Connecticut River town of Northampton, Massachusetts. There, in 1734 and 1735, he observed approvingly as his congregants hearkened to the spiritual tasks he set before them. His *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival in New-England* appeared at a time of growing hostility toward the perceived excesses of the revival. In this lengthy treatise, Edwards dwelt on the insufficiency of language in communicating the movings of the soul. The individual experience of grace was as unpredictable, as resistant to description, as were God's intentions. According to Edwards, the individual perceived saving grace within, much as someone would the blowing of the wind. In both cases, shared experience represented the only means of demonstrating what could be indisputably felt but only imperfectly communicated.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Edwards argued.

---

<sup>29</sup> For a fuller description of Edwards' insistence on the inadequacy of language, as well as his use of the wind analogy, see Amy Schrager Lang's insightful interpretation of the Edwards-Chauncy dispute in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. 162-168.

the practice of “Censuring others” was not the altogether unexpected outcome of a period in which many had been undergone a profound conversion experience.<sup>30</sup>

The closest thing to an official statement on the Awakening came with the publication of Charles Chauncy’s lengthy response to Edwards’ *Some Thoughts*. Chauncy’s *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England* (1743), explicitly eschewed the traditional opening apology, and concluded with the signatures of several hundred New England dignitaries, including those of the governors of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. Noting that he borrowed his title from a work of John Winthrop’s, Chauncy prefaced his account with an extended comparison of the New Light outbreak to the contagion that Anne Hutchinson and her fellow Antinomians had spread in defiance of New England’s Puritan founders. During the early years of Puritan settlement, Chauncy maintained, these “Opinionists” carried their errors from England to America. The Antinomian “infection” was spread effectively, in part, because the Antinomians successfully acquainted themselves with so many people.<sup>31</sup> In Chauncy’s hands, the metaphor of infection constituted an indictment of the carriers as much as it did an indictment of those who merely experienced the symptoms. It was upon the proselytizers who disseminated this plague of corrupt practices and principles, rather than those who experienced their awful bodily effects—the trembling and shrieking, the weeping and

---

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival in New-England,” *The Great Awakening*, ed. C.C. Goen. Vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 322.

<sup>31</sup> Chauncy, Charles, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England* (Boston, 1743), vii-xiii.



sighing—that the burden of sin lay. Like many of his contemporaries, Chauncy associated New Light preaching with seduction, citing the biblical passages which indicated that in “the last days” there would appear those who “creep into Houses, and lead captive silly Women laden with sins; led away with divers lusts; Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”<sup>32</sup>

Chauncy had by no means abandoned his liberal commitment to the right of private judgment, nor his opposition to state interference in matters of conscience. As he had done in 1739, he insisted that individuals must independently inquire into religious matters, taking nothing on trust either from “single Persons, or public Bodies.” Nor should civil magistrates play a role in the determination of religious matters. In fact, he insisted that private judgment be protected to the point of recommending that civil magistrates “restrain some Men’s *Tongues* with *Bit* and *Bridle*.” Religion, he maintained, could not legitimately be employed as a cloak for personal invective. Chauncy also stressed the significance of “true CHRISTIAN CHARITY,” which entailed love toward those outside of one’s own “*Opinion* and *Party*.” In contrast to those who defended religious creeds and confessions of faith, who demanded that uniform assent be elicited from the stupid masses, liberal clergymen like Chauncy demanded that zealous, sharp-tongued critics of the established churches be quieted. But in the heat of the Awakening, these positions were difficult to distinguish from one another. As had been the case during the Hemphill dispute of 1735, the most committed proponents of the liberal right of

---

<sup>32</sup> Chauncy cited Timothy Ch. 3, v. 1, 6, 7, 8 and 13. Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts*, 369.

private judgment proved amenable to the practice of silencing dissent. For them, the right to privately judge still entailed the obligation to judge in private.<sup>33</sup>

Chauncy expressed his wish that *Seasonable Thoughts* might serve as “a great Preservative against the Errors and Disorders,” which contemporary zealots had “*unhappily run into*,” that it might serve “not only to guard those who are not as yet infected, but to check the Growth of our Difficulties.”<sup>34</sup> As it turned out, most of the reading public appears to have been no more impressed by his alleged antidote than they were by the vaccines offered as cures for small pox. It is hardly surprising that the pamphlet proved difficult to sell.<sup>35</sup> Where religious claims were as hotly contested as they were in mid-eighteenth century New England, the pretence of speaking univocally on behalf of the general public could not help but fail. Chauncy suggested that what the New Lights recognized in one another represented nothing more than the same affliction: an excessive pride in their own judgments. Chauncy also shared the Old Light conviction belief that to be *persuaded* was to silently and voluntarily embrace the truths that God had made available to everyone. He could not contemplate the existence of a religious society that would need to continually justify its existence before its critics. Repeated acts of persuasion, however, were precisely what the “rashly judging” New Lights were demanding.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 367, 368, 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., xxvi. I have removed the distracting italics that once graced this entire sentence.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Heimert and Perry Miller quote a contemporary who noted that the tract was “never vendible.” See Heimert and Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 292.

## The Divided Church

According to established ministers like Charles Chauncy, the tremors of the enthusiastic believer, the physically seductive quality of New Light preaching, and the transience of the evangelical preacher, were all clear manifestations of how bodily necessity had trespassed upon the autonomy of the individual mind. During the Awakening, religious societies found themselves besieged by dissenters who refused to stay where they were, and refused to remain quiet if they did. To the legal toleration that religious dissent generally enjoyed, the mid-century religious revivals added the sanction that individuals demanded for their own subjective experience. Whether a community could be forged from such notoriously incongruous materials would now constitute the most pressing of questions. Not surprisingly, this problem received its most extensive treatment in Philadelphia's Presbyterian Synod.

The controversy over the eccentric young Irish preacher Samuel Hemphill had barely ended when disagreements over the examination of ministerial candidates split the Presbyterian Synod in two. Supporters and opponents of the revival—referred to as “New Siders” and “Old Siders” respectively—edged toward a showdown in 1738 when the Synod passed two divisive acts, mandating ministerial examinations for those educated in non-traditional colleges and restricting itinerant preaching.<sup>36</sup> Soon

---

<sup>36</sup> As Leonard Trinterud, Elizabeth Nybakken, and, most recently, Patrick Griffin, have suggested, many of these differences extended back into pre-migration past of these largely Scotch and Scotch-Irish peoples. See *The Forming of an American Tradition*, 73-85; Nybakken, “New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences on Colonial Presbyterianism,” *Journal of American History* 68 (1982), 813-32; and, Griffin, “The People with No Name: The Ulster Presbyterian Transatlantic Experience and

after, the New Siders began preaching, uninvited, within the parish bounds of the regularly-ordained clergy. Then, the evangelical New Brunswick Presbytery rebuffed the synod's demand to exclude from its pulpits the Log College graduate who refused to undergo synodical examination. Gilbert Tennent's *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* crystallized New Side grievances with the Old Siders. Fed up with the New Side's "ensoriousness," their itinerant preaching, their resistance to synodical authority, and their emotional brand of piety, the Old Siders presented a *Protestation* to the entire Synod when it assembled in May, 1741. The New Siders withdrew.<sup>37</sup>

The dispute over the *Protestation* suggests how significant a problem dissent now posed for religious authority, and just how significant an obstacle differences now presented to church unity. The New Light minister Gilbert Tennent responded to the *Protestation* with an extensive critique of the Synod's decision. While it was perfectly just for a majority to "reason with their scrupulous Brethren," Tennent maintained, if the dissenters still could not conscientiously comply after the issue had been debated, then "mutual Forbearance"—not majoritarian imposition—was in order. Throughout his relatively modest apology Tennent employed the phrase "in our Opinion." At one point, he wrote: "We conceiving the aforesaid Laws to be (in our Opinion) unscriptural and arbitrary, as well as of fatal Tendency to mar the Progress of the Work of God in this Land; did judge ourselves obliged, in Conscience, to oppose them, both by Speech and Practice." The apostrophe "in our Opinion" represented a

---

Identity in a British Atlantic World" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1999). Quotation from Trinterud, *The Formation of an American Tradition*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> The Old Siders may simply have "declared themselves to be the synod." Quote from Trinterud, *The Formation of an American Tradition*, 105.

rhetorical redundancy that gestured at once toward the Tennent's insistence on ecclesiastical restraint and his assertion of individual subjectivity. Tennent then noted, in an implicit yet powerful contrast, how the Old Sides "express[ed] their Protest with extraordinary Solemnity." He expressed his "hope that this Method" would "not influence the Impartial and Judicious." Undoubtedly, Tennent believed that the "Impartial" would find his invocation of subjective autonomy more compelling than the Old Sides' authoritative assertion of their own authority.<sup>38</sup>

*The Apology of the Presbytery of New-Brunswick* reiterated Tennent's criticism, challenging the majoritarian assumptions upon which the Old Sides' built their case for obedience. The authors of this work (of whom Tennent was surely one) denied the Synod's ostensible claim to "Legislative Authority," which made "the Terms of Communion as variable as any Weather-Cock: so that a Man is in continual Danger of being cast out of Communion ... unless he has a Conscience as plyable as Wax, ready to receive every Impression, or can alter his Sentiments out of Complaisance to a Majority of Votes, as fast as the Camelion its Colours." Adherence to the whim of the majority, they maintained, would entail an attempt to remold what could not be molded, an attempt to reshape the instrument through which God's immutable wisdom entered the world. Nor was it of any consequence to suggest, as the national churches of Scotland and England had long done, that certain matters could be safely ruled upon without substituting human judgment for God's. Synods

---

<sup>38</sup> Tennent, Gilbert, *Remarks Upon a Protestation Presented to the Synod of Philadelphia, June 1, 1741* (Philadelphia, 1741), 105, 14.

should merely offer “their deliberate Judgment” on the law, rather than legislating it themselves.<sup>39</sup>

A comprehensive vindication of synodical power was left to the pro-subscriptionist minister John Thomson, whose book-length *The Government of the Church of Christ* was purportedly read before the Synod itself in May, 1741.<sup>40</sup> In addition to defending the Old Side’s claims within the Synod and the Synod’s claims within its territorial jurisdiction, Thomson denounced New Side practices, and, in particular, the practice of “Rash Judging.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the two matters seem to have been closely intertwined for him. The thrust of Thomson’s argument was that decisions made by a legitimate authority (a Synod, for instance) could be neither criticized nor disobeyed. Thomson contended that “Private Judgment,” was properly exercised in judging the particular applications of church-approved doctrine. “[T]he People who are ruled,” he wrote, “are not the proper judges of the Rulers Authority.”<sup>42</sup> Thomson contended that there existed a realm of private spiritual “interest” or of “free intimate private voluntary Conversation” un-burdened by the judgments of others, and

---

<sup>39</sup> *The Apology of the Presbytery of New-Brunswick for Their Dissenting from Two Acts or New Religious Laws, which were made at the last Session of our Synod* (Philadelphia, 1741), 67.

<sup>40</sup> I say “ostensibly” because it contained extensive references to the pamphlet Tennent published in response to the *Protestation*.

<sup>41</sup> John Thomson, *The Government of the Church of Christ, and the Authority of Church Judicatories Established on a Scripture Foundation, and the Spirit of Rash Judging Arraigned and Condemned* (Philadelphia, 1741). The matter of rash judging seems to have been something more than an abstraction for Thomson, who complained that “the more forward and faithful I was in warning the People of my own Congregation” about the excesses of the Awakening, “the more I was maligned, despised, hated and forsaken by my own People.” (iii-iv)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

distinct from the church members obligation to profess an “Acquaintance” with the Presbyteries Confession of Faith.

Thus, in 1740 as in the subscription controversy of the 1720s, for Thomson as for the Old Side majority that he represented, a public body was a unified body. Dissent was acceptable, Thomson maintained, as long as the body remain unresolved. But as soon as a decision was made, legitimate differences became irresponsible criticism.<sup>43</sup> The New Sides had challenged this reasoning with an entirely novel argument, insisting on their rights as a “minority.” The historian Patricia Bonomi has pointed out both the significance and the originality of the New Sides position.<sup>44</sup> Just as significant and just as original, however, was their insistence that the Synod’s policy *merely* expressed the will of the “majority.” To make this claim, according to Thomson, was to presuppose a division that could not exist. “Conclusions and Determinations of Judicatories” are mis-represented, he argued, “as the Acts or Works of a Majority, whereas they are really and truly the Acts of the whole Body.” When an individual consented to determine a particular measure by means of the vote, Thomson continued, that person both exercised their “Christian Liberty” and bound themselves to the determinations of the greater number. Moreover, he argued, to strip the majority of its power to bind the entire body was to deprive those who made up that majority of their over liberty; in which case, the majority was as entitled to “plead Conscience as the Minority.”<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> “Disorderly” was the term used by the Old Sides to describe the New Sides’ activities.

<sup>44</sup> See Bonomi. *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 152-157, 262.

<sup>45</sup> John Thomson. *The Government of the Church of Chris*, 80, 62.

This talk of majorities and minorities, Thomson maintained, was little more than a mask for infidelity, a way of skirting the obligations of an implicit promise made at the moment a vote was taken. Nonetheless, as he noted, there seemed to be something extraordinarily compelling, even magical, about this new language. "It appears," he wrote, "that the Words MAJORITY and MINORITY are of exceeding great Use and Esteem with them [the New Sides] in this Debate, as if they had something of a Spell or Charm in them invisibly to bear down all Things against which they are brought."<sup>46</sup> Such novel incantations only betrayed how illusory their claims were. Unless the decisions of the majority substantively bound the minority, Thomson contended, not only would "all Authority and Government in the Presbyterian Church" be at an end, every form of "social Government" would be rendered impotent. Indeed, he asked, why could the majority not just as easily disengage itself from the agreements to which it had consented? The New Siders, Thomson argued, were demanding a form of government founded on the notoriously unstable foundation of "persuasion." As he saw it, such an institution would remain a hostage to the fickle opinions of its members, always changing, ever learning, and never bringing its members to the knowledge of the truth. Persuasion demanded the charms of the religious seducer and the transfiguration of signs, demoting the "whole" to the "majority." It could neither educate nor bind. Exactly what sort of church were the New Sides imagining they were a part of?

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 108.



Although their insistence on majority rule might have taken on an egalitarian meaning in the next century, the Members' conception of social authority was rigidly hierarchical. Their tone, as Tennent suggested, was indeed "somber." In contrast to Tennent's repeated invocation of the phrase "our opinion," the Members continually used the phrase "our judgment":

it is *our Judgment*, that in all our Determinations subject to fair Voice, that the Acts of the Majority are the Acts of the Synod, and binding upon the whole Community; for in such a Case, the Majority is the Synod, as in all other Communities and Votes, otherwise Voting will answer no End; and there will be no Way left to determine any Controversies, or to establish any standing Rules in any free Society or Community, as such.<sup>47</sup>

Men, they conceded, were "equal" in their "Rights of Conscience and private Judgment"; a "Prince" had no more claim to such a right than a "Peasant." But like Thomson, they insisted that these private judgments had to be confined to their "proper Box." Unless they were, neither kingly rule nor Synodical government would be tenable. Should we rely on the criminals own private judgment when determining punishments, they asked? Legitimate judgments on matters of public concern were confined exclusively to those entrusted with such responsibility. A society that could act no further than any of its members would permit—one that would substitute private judgment for public authority—was no society at all. All authority would be at an end were this the case. In such a situation, "no Prince in the State, nor Minister in the Church" would possess "any Authority over the meanest Subject."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> My italics. *An Examination and Refutation of Mr. Gilbert Tennent's Remarks of the Protestation Presented to the Synod of Philadelphia, June 1, 1741* (Philadelphia, 1742), 56.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 66, 62.

Like the contemporary discussion of evangelism, the debate over the rights of minorities and majorities, represented an argument over the capacity of ostensibly converted believers to render indisputable judgments. New Light appeals for their rights as minorities, or for their own churches, generally presumed that volunteered unanimity was the primary end of organized religious life. The Philadelphia New Siders echoed revivalists in other parts of the colonies who insisted that substantive agreement only came with common experiences, with the spontaneous, un-coerced movement of individual spirits toward a sanctified object. They shared with the separatists of New England, in particular, the conviction that ecclesiastical decisions required the explicit consent of all of those affected. In making this claim, the separatists challenged the great myth of the Puritan founders, who maintained that the church was a purely consensual body. Their demand for a de facto unanimity of spiritual experience, together with their rejection of doctrinal uniformity, constituted an argument on behalf of spiritual autonomy. Theirs was an imagined communion of souls that arose from the deepest recesses of the individual experience, which left the believer helpless to do anything but consent. For them, it was necessary that individuals conform their social arrangements to the impulses they received from the spirit of God as devotedly as they attempted to conform their everyday behavior.

Apologists for religious autonomy made Elisha Williams' *A Seasonable Plea for the Liberty of Conscience and The Right of Private Judgment* a foundational text in eighteenth-century writing soon after its publication in 1744.<sup>49</sup> The immediate

---

<sup>49</sup> Elisha Williams, *A Seasonable Plea for the Liberty of Conscience and The Right of Private Judgment* (Boston, 1744).

occasion for Williams' treatise was the Connecticut Assembly's passage of an act resembling the one endorsed by the Philadelphia Synod. *An Act for regulating Abuses, and correcting Disorders in Ecclesiastical Affairs* "forbade any minister to preach at another parish without the express permission of the minister and a majority of the parishioners there."<sup>50</sup> A former minister and law student, Williams began his defense of private judgment with an account of the State of Nature drawn largely from the writing of John Locke. Williams then constructed a lengthy case for both the autonomy of the individual believer within the individual church and the autonomy of the individual church within the larger ecclesiastical structure.<sup>51</sup> In his view, original social contracts imposed very few obligations on those who agreed to them. Williams maintained that each individual retained the right not only to read, but to interpret, to determine the "*Sense and Meaning*" of Scripture for themselves.<sup>52</sup> He suggested that the attempt to impose beliefs on the mind, was no less "ridiculous" and cruel than the attempt to shape human bodies "'till they are brought to *one Size, and one Way of Thinking and Practice.*" The mind, like the body, would not be easily "distort[ed]."<sup>53</sup>

The conviction that "Unity of Faith and Uniformity of Practice in Religion is necessary to the Peace of the State," Williams argued, was responsible for the

---

<sup>50</sup> Quotation from Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 97.

<sup>51</sup> In New England, this meant the various consociations, which were generally held responsible for approving ministerial candidates and dispensing advice to its member churches.

<sup>52</sup> Elisha Williams, *A Seasonable Plea*, 7-8. He actually referred to "an *unalienable Right* to judge of the *Sense and Meaning*" of Scripture.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

suffering that nonconforming individuals had long endured. Such acts of brutality had rendered Civil Authorities “the greatest Plagues that can be sent upon the World.” Real unity, Williams suggested, resulted from the practice of mutual good will, along with the rigorous application of “*private Reason*” and “free Enquiry” in the study of Scripture. These were “the most likely Means to produce Uniformity in the essential Principles of Christianity ...” Williams insisted that no “Determinations” could be made when there was any disagreement over the “several Modes ... of instituted Worship.” Even if there was only one mode to choose, no decision could be made unless everyone could agree to it. The right of a society to make decisions for themselves should not be privileged above either the individual’s right to choose for himself, or the right that a part of the church had to separate from the whole. “[A] greater or lesser *Number* of Christians,” Williams contended, possessed a “*Right to withdraw*, and to be embodied by themselves,” to separate from their current church and form another.<sup>54</sup>

According to Williams, religious societies represented entirely conditional bodies from which hardly anyone could be excluded and to which no one could be bound. In this sense, religious societies differed radically from “civil Societies.” The decisions of the “Majority” were not to be “considered as the Act of the whole.” as they might in a civil matter. In matters “where Conscience and Men’s eternal Interests are concerned,” individuals could not “transfer their Power to the Community.”<sup>55</sup> The

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 39, 41-42, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 48-49. Interestingly, Williams also argued that, with regard to civil matters, “[e]veryone” had not only a right, but a duty to “*to speak his Sentiments openly concerning such Matters as affect the good of the whole.*” Such a right was grounded in the ownership of property.

fact that the majority represented the whole in a civil society, but not in a religious society, was not unrelated to the fact that it was possible for individuals or groups to opt out of a religious society, but not out of civil society. If the entrance to Williams' ideal church was wide; the exit was wider still.

Williams' *Seasonable Plea* represented one among only a handful of early eighteenth-century American texts that other colonials would regard as worthy of citation.<sup>56</sup> There are good reasons for it to have received the attention it did. His appeal for liberty of conscience and minority rights in defense of itinerancy, religious separatists, and dissenters from established churches represented the first systematic justification of the physical dislocating, socially disruptive effects that the Awakening generated. Williams' legitimated what Chauncy—who shared Williams' commitment to rights of worship, speech and conscience—could barely countenance. Chauncy's argument for liberty of conscience presumed a stability of religious descriptions, and a certain residency of bodies, so that "Persuasion" would represent little more than the autonomous choice of an autonomous mind. Williams' argument presumed that ostensibly similar experiences could generate radically different descriptions, and as a result, that the same body might legitimately find itself bound to radically different and legitimate social arrangements. Williams' appears to have been comfortable with

---

"[T]he Right ["Every Member of a Community"] has to his own Life and Property gives him a Right to speak his Sentiments." (7). Williams does not seem to have addressed this matter with regard to religious matters, though it can be safely assumed that he very well might have. Then, of course, the problem arises of how an individual could speak on behalf of the "whole" in a religious matter.

<sup>56</sup> For eighteenth-century references to Williams' work see Philemon Robbins, *Plain Narrative of the Proceedings of the Reverend Association and Consociation of New-Haven County* (Boston, 1747), 41; Israel Holly, *A Plea in Zion's Behalf* (Hartford, 1765), 7-9; Ebenezer Frothingham, *A Key to Unlock the Door* (Boston, 1767), 193.

the idea that the church body—as the Pennsylvania Old Sides feared—would continually need to be made and re-made, often upon little more than the shifting foundation of persuasion.<sup>57</sup>

### **Conclusion: Mortal Visions**

As contemporaries quickly discovered, demands for minority rights were self-reproducing. Once the church community had been rendered theoretically contingent, once the principle of self-description was accepted, there were few legitimate means of binding people to one another. A multi-pamphlet exchange between the Baptist Abel Morgan and the New Light Presbyterian Samuel Finley suggests the link between the problem of recognition and the issue of minority rights. Following Morgan's visit to Finley's congregation sometime between 1746 and 1747, Finley challenged Morgan to a public debate.<sup>58</sup> The opening round in this printed dispute, Finley's *Charitable Plea for the Speechless* appeared during that time.<sup>59</sup> In 1747, Morgan responded to Finley's with a treatise of his own.<sup>60</sup> Morgan noted that Finley was reluctant to appear "as a Reviver of buried Controversies." But to Morgan, the

---

<sup>57</sup> My claim that Williams tolerated a range of scriptural interpretations owes a debt to Christopher Grasso's subtle argument in *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), esp. 112, 142-143.

<sup>58</sup> It's not clear whether Finley challenged Morgan to a printed or an oral debate.

<sup>59</sup> Finley's pamphlet does not appear to be extant.

<sup>60</sup> Abel Morgan, *Anti-Paedo-Baptism or Mr. Samuel Finley's Charitable Plea for the Speechless Examined and Refuted* (Philadelphia, 1747).

issue of infant baptism was far from dead. Is “*it not hard to find in what Sense the Controversy about Baptism may be said to be buried?*” he asked.<sup>61</sup> Finley, who was among those New Side ministers that defected from the rest of the Synod in 1741, and who would later serve a five-year term as the President of the New Side-founded College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), bristled at Morgan’s refusal to “Assent” to the “clear and plain Evidence” he presented.<sup>62</sup> Sounding very much like the apologists for longstanding church establishments, he asked that Morgan at least “act according to the universally acknowledged Laws of Disputation.”<sup>63</sup> He maintained the hope that such “Laws” would end this controversy once and for all.

Like other disputes at the time, the debate between the New Side Finley and the Baptist Morgan did not turn on the right of a dissenting group to worship freely, but rather, upon their liberty to pass even implicit judgment upon those who worshipped differently. Morgan refuted Finley’s charge that the Baptists’ self-righteous commitment to post-infant baptism “exclud[ed] and unchristian[ed] all the other Protestant Churches.” “Does a Society unchristian all others,” Morgan retorted, “with whom it cannot or doth not hold Communion?” And should not a church enjoy the “Privilege of all Christian Societies to judge for themselves, who shall be admitted into their Communion?” Morgan insisted that neither the Baptists adhering to their own particular mode of worship, nor their attempting “to convince them that differ

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>62</sup> Trinterud describes Finley as “one of the more fiery of the younger College men.” Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition*, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Samuel Finley, *A Vindication of the Charitable Plea for the Speechless: In Answer to Mr. Abel Morgan’s Antipædorianism* (Philadelphia, 1748), vii.

from us by Scriptural Arguments” represented infringements upon the “Liberties” of other religious denominations. Near the end of his text, Morgan accused Finley of “STRANGE PARTIALITY” for laying the charge of schismatical intolerance on the Baptists. Had not Finley’s church itself separated from the Synod of Philadelphia, and were they not setting up a multitude of “Tents” and meetinghouses “through the Country,” oftentimes adjacent to those of their fellow Presbyterians?<sup>64</sup>

Finley dismissed the implication of schism laid upon his Presbyterians by noting, as the defenders of established churches had always done, the diversity of his dissenting adversaries. There were, he claimed, twice as many kinds of Anabaptists as there were Presbyterians. Moreover, Finley maintained that the Anabaptists “were indeed “imposing” their doctrines on others. In denying the allegation, Morgan construed the meaning of “imposition” in a far too limited a sense, “as if there could be no imposing without external Force.” The Baptists attempt “to persuade [others] that their own Societies are not within the visible Church,” Finley claimed, was in fact to “unchristian” them. At the conclusion of his discourse, Finley reiterated his desire that controversies such as this one might remain “buried”: “I cannot but long for the Time,” he wrote, “when Truth may be spoken without Opposition ...”<sup>65</sup>

The Morgan-Finley debate, which took place at after the mid-century revivals had largely subsided in the Middle Colonies and New England, suggests how the Great Awakening re-oriented American thinking about their religious societies. When

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 158-160.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 111, 113.



Morgan turned the charge of schism back on Finley and his fellow New Side Presbyterians, he illustrated the inertial quality of demands for religious autonomy. Finley's dream of opposition-less speech and his insistence that there might be something coercive about mere speech suggests just how tenuous his authority as a minister was in the face of the claims of self-description. Moreover, Finley's contention that the Baptists' harsh words constituted a persecutory "imposition" on the conforming mind points to the beginning of a revolution in the way that Americans perceived intolerance. As early as the mid-1740s, colonial Americans had started to treat the refusal of recognition as a substantive injury.

Finley shared his dream of opposition-less speech with another enthusiastic supporter of the revival: Jonathan Edwards. Seventeen years after Edwards set western New England aflame with his ominous warnings of damnation for the unconverted, the great theologian was dismissed from his Northampton congregation. Conceding that he and his parishioners possessed "*Principles in Opposition* to each other," a council of nine churches ruled that Edwards should be separated from his congregation. In his farewell sermon, Edwards noted ruefully that debates between ministers and "their people" were seldom of any avail. Though they might gather "to hear the Reasons that may be offered on one Side and the other," they often ended with little improvement on the part of those who are "wrong." "But," he continued,

when they shall hereafter meet together, at the Day of Judgment, before the Tribunal of the great Judge, the Mind and Will of Christ will be made known; and there shall no longer be any Debate, or difference of Opinions; the Evidence of the Truth shall appear beyond all Dispute, and all Controversies shall be finally and forever decided.

Until the Day of Judgment, he lamented, the “remain still, notwithstanding all their Ministers can say, stupid and unawakened, and their Consciences unconvinced.” But, again:

it will not be so at their last Meeting at the Day of Judgment; Sinners, when they shall meet their Minister before their great Judge, will not meet him with a stupid Conscience: They will then be fully convinced of the Truth of those Things which they formerly heard from him, ... The Eyes of Conscience shall now be open'd, and never shall be shut any more.

On that day, the Lord shall be appear “in his most immediate and visible Presence.”

On that day, “the Secrets of every heart,” which were otherwise inaccessible, “shall be made manifest.”<sup>66</sup> On that day, the minister’s sincerity and faithfulness shall be evident; on that day, all censoriousness shall be at an end.

In reading the published sermons of this period, it becomes clear that by the close of the 1740s, America’s ministers were experiencing a sense of exasperation, of despair at every rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in this world. It may be that we are witnessing the tired concessions of aging men, grown weary of dispute. But by the late 1740s, these men appear to have recognized that they had done all they could to make the church as one, that they would die in a world divided with itself. They seemed increasingly aware that their church was no longer *the* Church, and that it never would be again. In Edwards Awakening’s millennialism we can detect a yearning for a final judgment that would at once sanctify the good and damn the evil, that would do so upon the grounds of a judgment that was just, omniscient, and

---

<sup>66</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. *A Farewel-Sermon Preached at the First Precinct in Northampton* (Boston, 1751), 7-8, 10, 9.

determinative. Edwards vision of deathly reconciliation represented a clearing away of irreconcilable differences, much like John Callender's vision of a wonderful providence transformed offending cultures into dry bones. Whether it was Isaac Stile's image of the prostituted Christian viewing himself in the mirror, Jonathan Dickinson's suggestion that judgments be rendered impartially (as if they judge were going to be compelled to appear before the tribunal of heaven), or Edwards fantasy of deathly omniscience, the appeal of indisputable, objectified truth was apparent throughout the Awakening. The point often made against scientific rationality by its postmodernist critics—that the dream of objectivity, or impartiality, is the dream of disembodied knowledge—possesses some resonance when it comes to America's first Great Awakening. In the end, as many in the ministerial class realized, the dry bones that made for reconciliation were their own.

As ecumenical as the religious convictions of some Americans were at mid-century, this was as much an age of church separation, spiritual segmentation, and virulent criticism, as it was an age of religious tolerance. New England alone witnessed dozens of church separations during the 1740s. New churches must have represented welcome asylums for those who regarded themselves as unwilling parts of a corrupt body. These churches served a function for eighteenth-century dissenters not unlike that served by the British-American colonies during the seventeenth. To the theoretical right of choosing one's affiliation, the Great Awakening added the concrete possibility of having a choice; to the quiet dissent of the mind, it added the boisterous movement of the body. Above all, it allowed people to get away from the neighbor's of whom they could not tolerate.

Fittingly, it was not the principle of “private judgment.” but the practice of “rash judging” that made the mid-century revivals as disruptive as they were. Those who participated in the Awakening looked beyond their own souls, into the souls of others. In doing so, they demanded a conformity of an utterly new kind; they demanded to see in others what they felt in themselves, a confirmation from others of their internal assurance. Meanwhile, those who explicitly condemned the practice of “rash judging” helped secure the individual conscience from the demands of external authorities. These individuals—many of whom were no more than *nominal* partisans of the principle of private judgment—insisted that the interior states of believing Christians were inaccessible to all but the believers themselves. Thus, while condemnations of rash judgment evoked old injunctions against lay impudence, they also anticipated an emergent set of restrictions that would recognize each individual equally.

Ultimately, the same conspicuous assertion of differences that revealed the contingency of religious authority made intolerance seem less tolerable. Movement across parish boundaries prompted a radical rethinking of the grounds for religious commitment, as well as generating the often invidious comparisons that went by the name of rash judging. Thus, the same cultural context that produced the first grumblings over majority rule granted recognition to the religious self-descriptions of pious lay people. The same logic that condemned decisions made without the endorsement of the minority condemned those descriptions made without the consent of the believer whose beliefs were being described. Even more than the individual conscience that seventeenth-century theorists had championed, evangelical faith could

not be described in anything but the believer's own words. For many mid-eighteenth century Americans, divided churches—particularly those divided by those converts who were most certain of their beliefs—stood as only the most visible reminders of how frustratingly partial were the judgments that believers made of one another. These were lessons well-learned, because in the coming decades, provincial Americans would increasingly inhabit societies that contained people of very different beliefs.

### Chapter 3

#### Open to All Parties: Ecumenism at Mid-Century

Phil 3:16 *Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.*

“Open to All Parties, But Influenced by None”  
Popular newspaper masthead of the 1750s and 1760s

Diversity had once been something that writers ascribed to dissenters, to those **outside** of their religious community. During the second half of the eighteenth century, provincial Americans discovered diversity within their religious communities. In a very real sense, this was because those communities became larger. Immigrants poured in from places such as Ireland, Scotland and Germany, transportation improved, commerce grew, and the print trade flourished. As a result, the events that people believed they could effect, the range of their sympathies, the extent of the attachments they felt, all expanded dramatically.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, many of the social institutions that made up their world—such as their newspapers, colleges and fraternal societies—either opened themselves or considered opening themselves to white men of every persuasion. It is probably no coincidence that the phrase “Open to All Parties, But Influenced By None” appeared on several newspaper mastheads.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> On the imaginative extension of communal boundaries in the eighteenth century, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991); and, Timothy Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984). On the extended sympathies that resulted, see Thomas Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I,” *American Historical Review* 90 (April, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> This same title regained popularity following the Revolutionary War.

Ecumenism was often preached and sometimes even practiced during this period.<sup>3</sup> But if diversity was now expected, unity was ever more longingly sought after, its breadth compensating for its relative superficiality.

Mobilizing disparate religious groups to undertake common actions, or even just persuading them to get along, proved no easy task. During the second half of the eighteenth century, provincial Americans learned that living in a religiously plural society meant living with the things that could not be said and the judgments that could not be rendered. Appropriately, they often insisted on the reduction of principles to the fundamentals upon which all could agree, while rejecting the demand for conformity to the particulars to which few could assent. Inspired by a love professed for all and a piety enjoined upon each, pre-revolutionary Americans also grew more comfortable with the notion that their institutions were invented and their religious identities accidental. The vast majority of this cultural work was done in the absence of systematic thought—the Great Awakening had normalized changes in religious affiliation, while the increasingly broad diversity of colonial religions suggested the contingency of every institution. Ecumenical principles sometimes surfaced as habits before they were articulated as arguments.

The act of creating unity between believers who were seen as their own sources of self-description, within institutions that were recognized as contingent, and amid a diversity that threatened the entire project, demanded prodigious acts of

---

<sup>3</sup> Among those historians who have describe an increasing religious ecumenism in American thought from mid-century onward are Richard W. Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), esp. 144.

forgetting. Such an achievement entailed talking about shared beliefs without considering their actual content. It entailed assertions of piety without demanding much of the believers whose piety was asserted. War against Catholic France was a constant reminder of the dangers a Protestant people confronted by persisting in their divisions. Within this context, the oft-cited biblical question: “*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*” took on a new meaning. An injunction to uniformity was transformed into an argument for mere agreement. If believers were now secure in their right to private judgment, they were ever more stridently called upon to agree however agreement might be achieved.

The evangelical revivals of the 1740s, which often drew together people of multiple denominations, and divided those of the same church, gave an impetus to the old Christian dream of universal love. Four years before Jonathan Edwards was dismissed from his congregation, the great theologian had imagined a “concert of prayer” uniting the world’s faithful in simultaneous worship. Edwards’ *An Humble Attempt to Promote Visible Union of God’s People* (1747) endorsed a plan initially proposed by an anonymous group of Scottish Presbyterians. While acknowledging the dangers of attempting to make religion uniform, Edwards praised the effort to make worship simultaneous. Temporal unity, he suggested, would more than compensate for theological differences. In addition to being “beautiful,” such a project would cultivate “mutual Affection and Endearment ...” Its participants would be united “with one Heart and Voice.” Edwards excused the concert’s organizers for declining to attach their names to the appeal. In what was perhaps “an Excess of Modesty” they



had attempted to avoid receiving credit as “the first Projectors and Movers of something extraordinary, that they that they desire should become general, and that God’s People in various distant Parts of the World should agree in.” And thus, he continued, they insisted that it was “a Thing already set on Foot.”<sup>4</sup> To Edwards, the “concert of prayer” represented a plan already set in motion by an un-named source; its first movers thus remained hopelessly unknowable; the plan itself unremitting, predetermined and absolutely impartial.

Edwards’ appeal for the concert of prayer stands at odds with the embittered final sermon he delivered to his congregation in 1751 following his dismissal. By that point, Edwards dreamed not of simultaneous prayers, but of opposition-less speech, not of earthly concordance, but of a final retributive judgment. In 1747, however, well before the collapse of the church community he assiduously cultivated for much of his productive life, Edwards could imagine a world united by evangelical faith. This was a vision grounded in the absence of human judgment and self-interest, rather than the overwhelming presence of divine judgment; it emerged from indeterminate origins, rather than from a determinative end. It was a vision he had championed throughout the revival, but never so ecumenically until this point, at its conclusion.<sup>5</sup>

Edwards shared his vision of interdenominational unity with other revivalists,

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Visible Union of God’s People* (Boston, 1747), 81-82, 183, 185.

<sup>5</sup> According to Alan Heimert, Edwards, like other Calvinists had long associated christian faith with “the ‘affinities’ they were certain inhered in the particles of nature,” with a benevolent attraction for one another. See Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 108.

notably Gilbert Tennent, who, by 1748, was calling for the reunion of the Presbyterian Synod that he had done much to divide. Repentant of earlier sectarian rhetoric, Tennent's justification for unity was now animated by the image of Christ's suffering and death. The love Christ demonstrated by dying for us, Tennent suggested, should motivate our love for one another. Doctrinal opinions notwithstanding, the holier an individual was, the more love he warranted. Reemphasizing points he had made earlier, but now with a greater degree of urgency, Tennent insisted that differences of all sorts should be borne with charity, even those which separated people of distinct denominations. To act otherwise was to evince a narrow, selfish affection. "Seeing that every Man has an Equal Right to think for himself; and seeing that *Methods of Force* can't alter the *Sentiments* of the Mind," Tennent wrote, "it is therefore unreasonable and unjust; yea some Degree of *Persecution* to be *offended* with our *Brother*, because he doesn't think as we do in every Thing."<sup>6</sup>

The love that Tennent described, spilled selflessly outside the boundaries of any particular church. He now imagined a religious community connected by a common interest in sincere faith rather than a shared animosity toward hypocritical legalism. This community was notably *christian* both in its ecumenical incorporation of all Protestant believers in Christ and in its attention to the person of Christ, whose suffering redeemed all humanity.<sup>7</sup> "[W]e should sincerely love ALL." Samuel Finley

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Tennent, *Brotherly Love recommended, by the Argument of the Love of Christ* (Philadelphia, 1748), 6, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> My colleague, Karen O'Brien, first pointed out to me the increasingly widespread invocation of Christ during the middle to late decades of the eighteenth century.

wrote in 1757, “that profess to believe in the LORD JESUS CHRIST, and treat them as brethren, if, in any tolerable degree, they maintain his truths, and obey his gospel.”<sup>8</sup> The New Lights’ separatist longing to purify the community by dividing the church’s wheat from its chaff was giving way to the evangelical longing to unite the faithful wherever they might reside. As the example of Jonathan Edwards attests, this transformation proceeded by fits and starts. Nonetheless the trajectory of thinking about religious community—particularly among New Lights such as Tennent—had shifted conspicuously in the direction of inter-denominational unity.

By the early 1750s, the notion that christian love would prevail when essential doctrines were privileged over the particular matters upon which few agreed, had become widespread. Fundamental beliefs, as the anonymous pamphleteer “Catholicus” wrote in 1757, consisted of elementary christian principles, such as: “*Jesus Christ* died. ... offered up Himself upon the Cross to God, as a proper propitiatory Sacrifice, for the purging our Sins.” “But that he was crucified at Golgotha, on such a Day of the Year, and that he expired on such an Hour of the Day,” this anonymous author continued, “these I call Appendages of the Doctrine...” Catholicus expressed the generally-held conviction that “a proper Difference” be “made between the Substance and lesser Circumstances of the greatest Doctrines of our holy Religion.” Agreement, union, mutual benevolence, he argued, required that a distinction be made between the essential and un-essential.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Smith, *Detection Detected* (Lancaster, Penn., 1757), 31.

<sup>9</sup> *A Letter to a Clergyman, in the Colony of Connecticut, From His Friend* (New Haven, 1757), 12n-13n.

The strange alignments brought about by the Great Awakening were now seen as having resulted from the happy coincidence of essential principles. Defending the informal alliance George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent had forged earlier in the decade, Samuel Davies wrote: “[T]hey look’d upon an *Agreement in essential Points* a sufficient Ground for *walking together as far as they were agreed*,” he argued, “notwithstanding a *Diversity of Sentiments in extra-essential Matters*.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, by the late 1740s, vocal evangelicals like Davies were professing the same commitment to essential doctrines, which some opponents of the revival, such as Charles Chauncy, had long professed.<sup>11</sup> The quieting of the vociferous disputation that accompanied the mid-century revivals seems to have resulted from a tacit agreement to agree on a few, vaguely defined, fundamental principles. Such a resolution appealed to the evangelicals who possessed little patience for theological quarreling, as well as the more liberal-minded among their opponents, who possessed little patience for either the creedal impositions of established churches or the rash judgments of an enthusiastic laity.

There was nothing particularly new about the injunction to give priority to points of fundamental agreement over points of circumstantial difference.<sup>12</sup> The

---

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Davies, *The Impartial Trial, impartially Tried, and convicted of Partiality* (Williamsburg, 1748), 20.

<sup>11</sup> In 1739, for instance, Chauncy complained of the clergymen who “*delivered over to Satan* those, who were so unhappy as to differ from them, tho’ in Points of more *Nicety* than *Importance* ...” Charles Chauncy, *The Only Compulsion Proper to be Made Use of in the Affairs of Conscience and Religion* (Boston, 1739), 14.

<sup>12</sup> In a 1701 sermon, the Massachusetts Congregationalist Benjamin Wadsworth, had suggested that “*Christians may differ from one another in smaller things, and yet not be obliged to contend and*

problem of distinguishing essential from non-essential doctrines, however, had long been a source of conflict between the proponents and opponents of greater legal toleration. Latitudinarian English writers associated “nonessential” articles of faith with mere “opinion,” with that which could not be determined with any certainty—and therefore, that which could not be justly imposed.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, apologists for confessions of faith were likely to contend that ecclesiastical institutions were justly endowed with both the power of judging what constituted “Fundamental” doctrines or practices and the power to require compliance.<sup>14</sup> Some opponents of an expanded toleration went so far as to insist that the distinction between essential and non-essential matters should be done away with altogether.<sup>15</sup> Despite these past

---

*quarrel with one another about them.*” Benjamin Wadsworth, *Mutual Love and Peace Among Christians* (Boston, 1701), 8.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the latitudinarian relegation of nonessential matters to the rank of mere “probability” or “opinion,” see Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 104-108. Sidney Mead argued that, by the founding period, “the churches implicitly accepted the view that whatever any religious group held *peculiarly* as a tenet of its faith, must be irrelevant for the public welfare.” Mead, “Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America,” *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 83. In America, at least one early eighteenth century proponent of toleration suggested that even “the Fundamental Truths of our holy Religion” should not be imposed on individuals. See Jonathan Dickinson, *A Sermon Preached at the opening of the Synod at Philadelphia, September 19, 1722* (Boston, 1723), 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission of the Synod in Answer to Some Observations On Their Proceedings against the Reverend Mr. Hemphill* (Philadelphia, 1735), 24. Jonathan Dickinson would himself subscribe to the Synod’s position on Fundamental doctrines by this point.

<sup>15</sup> In arguing for the introduction of the confession of faith into Pennsylvania’s Presbyterian churches, John Thomson insisted that the distinction served to reinforce “a kind of Indifferency, and mistaken Charity” toward the heretical. See John Thompson, *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod* (Philadelphia, 1729), 30.

differences, there was widespread agreement that the health of civil society rested upon the public's assent to certain essential principles.<sup>16</sup>

Both the pervasiveness of the distinction between fundamental and circumstantial matters, and the force with which the distinction was articulated, suggest a break with earlier ways of thinking about the problem of difference. Indeed, much of the conceptual work that was done late in the eighteenth century rested upon this distinction. The reduction of complex, highly differentiated systems to fundamental principles appealed to a surprisingly wide range of writers. In 1760, for instance, the famous revolutionary pamphleteer James Otis published *The Rudiments of Latin Prosody*, which made the case for a universal language. "The diversity of characters used by the several nations, to express the same idea," Otis wrote, "has been also tho't the chief obstacle, to the advancement of learning." In an attempt to resolve the seeming incommensurability of the world's languages, Otis proposed a series of "universal character[s]" which all humanity, no matter what their own

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Benjamin Lord, *Religion and Government Subsisting Together in Society* (New-London, 1752). Lord observed that differences regarding the "more Circumstantial Things in Religion" is tolerable, but "how great the Difficulty in Church and Common Wealth, when the Members thereof, are so wide from one another, in what they should be most of all United in; that they can't agree, so much as in mutual Love and Forbearance, and scarcely in the practice of common Justice and Equity, and speaking Truth to, and every one, of his Neighbour, what Jarrs and Conditions will then ensue and arise, and spread into the public Affairs, wherein they, are obliged to be Concerned together?" (41-2) It was rare for someone to argue, as did Thomas Darling in his reply to Thomas Clap, that there were no fundamental tenets "that that is Truth to every Man, that he believes to be Truth. &c." Thomas Darling, *Some Remarks on President Clap's History and Vindication* (New Haven, 1757), 38. Even the growing body of those who subscribed to the theology of "Natural Religion"—or "deism" as it was sometimes called—claimed to adhere to at least a few unassailable principles. Of course, these principles were of another order than those articulated by the Calvinist majority. For the deists, the prerequisite for "discoursing on Natural Religion is to establish this great, this fundamental, this essential truth—That there is a God." Andrew Eliot, *A Discourse on Natural Religion Delivered in the Chapel of Harvard College* (Boston, 1771), vi.

“particular idiom,” would understand. “[I]t is the business of every one,” he continued, “to use the best helps in his power, towards analyzing [sic] speech, and reducing his mother tongue, at least, to its principles.” Such efforts Otis contended, would “admirably display the beautiful mechanism of nature, and furnish new proofs among thousands, of the goodness, as well of the wisdom, and power of the Divine Architect.” There was, it seemed, something aesthetically impressive, even worshipful, about the reduction of speech to its fundamentals. In the process of transforming particular, idiomatic meanings into shared ones, nature was honored, and God was served.<sup>17</sup>

A number of mutually reinforcing conditions help explain the increasing priority given to fundamental beliefs over denominational particularities, as well as to the ecumenism that often accompanied it. There was probably no more important factor in the increasing weight given to Protestant unity than the British Empire’s nearly unrelenting conflict with Catholic France. As Linda Colley has demonstrated, British national identity coalesced around the notion that good subjects of the empire shared a common Reformed heritage, one that was threatened by France’s aggressive

---

<sup>17</sup> In the same pamphlet, Otis observed that persuasive orators “annihilate[d] self-love” and evinced a “sincere” concern for their listeners. Otis also recommended that aspiring orators employ “the most easy, natural ways of expressing yourself.” The best public speech thus resembled the private conversation of the gentleman. Sincerity removed the affections that came with the age, as well as the rhetorical excesses that ordinarily characterized public speech. Otis, *The Rudiments of Latin Prosody* (Boston, 1760), 8-10, 56. These sentiments do not appear to have been confined to America. In 1757, the Scottish philosopher David Hume observed that “[e]very voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and false brilliancy: But when critics come to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes; and it is found, that they had affixed a very different meaning to their expressions.” Yet, despite the variety of meanings attached to the same few terms, Hume wrote, the “general principles of taste, are uniform in human nature.” Hume, “Of The Standard of Taste,” *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 243.

imperial pursuits.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, to a greater extent than any of the previous wars, the Seven Year's War (1756-1763) mobilized and forced cooperation among people of nearly every denomination. In other words, the colonists' often involuntary mixing with others of similar (Protestant) principles coincided with their "*violent* contact" with those of distinctly different (Catholic) principles. During the imperial conflict, colonial soldiers were marched to places neither they nor their families had ever visited. Even stranger encounters originated from afar. A surge in immigration after 1730 brought hundreds of thousands of migrants to the colonies, many of them German Lutherans, Irish Catholics, and Scotch and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Every year from 1748 to 1754, between two thousand and sixteen thousand made their way from Germany alone.<sup>19</sup> In addition to these developments, the middle decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a rapid growth in commerce—especially after 1740—which drew provincial Americans into increasingly distant and impersonal relationships. Colonial merchants competed for overseas trade, peddlers crowded provincial roads, and American consumers purchased an unprecedented array of

---

<sup>18</sup> "More than anything else," Colley writes, "it was this shared religious allegiance combined with recurrent wars that permitted a sense of British national identity to emerge alongside of, and not necessarily in competition with older, more organic attachments to England, Wales or Scotland, or to county or village." Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 18. A similar dynamic seems to have been at work in the colonies.

<sup>19</sup> Marianne S. Wokeck, *Trade in Strangers: The Beginnings of Mass Migration to North America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) 44-45. For statistics on German migration to North America, see Table 2 on p. 45. The heaviest concentration of migrants did not actually arrive in the colonies until the 1760s. The tide remained heavy until the outbreak of the American Revolution.



imported manufactured goods.<sup>20</sup> The colonial publishing industry underwent a related, and comparable, expansion, which, like the increase in migration and trade, brought colonial Americans into (imaginative) contact with people who seemed essentially the same.

These social and political developments help explain how it was that colonial Americans could come to see their own fates bound up with other Protestants, other Christians, and even other humans. They help us understand how it was that mid-century Americans could have warmed to the universalist rhetoric then gaining adherents in Europe, how it was that they could have embraced ideas akin to those championed by participants in the continent's intellectual Enlightenment. According to the historian Carl Becker, a central aim of Enlightenment thought was "to identify and enumerate and describe the qualities that were common to all men in order to determine what ideas and customs and institutions in their own time were out of harmony with the universal natural order."<sup>21</sup> Over the past century and a half, voyages of exploration, the expansion of international trade and the explosion of print, gradually brought about the intellectual changes in Europe that colonial Americans were experiencing in a comparatively condensed period of time. In both cases, a bigger world, a more various population of souls, seems to have demanded the

---

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the Atlantic wide consumer revolution, see T.H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (October 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1932).

reduction of complex local systems to simple universal ones. In America, however, such sentiments confronted the concrete fact of diversity.

The ecumenical appeals that gave precedence to the fundamental components of faith were accompanied by the equally insistent claims that portrayed particular beliefs as the foundational components of religious identity. Thus, it was now possible to think of confessions of faith, which were the ostensible embodiments of particular church's essential doctrines, less as standards of orthodoxy, and more as markers of difference. The anonymous author *Catholicus* suggested that creeds were best regarded as faithful representations of a church's beliefs. If examined, such institutions would demonstrate "how far [the world's various churches] are agreed, and wherein they differ."<sup>22</sup> Thomas Fitch contended that Connecticut's Say-Brook Platform, like other professions of doctrine and practice, demarcated the "sentiments, principles or opinions of particular men." "The peculiar principles of episcopal, presbyterian, and other churches abroad," he wrote, "are known from the plans, articles and rules, by which they are denominated, and distinguished from each other, and which they respectively profess to adhere to and be governed by."<sup>23</sup> Dissenting

---

<sup>22</sup> *Catholicus, A Letter to a Clergyman, in the Colony of Connecticut, From His Friend* (New-Haven, 1757), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Fitch, *An Explanation of Say-Brook Platform* (Hartford, 1765), 6. For traditionalists, essential or fundamental beliefs, were still less important for their role in uniting Christians than they were for distinguishing true believers from the false ones. The President of Yale College, Thomas Clap, insisted that a difference could not be "made" between Christianity and other forms of faith unless its essential doctrines were explicitly acknowledged and promoted, for "that which has Nothing fundamental or essential to it, has no real *distinct* Existence at all." They who would deny the existence of "fundamental Principles or Doctrines," he wrote, "make but little Difference between Christianity, Mahometanism, and refined Heathenism, except in some external Rites and Ceremonies."

opponents of creeds had always regarded such institutions as secular perversions of sacred words. Carrying on this tradition, Thomas Darling maintained that the “arbitrary” quality of human language made confessions of faith the “uncertain and pernicious” institutions that they were.<sup>24</sup> Now, however, even the supporters of creeds seemed willing to concede their contingent quality. Once a formidable instrument of conformity, the creed appeared on its way to becoming a relatively modest means of collective self-description.

Much of the effort expended to distinguish between fundamental and circumstantial matters was a reflection of the tension between the unity after which every church strove, and the unanimity that every church claimed to already embody. In 1758, the Synod of Philadelphia was re-united. Speaking before both groups, Francis Allison, the leader of the Old Lights, preached an appropriately conciliatory sermon, titled *Peace and Union Recommended*. Allison opened his discourse with a citation from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians “Be of one Mind, live in Peace, and the God of Peace shall be with you.” (2 Cor. xiii.) “[I]n a church like ours in America,” Allison counseled, “collected from different churches of CHRIST in Europe, who have followed different modes and ways of obeying the ‘great and general commands of the gospel,’” there was a particularly pressing need to demonstrate forbearance.<sup>25</sup> Praising even Gilbert Tennent’s efforts to bring together

---

See Thomas Clap, *A Brief History and Vindication of the Doctrines Received and Established in the Churches of New-England* (1757), 24.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Darling, *Some Remarks on President Clap's History and Vindication* (New Haven, 1757), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Allison, *Peace and Union Recommended* (Philadelphia, 1758), 28.

the two sides, Allison gently advised his fellow Presbyterians of the essential doctrines they held in common, as well as the particular doctrines for which they should display forbearance—all in the name of “the LORD JESUS CHRIST.”<sup>26</sup> Fortunately, according to Allison, “no denomination of christians, are more unanimously agreed in the essentials of religion.” And there were additional reasons to be hopeful, for “[f]ew of those who heretofore differ’d are now alive.”<sup>27</sup>

Most of the old partisans may have indeed been dead, but enough of the old tensions survived to make the re-united Synod less than harmonious. Their disagreements represented a conflict between the progressive advocates of sincere faith who regarded fundamental doctrines as the basis of inter-denominational cooperation, and the traditionalist proponents of doctrinal scrupulousness, who regarded such doctrines as the boundaries of denominational identity. In 1760, a controversy broke out over a letter that a group of eighteen New Light ministers had sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury, requesting the induction of a former Presbyterian into one of Philadelphia’s Anglican pulpits. The authors declared that the letter was penned with a “disinterested Regard to those Fundamental Doctrines of the Christian Religion and the Protestant Reformation,” which the two churches held in common. They professed a “Regard so warm and extensive that no Difference in lesser Matters, nor any selfish Attachment to a Party” could “extinguish” it. The

---

<sup>26</sup> “Good men who are for bringing all to their own measures,” Allison cautioned earlier in the sermon, “should remember that their fellow-christians have equal pleas for adhering to their own particular modes.” *Ibid.*, 27-28, 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

gesture infuriated the Synod's Old Side members. "If the Church of England be possess'd of the Truth," an anonymous author noted, "we are possessed of Error." If the eighteen ministers were correct in their assessment, then "All our Scruples of Conscience are answered at once, by resolving them into nothing else but a selfish Attachment to a Party."<sup>28</sup> The problem transcended this particular instance of false New Light, charity. "Have not the Heroes of this scheme," another pamphlet asked, "cried up Arminians, Antinomians, Moravians, Quakers, and Episcopalians, as dear children of God, and at the same time condemned pious and sound orthodox Calvinists."<sup>29</sup> According to these Old Lights, their fellow Presbyterians had defined the church's fundamental doctrines so broadly that any difference between it and other denominations was the product of an uncharitable, schismatic, disposition.

The relationship between the fundamentals that some expected to serve as the foundation of inter-denominational unity and the fundamentals that others expected to define the boundaries of religious organization was complicated by the imperial campaign against Catholic France and its Native American allies. War elicited demands for unanimity that even the most enthusiastic proponent of church solidarity would have been hesitant to enjoin. In 1755, following the retreat of the British army into Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania assembly passed its first defense appropriations bill. Soon after, a pamphlet was distributed among the Friends, urging them not to pay the taxes designated for war supplies. When a provincial fast was declared the

---

<sup>28</sup> *A True Copy of a Genuine Letter* (New York, 1761), 3, 7, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *A Second Letter to the Congregations of the Eighteen Presbyterian (or New-Light) Ministers* (Philadelphia, 1761), 8.

following year, some proportion of Quaker population abstained. To the dismay of their fellow Pennsylvanians, the pacifist Quakers ignored the call directed at “all his Majesty’s loving subjects ... of whatever Denomination’.” *An Address to Those Quakers Who perversely refused to pay any Regard to the late provincial FAST* (1756) bemoaned their failure to comply. According to the anonymous author(s) of the tract, the Quakers had spoiled an opportunity to repent unanimously, thereby thwarting the wishes of “a great Majority.” “[W]hat a glorious Prospect it would have been,” the author lamented, “to have beheld two or three Provinces, without one dissenting Voice.”<sup>30</sup>

If essential beliefs, confessions of faith and the like merely demarcated the boundaries, if they merely “made” the “Difference,” between various religious communities, then they might constitute grounds for mutual recognition, even cooperation, but not for debate. Indeed, they might even provide the necessary sanction for prohibiting dissent. This placed dissenters in the awkward position of convincing their audience that the matters upon which they dissented—infant baptism, ministerial qualifications, pacifism—were indeed essential to the faith.<sup>31</sup> To fail in

---

<sup>30</sup> *An Address to Those Quakers Who perversely refused to pay any Regard to the late provincial FAST, May 25, 1756* (Philadelphia, 1756), 7, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Backus queried some Baptist opponents of his: “... But by what authority do you make such a particular mode [the non-sprinkling mode] of baptism one of the essentials of religion, essential to baptism, and to salvation?” Backus, *A Seasonable Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (Boston, 1770), 28. See also John Tucker, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. James Chandler* (Boston, 1767), where he writes: “Every man looks upon his own opinion as the truth, and his conscience is, in some measure, concerned in it: and religion, according to his notion of it, he considers as the cause of God. And are not these the very things, and commonly the only things, on the side of those who separate from our churches, that are pleaded in favor of their separation? None acknowledge they separate out of humour.—prejudice, or from any carnal views: But they are obliged to it (they pretend) from conscience—for the sake of truth, and the cause of God. Now, let these things be excepted, which you suppose are not to be given up for

this endeavor was to leave oneself open to the charge of quibbling about mere circumstantial. “These essential points, the number of which is small, and in which christians are for the most part agreed are alone to be contended for.” the latitudinarian Zabdiel Adams wrote, “whilst a thousand other things which are matters of mere speculation are to be left for every man to enjoy his private opinion concerning, ....” Adams complained that “multiplying fundamental doctrines, and advancing particular opinions into essential articles of faith, tends to promote bigotry and uncharitableness, and to destroy the peace and unity of churches.”

When it came to the physical security of the state, or the population, dissent was reluctantly tolerated at best. In this case, the fundamental rights of an ostensibly universal humanity, namely the right of self-preservation, took precedence over any particular group’s opposition to waging war. Quaker pacifism ranked among the purportedly particular claims of conscience that contravened the fundamental rights of the population. The Quakers claimed that the pacifism was indeed essential to their faith, that a Quaker could not be anything but a pacifist. But even the generally

---

the sake of peace and unity? and your honest answer, I conceive, must be, *nothing at all*.” (25) See also Zabdiel Adams, *The Happiness and Pleasure of Unity in Christian Societies Considered* (Boston, 1772). “These essential points, the number of which is small, and in which christians are for the most part agreed, are alone to be contended for; whilst a thousand other things which are matters of mere speculation are to be left for every man to enjoy his private opinion concerning, without molestation and disturbance. The multiplying fundamental doctrines, and advancing particular opinions into essential articles of faith, tends to promote bigotry and uncharitableness, and to destroy the peace and unity of churches.”(39) The Anglican preacher Jonathan Boucher insisted that “It ought to be remembered, that the causes which these our brethren alledge for their separating from us do not relate to points which we deem indifferent: though, as they concern them, they acknowledge them to be such. ... They may, and all of them, comply with all that our Church requires, without doing any violence to their consciences ...” See Jonathan Boucher, “On Sects and Schisms,” *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution; in thirteen Discourses, Preached in North America Between the years 1763 and 1755* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 73. For an exception to this principle, see Samuel Harker, *An Appeal from the Synod of New-York and Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1763), 7-8.

ecumenical New Lights could not countenance their dissent. The reaction of the New Side Presbyterian, Samuel Finley, is a good example of the ethical tensions generated by the conflicting demands of religious tolerance and civil obligation. The same Samuel Finley, who maintained before his fellow Presbyterians (in this same year, 1757) that his unwillingness to condemn to hell those with different opinions to hell did not mean that he was “indifferent,” called Pennsylvania’s pacifist Quakers “NEUTERS.”<sup>32</sup> This “Cause,” Finley insisted, “admits of no Neutrality.” The same Samuel Finley who argued against the imposition of the Solemn League and Covenant on his own Synod, claimed that the Quaker’s appeal to conscience could not justify them in their dissent. “How sad,” he noted, that their “religious *Principles* are their *Crime!*” There was, in his estimation, something profoundly different about the nature of religious and the nature of civil obligations. “When we become *Christians*, must we cease to be *Men?*” he asked, “Does it eradicate the *original Impression* of *Self-Preservation?* Does it *cancel* our *Obligations* to our *King*, and our *Country?*”<sup>33</sup> The

---

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Detection Detected*, 13. Finley’s remarks constitute the first forty-seven pages of the pamphlet.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Finley, *The Curse of Meroz* (Philadelphia, 1757), 8, 26. More than other denominations, Quakers had long valued unanimity within their meetings as much as their fellow provincials now valued unanimity within the polity. And as the military situation worsened, these two objectives coincided. The debate over war taxes had split the Pennsylvania’s Quakers into at least two distinctive groups, just as it split the provincial polity into pro- and anti-war factions. But efforts were underway to unite both. During the second half of 1755 and throughout 1756, at the very time that a plan was afoot among the pro-war, anti-Quaker, proprietary party to remove Quaker Assemblymen from the halls of the Pennsylvania legislature, the Friends were themselves considering the voluntary withdrawal of their representatives. Between June and October 1756, ten Quakers resigned from the Pennsylvania assembly, largely so that they would not have to impose war taxes upon conscience-bound Friends. The move narrowed the political breach within Philadelphia, as well as the religious breach within the Yearly Meeting. According to the report issued after the dissolution of the Yearly Meeting in 1758, it was “unanimously declared as the Sense of the Yearly Meeting” of Friends, that “furnishing Waggons & so conveying Military stores” was in fact a “Military Service.” The report



demands of war seem to have prompted this unlikely ordering of ministerial priorities—of humanity before christianity, the body before the soul—but the implicit reduction of christianity to humanity, of the soul to the body, made it possible. The fundamental needs of humanity took precedence over the beliefs of a particular group.

The reduction of christianity to humanity in the service of unity, and the reduction of christian beliefs to a few fundamental principles at the expense of denominational particulars, characterized the budding fraternal organization known as the Free Masons. The Masons promoted the same ecumenical ideals, and embodied the same ethical tensions, that characterized the religious writing of the period.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the lodge represented one of the rapidly expanding number of voluntary societies within which men of different denominations interacted with one another. Formally nonsectarian, the Masons welcomed “Benevolent” minded men of all creeds. At least a few lodges even counted Jews and Catholics among their members. Unlike

---

condemned those who persisted “in the practice of what is so essentially repugnant to that Liberty of Conscience for which our Ancestors deeply suffered” and “without maintaining which true Unity cannot be maintained among us...” Thus the Meeting “unanimously” carried out an act intended to ensure its own “unity.” For extensive accounts of the role that Pennsylvania’s Quakers played in provincial politics, as well as the divisions that beset them, see Richard Bauman, *For the Reputation of Truth: Politics, Religion, and Conflict among the Pennsylvania Quakers, 1750-1800* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); Ralph L. Ketcham, “Conscience, War, and Politics in Pennsylvania, 1755-1757,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XX (July 1963), 416-439; and, Jack D. Marietta, “Conscience, the Quaker Community, and the French and Indian War,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. XCV, no. 1 (January 1971), 3-17.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Bullock points to this homology in his excellent book on Freemasonry. See Bullock’s *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 57. Bullock observes that Charles Brockwell’s sermon, *Brotherly Love Recommended* (cited below) was printed in Boston the same year as two other sermons on brotherly love were published, one of which—*Love to Our Neighbors Recommended*—went through a second printing before the year was through. It should also be noted that 1749 was also the first year that Isaac Watt’s classic latitudinarian tract, *Orthodoxy and Charity United*, originally printed in London earlier in the century, was printed in the colonies.

other groups. Thomas Pollen wrote, the Society “opens wide its arms to every nation under heaven, and offers to take in both *Jews and Greeks*, both *Cretes and Arabians*; following the steps of their master Christ, ...”<sup>35</sup> But its ecumenism took many forms. The increasingly popular language of unbounded christian fellowship appeared in some Masonic writings. Arthur Browne envisioned the “blood of CHRIST cementing all mankind together.” Christ’s death, Browne observed, made universal love imaginable, as well as obligatory.<sup>36</sup> It joined men, “merely as Men” within its “*universal Comprehension*.”<sup>37</sup>

While the Masons welcomed individuals of nearly every denomination, they placed a premium on unanimity. No one could be admitted to the privileges of the Lodge, for instance, without the consent of every member. And once admitted, the Lodge discouraged members from talking about their particular beliefs. “Freedom of Opinion thus indulged, but its points never discussed.” was, according to Charles Brockwell, “the happy influence under which the unity of this truly *Ancient and Honourable Society* has been preserved, from time immemorial.”<sup>38</sup> The “religion of the blessed JESUS,” Arthur Browne wrote, was “too sacred a subject to be made the

---

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Pollen, *Universal Love* (Boston, 1758), 16.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Browne, *Universal Love Recommended* (Boston, 1755), 10. Beginning in the late 1750s, the ranks of the Society broadened considerably when a second, less socially exclusive branch of the Free Masons was established. Nonetheless, overcoming religious divisions was, according to one member, the Society’s primary aim. See Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 59, 63, 85-86. The new society identified itself as the *Ancient Society of Free Masons*.

<sup>37</sup> William Brogden, *Freedom and Love* (Annapolis, 1750), 15.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Brockwell, *Brotherly Love Recommended* (Boston, 1750), 14.

topick of common conversation.”<sup>39</sup> It was enough, Charles Brockwell insisted, for members to be pious in their faith and upright in their characters. Although there might be “some points or rather modes of worship we may differ or dissent from each other,” the Lodge would “reconcile” them. The Lodge brought together men who “might have otherwise remained at perpetual distance,” joined them in “conversation,” “intermingl[ed]” their “interests.” Within its walls, principles were “harmonized” and particularities were ignored; there could be no substantive disagreement. Nor were moral irregularities permitted. Every member was “under the strictest obligation to be a good man, a true Christian,” he noted, “however distinguished by different opinions in the circumstantial of Religion.”<sup>40</sup> “[W]hoever is an *Upright Mason*,” Charles Brockwell insisted “can neither be an Atheist, Deist, or Libertine.”<sup>41</sup>

The Masons thus presented the odd spectacle of an organization committed to both open discussion and unanimity.<sup>42</sup> Candid conversation among those of different denominations was repeatedly encouraged, but fraternal love, it appears, could only be enacted in the silence of virtuous behavior or the quiet of selfless assent. Its speech was constrained by the limits is placed on dissent. Silence was not its dark secret. Rather, it represented an explicitly stated mode of fellowship, the necessary

---

<sup>39</sup> Browne, *Universal Love Recommended*, 21-22.

<sup>40</sup> Brockwell, *Brotherly Love Recommended*, 14. Brockwell’s language here borrowed heavily from *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons: Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, etc. of That Most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity* (Philadelphia, 1734; rpt. ff London, 1723).

<sup>41</sup> Brockwell, *Brotherly Love Recommended*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> “Unanimity” was a common theme in Masonic writings. See for instance, William Smith, *A Sermon Preached in Christ-Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1755), 18, 21.

prerequisite to its commitment to inclusivity. Like so many churches around the same time, the Masons minimized the content of their disagreement by suggesting that the only relevant, legitimately animating, doctrines were those which were “fundamental” or “essential.” Such doctrines were common to men rather than just to Christians. Like Edwards’ *Concert of Prayer*, they spoke to all, even if almost nothing was said about them.

While many claimed to favor the prospect, welcoming “parties” of all denominations into the same political and social institutions increased the possibility that interdenominational disputes would upset whatever harmony existed within them. And so, at mid-century, visions of universal love and points of fundamental agreement competed with the perceived reality of factional conflict between religious groups. Indeed, it was not uncommon during the two decades prior to the Revolution for writers to accuse particular churches of conducting “political Intrigues, under the Mask of Religion,” which is what the Anglican, William Smith, accused Pennsylvania’s Quakers of doing.<sup>43</sup> Whether they acted as politically interested factions or not, religious groups were often rhetorically cast as factions, with the capacity, some thought, to serve as mutual checks upon one another. “Providence has planted British America with a variety of sects,” Ezra Stiles wrote in 1760, “which will unavoidably become a mutual balance upon one another.” Stiles was optimistic about the outcome, likening it to a well-contained chemical reaction. “Their temporary

---

<sup>43</sup> William Smith, *Brief State of the Province of Pennsylvania* (New York: 1865), 28.

collisions,” he continued, like the action of acids and alcalies [sic] after a short ebullition, will subside in harmony and union, not by the destruction of either. but in the friendly cohabitation of all.”<sup>44</sup> Such calculations presumed a degree of equality that the older rhetoric had not. Moreover they presumed that religious groups were creating alliances across denominational lines.

Given the possibility of such factional divisions, the peril of Catholic France, waging war on Pennsylvania’s western settlements only made the prospect of religious division all the more worrisome, and the demand for unanimity all the more strident. Addressing an English audience, the Anglican William Smith, contended that the Pennsylvania’s various smaller sects, which had once been “employed only in establishing themselves,” were beginning to “turn their Thoughts to the Public.” While the ranks of Quaker citizens (“the Quakers without Doors”) may have sincerely subscribed to pacifist ideals, its legislators (“those within Doors”) had merely embraced the doctrine to advance their own political interests. And unless the proper “Checks” were administered to “balance their increasing Strength,” chaos would ensue.<sup>45</sup> Smith lamented the Quakers’ ability to influence the votes of Pennsylvania’s German voters, and expressed his hopes that the Anglican-Presbyterian Proprietary Party would be able to forge a “*Coalition*” with these same sectarians. Until they were, the imperatives of military security demanded that the Germans should be

---

<sup>44</sup> Ezra Stiles, *Discourse on the Christian Union* (1761), 96-97. An anonymous letter addressed to the Connecticut clergy even posited that “[t]here must be a due Balance of Power between the Clergy and the Laity.” *A Letter to the Clergy of the Colony of Connecticut* (New Haven, 1760), 14.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Brief State*, 20, 37-38.

deprived of their suffrage and loyalty oaths administered to their political allies who sat in the Assembly.<sup>46</sup> If the German masses could be educated “in the Nature of free Government, the Purity and Value of the Protestant Faith” and bound to the rest of the colony “by a common Language, and the Consciousness of a common Interest,” they might make loyal subjects. Smith’s worried review of Pennsylvania’s affairs thus indicated how much ethnic-denominational conflict mid-century Americans experienced, and how appealing inter-ethnic/religious coalitions had become.

As an increasingly diverse body of students entered made their way into once exclusive colleges during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, provincial colleges generally professed themselves open to all parties, though they were generally influenced by just one. At mid-century, colleges were still described as “seminaries of learning,” and still regarded as denominational training grounds. However, students of all denominations were now welcome in America’s colleges.<sup>47</sup> The historians Richard Hofstadter and Walter Metzger observed that the mid-century marked a watershed in the “toleration” of diverse religious affiliations.<sup>48</sup> They

---

<sup>46</sup> That is, to the Quakers who refused to supply war material.

<sup>47</sup> The standards for students differed significantly from those of their teachers. According to Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger: “The candid examinations of prospective appointees suggest that the consideration of doctrinal acceptability was all but universal; and where a president, professor, or tutor was installed without prior examination, the omission is more plausibly explained by the presumption that his principles were already well known than by the assumption that the boards of governors were liberal or indifferent to such matters. Interdenominational colleges were liberal or indifferent to such matters. In interdenominational colleges more latitude existed for variety of belief, but no one seems to have contested the principle that a college officer’s beliefs could properly be scanned before his appointment.” See *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York, 1955), 156.

<sup>48</sup> Specifically, they point to 1746 as the turning-point. Hofstadter and Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom*, 152.

attributed this development to an increasingly competitive market for students. Whatever the cause, an ecumenical admissions policy was thrust upon the mid-century college administrator. Yale's President, Thomas Clap, was among the least enthusiastic proponents of academic ecumenism. He once refused a degree to a student who was gathering a subscription "to reprint one of Locke's letters on toleration ..."<sup>49</sup> Yet, forced to defend the college's right to choose its own minister, Clap noted that his college had "always freely admitted, Protestants, of all Denominations"—as long, of course, as they conformed to "our Way of Worship; while they are there."<sup>50</sup>

Like other seminaries of learning, Yale was indeed open to all parties, but Clap claimed, beholden to only one.<sup>51</sup> Clap noted that "*At a Meeting of the President and Fellows of Yale College, November 21, 1751*" it had been resolved that the students were not "to be instructed in any different Principles or Doctrines" than those prescribed by the Founders.<sup>52</sup> In a manner resembling that of Philadelphia's

---

<sup>49</sup> See Hofstadter and Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom*, 152, 164.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Clap, *A Brief History and Vindication of the Doctrines Received and Established in the Churches of New-England* (1757), 15-16. "Persons of all Denominations of Protestants are allowed the Advantage of an Education here," Clap would later write, "and no Inquiry has been made, at their Admission or afterwards, about their particular Sentiments in Religion." Only if an individual "should take Pains to infect the Minds of their Fellow-Students with such pernicious Errors, as are contrary to the Fundamentals of Christianity, and the special Design of founding this College" that action was taken against them. Only the erroneous who attempted to exert influence, to "infect the Minds" of others, would be punished. Thomas Clap, *The Annals or History of Yale-College* (New York, 1766), 83-84.

<sup>51</sup> Hofstadter and Metzger noted that mid-century colleges exerted a good deal of effort to "proselytize" on behalf of the denomination with which they were affiliated. See Hofstadter and Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom*, 153n.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Clap, *A Brief History*, 12-13.

Presbyterian Old Siders during the 1730s, Clap argued that Yale was a sovereign society with the power to make and enforce its own standards of membership. Every man was at liberty to found his own college and set up laws according to the dictates of his conscience. “[N]o Parent,” he insisted, “can have a *Right*, to put his Child, to be a Member, of any Society; and then, order him, to *break the Laws*, and Rules of it.” “[T]his would,” he continued, “be destructive, to, the very Nature, and Fundamental Constitution, of all Societies.”<sup>53</sup> But the times were clearly against Clap and his ideal of a religiously-exclusive college establishment. After having suffered tutor desertions and an assault on his home by “a mob of students and townspeople,” he resigned the presidency of Yale College in 1766.<sup>54</sup>

As controversial as Yale’s religious commitments may have been, they paled in comparison to the debate that raged in 1753 over the religious composition of the “intended college” that would become King’s College. In contrast to the situation at Yale, control of King’s College had not yet been conclusively settled. From the beginning, it appeared that the Anglican Church would exercise nearly exclusive authority. Seven of the college’s ten original Trustees were Anglicans—in a city whose Anglican inhabitants made up no more than ten percent of the total

---

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Clap, *The Religious Constitution of Colleges* (New Haven, 1754) 13-14.

<sup>54</sup> Hofstadter and Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom*, 174-176. Among the complaints lodged against him was that he drew a false distinction between an unjustified, and uncharitable, distinction between “Primary and Secondary” matters of faith and worship. This same critic asked whether it would be too much to ask the college “to forbear one another in Love, tho’ they should not think exactly alike, in every Punctilio?” As “Unity is the Strength and Security of every Body of Men,” he insisted, “so Charity is the best Foundation of this Unity.” [Shubael Conant], *A Letter to a Friend* (New-Haven, 1757), 16, 19, 52.



population.<sup>55</sup> This state of affairs, which might have easily gone without public comment twenty years before, quickly moved to the forefront of the city's consciousness. Of the college's three non-Anglican Trustees, one was the Presbyterian William Livingston. In 1752, Livingston assumed the editorship of the newly-created *The Independent Reflector*. The *Reflector* rigorously contested Anglican demands for control of the college. Following a controversial defense of the Moravians, Livingston instigated what an early chronicler referred to as a "paper war" in which "persons of all degrees, of all denominations, of all religions, and almost of all ages" eventually participated.<sup>56</sup>

The *Reflector*'s "paper war" is significant because it represents one of the few sustained debates over how an actual institution would accommodate multiple religious groups. What role would private groups play in a public institution? To the *Reflector*, it was obvious that the Anglicans should be prevented from acquiring administrative command over the college. Episcopal control, he argued, would turn a "public" institution into a "Party" dominated private one. Even the admission of students from other denominations was insufficient compensation for an arrangement. The *Reflector* objected to the notion that students from "dissenting" denominations would be merely tolerated, that the Anglicans would rule like the college like an established church. Education would thus entail subjection to "the Doctrines of a

---

<sup>55</sup> Most were awarded their position in virtue of offices they already possessed.

<sup>56</sup> Quotation from Thomas Jones, *History of New York during the Revolutionary War*, 2 vols., Edwin Floyd De Lancey, ed. (New York, 1879), I, 7. Cited in *The Independent Reflector*, ed. Milton M. Klein (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1963), 5.

Party, enforced by the Authority of a Professor's Chair ..." "[W]here none but the Principles of one Persuasion are taught, and all others depressed and discountenanced," the *Reflector* argued, students would be "fetter[ed]" with "Prejudices." Anglican "Power"—a revealing term for control over an educational establishment—"would become formidable by its being united." By contrast, he continued, "a Dissention would impede its Progress." The *Reflector* worried that if exclusive practices dominated the college, they would soon dominate the rest of the province. "[S]hould any future House of Representatives become generally infected with the Maxims of the College," he wrote, "nothing less can be expected than an Establishment of one Denomination above all" from which those who differed would be "most graciously favoured with a bare Liberty of Conscience."<sup>57</sup>

The debate over the religious constitution of King's College provided the *Reflector* with the opportunity to comment on the larger problem of religious diversity in the province. Resistance to Anglican establishment had a long and venerable history in colonial America, but the *Reflector* employed a new conceptual language in making his case. He contended that a "Seasonable Opposition" would help preserve "civil or religious Liberty"<sup>58</sup> The intellectual vitality of any society, the *Reflector* suggested, depended upon the presence of mutually conflicting beliefs and interests. Moreover, he contended, societies themselves were self-regulating. The ascension of one particular sect would rally all the other sects, all of whom would be "equally

---

<sup>57</sup> William Livingston, et al, "Remarks on Our Intended College" *The Independent Reflector*, 180-182, 188-189.

<sup>58</sup> Livingston, "The Introduction, or Design of this Paper," *The Independent Reflector*, 58.

zealous for their Discriminating Tenets,” against it.<sup>59</sup> Fittingly, Livingston described his paper as a countervailing force to the “Pulpit-Scold,” which would otherwise preach without opposition. By his reckoning, the fact that it associated itself with no particular party, made it possible for it to serve as a critic of them all. Likewise, the *Reflector* argued that it was the legislature’s “Duty to preserve an even Balance [sic], and the just Rights of all Parties.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, the civil magistrate should play the same role that the journal played in the world of letters: preventing various sects from persecuting one another, rather than merely refraining from persecution himself.<sup>61</sup>

The *Reflector* suggested that ideological differences served society best when they were incorporated into the very fabric of its institutions. Livingston and his allies

---

<sup>59</sup> “Remarks on Our Intended College,” *The Independent Reflector*, 178-179.

<sup>60</sup> William Livingston, *The Watch Tower* (New-York, 1756). The *Reflector* was not alone in his opposition to Anglican control of King’s College, or in his assumption that countervailing religious forces were necessary to check the ascension of any one. David Marin Ben Jesse objected to the proposition that New York’s various denominations should have to pay to build and maintain a college dedicated to the education of student’s in another sects principles. Jesse was probably a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. Of course, there is always the possibility that Livingston or one of his allies penned this pamphlet, which does bear some strong resemblances to Livingston’s own work. It was the very equality of New York’s denominations that made the Church of England’s efforts so intolerable. Gaining control of the college, he argued, constituted the easiest way of achieving dominance within the province as a whole. In “a Country or Province, in which there are several Denominations of Protestants, whose religious Liberties hang in *Equilibrio*,” he wrote, an ambitious sect could devise no better scheme to enhance their own power than to seize control over the “Seminary of Learning.” Once accomplished, “the Youth [would] be tinctured with the Principles of those who teach them,” and the college would then “model Church and State.” Jesse expressed his hope that each tolerated denomination might enjoy their own college. Indeed, he noted, the King, like God, delighted “in the Happiness of his loyal and loving Subjects, though of various religious Sentiments.” But Jesse also suggested that “unanimity” might prevail among all of New York’s denominations if those denominations could escape the divisive influence of “domineering Parties” and “their Colleges.” David Marin Ben Jesse, *A Remark on the Disputes and Contentions in this Province* (New-York, 1755), 5, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Livingston, “A Vindication of the Moravians, against the Aspersions of their Enemies,” *The Independent Reflector*, ed. Milton M. Klein (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1963), 94.

were infuriated by the way the Anglican-controlled *New-York Mercury* conspicuously excluded “different Sentiments” from its pages. In 1753, they published a selection from Thomas Gordon’s famously anti-clerical *The Craftsmen*. According to their extended preface, the *Reflector* was established with the intention of compensating for the Church of England’s monopoly over public discourse. It was better for there to be “no Publication,” *Philo-Reflector* insisted, than for the proprietor of the *Mercury* to continue “writing without Opponents,” to continue publishing “without being contradicted.” What the Church of England could not achieve through public exclusion, it achieved through “private conversations.” Invoking the sort of imagery usually reserved for evangelical ministers, *Philo-Reflector* claimed that “a subtle Priest among us, avoids the Company of his own Sex, and affects only the Company of his Female Parishioners,” preying on their credulity. Not unlike the *Mercury*, this priest withdrew “when confuted.”<sup>62</sup> He could not tolerate disagreement nor provide reasons for his malicious notions. Livingston’s Anglican opponents retorted that he simply attempting to open up the administration of the college so that the Presbyterians, with the unwitting assistance of the Dutch—whom they were apparently attempting to “cajol[e] ... into a Coalition”—might seize control.<sup>63</sup> “It is plain,” declared one Anglican, “they no more wish to share the Power with the Dutch, than with the Church of England; but they think ... the Dutch to serve their present purpose.”<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Gordon, *The Craftsman, A Sermon from the Independent Whig* (New-York, 1753), xviii-xix, ii-iii, xi, xviii.

<sup>63</sup> *The New-York Mercury*, no. 63 (October 22, 1753).

<sup>64</sup> “Letter from a Gentleman in Queens County, to his Friend in New-York,” *The New-York Mercury*, no. 38 (April 30, 1753).

Livingston's Anglican opponents viewed the *Reflector*'s efforts at coalition-building as a symptom of his utter indifference to particular religious practices and beliefs. The *Mercury*'s writers ridiculed the ecumenical prayer he proposed for the college. One apologist for the Church accused the *Reflector* of having "spliced together" something which hardly resembled a prayer.<sup>65</sup> Another referred to it as "a disjointed Rhapsody." "Who would establish a College upon such a Bottom," it was asked, "more inconsistent than the Winds---more undulating than the Waves?"<sup>66</sup> Yet another letter writer confessed his befuddlement that the *Reflector* "*strongly recommends publick-Worship*" but of "no particular Method whatsoever."<sup>67</sup> One of the *Reflector*'s essays especially galled the Anglicans: "No. 31: *Primitive Christianity short and intelligible, modern Christianity voluminous and incomprehensible.*" Here, the *Reflector* reduced the requirements of Christian "Faith" to a mere two points: (1) the belief "that *Christ* was the promised *Messiah*," and (2) adherence to "its moral Directions," which he noted might be "contained in a Sheet of Paper." While most writers distinguished between the (required) fundamentals and the particulars of faith, hardly anyone was brazen enough to go as far as Livingston.

Livingston devoted the next several pages of his controversial tract to a description the "numberless Sects," which had "divided and subdivided Christianity." According to the *Reflector*, they "all claim to be orthodox, and yet all differ from one

---

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Nicoll, *A Brief Vindication of the Proceedings of the Trustees Relating to the College* (New York, 1754), 4-5.

<sup>66</sup> *The New-York Mercury*, no. 51 (July 30, 1753).

<sup>67</sup> "Advertisement," in *The New-York Mercury*, no. 36 (April 16, 1753).

another.” Furthermore, every one of them, was anxious “to damn all the Rest.”<sup>68</sup> The *Mercury*’s writers portrayed the *Reflector*’s “Catalogue of Sects” as nothing more than an irreligious rant. As they saw it, the existence of diversity only intensified the need for a national establishment. Employing Livingston’s own language of checks and balances, an anonymous author argued that “the Party that is uppermost becomes a Balance for all the tolerated Sects.” As the Anglicans saw the matter, only the moderate, charitable guidance of the Church of England could impose order on the various sects that Livingston gleefully catalogued. For them, such diversity was still confined to the dissenters whose own disagreements demonstrated their incoherence; by contrast, for Livingston, such diversity testified to the emptiness of the distinctions that *every* sect drew between itself and all the others.

The *Reflector*’s position on religious diversity was intimately bound up with the assumption that religious identity represented an accidental circumstance, an irrational choice amid a host of relatively comparable, and mutually hostile, alternatives.<sup>69</sup> Another New Yorker, Archibald Kennedy echoed the *Reflector*’s insistence that religious identity was at best, the product of sheer contingency.<sup>70</sup> Urging the provincial legislature to avoid becoming embroiled in the college dispute, he noted that religious disputes were particularly vituperative and long-lasting. Blame

---

<sup>68</sup> Livingston, “Primitive Christianity short and intelligible, modern Christianity voluminous and incomprehensible,” *The Independent Reflector*, 276.

<sup>69</sup> Every “human Mind,” according to Livingston, was endowed with “Freedom of Choice.” “Primitive Christianity short and intelligible, modern Christianity voluminous and incomprehensible,” *The Independent Reflector*, 270-271.

<sup>70</sup> The pamphlet was signed anonymously: “By a Member Dissenting from The Church.” Evans posits that its author was Archibald Kennedy.

often lay with the zealots of each denomination, the “BIGOT[s]” whose professed authority on all matters was God rather than Reason. “A BIGOT,” Kennedy defined as “a Person foolishly obstinate, and perversely wedded to an Opinion.” Kennedy hypothesized a conversation with a son about to set off for college. Stressing the fortuitous nature of all religious attachments, Kennedy indicated that his family “turned dissenters” when the local church was renovated, moving the family’s pew further from the altar. Again addressing his audience directly, Kennedy lectured: “I believe few of you can give a better Reason, for your Professions, Persuasions or Religion, call it which you will.” He and his wife had merely instructed the young man in his duty to God and neighbor, “without attempting to enter [him] into any formed System.”<sup>71</sup> They had taught him piety and decency, without inculcating a particular form of worship.

Living in a land that was even more diverse than it had been in the seventeenth century, Middle Colonists seemed particularly inclined to the conviction that religious identities could be made and un-made. Two of the *Reflector*’s three essayists, Livingston and John Morin Scott, in fact, had only recently moved from the Dutch and French Reformed churches (respectively) to the Presbyterian church. The Pennsylvanian Heamon Husbands began his personal account of denomination hopping by recalling how a fellow Quaker asked him, “by what Accident” he had come to join the Friends.<sup>72</sup> According to his own “impartial” narrative, Husbands had

---

<sup>71</sup> *A Speech Said to have been Delivered some Time before the Close of the Late Sessions* (New-York, 1755), 21, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Heamon Husbands, *Some Remarks on Religion* (Philadelphia, 1761), 3.

grown up in the Anglican church, but the visits of a Presbyterian minister had motivated him to “say the Lord’s Prayer and Creed every Night and Morning.” Later, after hearing the New Light preaching of George Whitefield, he had gravitated toward the “*New Presbyterians*.” Influenced by Whitefield’s sympathy for the Friends, Husbands became convinced that there were hardly even “ceremonial differences” between the New Presbyterians and the Quakers. Thereafter, he found himself defending Quaker doctrines and practices. Eventually, Husbands was introduced to some canonical Quaker texts, which purportedly convinced him to become a Friend himself. Like his contemporary, William Livingston, Husband directly encountered a variety of different religious groups during his lifetime, which may account for the ease with which he discounted their apparent “Ceremonial difference[s].” His migration from Anglicanism to New Light Presbyterianism and finally to Quakerism, Husbands suggested, was facilitated by the body of fundamental tenets and practices that these different denominations shared. Indeed, he claimed, these denominations even shared many of the same theological particulars. They were only distinguished by their relative degrees of piety.

By the 1760s, the boundaries of religious identity seem to have become so evidently constructed, and the doctrine of universal benevolence so stiflingly pervasive, that a very modest rebellion resulted. This “rebellion,” called Sandemanianism, was the exception that proved the ecumenical rule. Robert Sandeman, an elder in a Scottish Presbyterian splinter group known as the Glasites, successfully established several churches in New England during the 1760s. The Sandemanians eschewed a paid ministry, and were probably best known for the kisses



with which they greeted one another and the communal dinners they held, called “love feasts.”<sup>73</sup> Although the group had its origins across the Atlantic, it was in post-Awakening America that its leaders hoped to make the most significant inroads. Like their Masonic counterparts, the Sandemanians espoused “unanimity” and “*Brotherly Love*.” “In every Church Transaction, whether it be receiving, censuring, or expelling Members, chusing Officers,” Samuel Pike wrote, “we esteem *Unanimity* to be absolutely necessary.” “Nothing is decided by the Votes of a Majority,” he continued, “but by the most explicit Agreement of every Member present.” But unlike the Masons, the Sandemanians understood the obligation to “walk by the same Rule, and mind the same Thing” as a substantive commitment to embrace the same beliefs. According to Pike, the Sandemanians did not distinguish between essential and circumstantial matters. They considered every passage of Scripture “*sacred and indispensable*.” Every individual was free “to inquire or object, as his own Judgment and Conscience may dictate” and the church would consider such points as he might make, but it was “bound to reject” those who persisted in their dissent.<sup>74</sup>

A central and controversial tenet of the Sandemanians was the principle of “non-forbearance.” Abjuring tolerance toward dissenting opinions seems to have required a kind of conversion experience. This, as much as anything, indicates how radical a transformation Sandemanianism demanded. Indeed, Pike evoked the angst of

---

<sup>73</sup> I would like to thank John Smith for sharing his essay on this otherwise obscure group. See Smith’s soon-to-be-published paper “‘Sober Dissent’ and ‘Spirited Conduct’: The Sandemanians and The American Revolution, 1765-1781.”

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Pike, *A Plain and Full Account of the Christian Practices Observed By the Church in St. Martin-le-grand, London* (Boston, 1766), 22-25.

the repentant sinner, striving to turn toward God and away from his own worldliness.

when he wrote:

[T]his doctrine of unanimity and non-forgiveness has come with great weight upon my mind, time after time, and even while I professed and preached the sinful forgiveness, my own conscience would often recriminate: by some of the most plain and simple reasonings imaginable, such as these, if Christ forbids any thing, must we not think he would have it avoided? if he requires any thing, must we not suppose he would have it punctually performed?

Ironically, it was the non-forgiveness displayed toward the Sandemanians' own "kiss of charity," Pike claimed, that finally inclined him to embrace the doctrine.<sup>75</sup>

To subscribe to a principle of non-forgiveness in 1766 was indeed to adopt a radical stance toward the world. Moreover, to refer to the principle itself as "non-forgiveness," rather than merely as "unanimity," was to consciously invert the reigning orthodoxy. Thus, while Pike employed similar language to that used by opponents of toleration in the past—to insist that the church possessed the "natural Right" to separate from the disobedient—he meant something very different by it.<sup>76</sup> According to Pike, the realization that there was "no such thing as settling the limits of it or drawing the line of partition, between what may and what may not be forgiven within christian fellowship" motivated him to embrace this "doctrine of conscientiousness in religion."<sup>77</sup> The Sandemanian project constituted a self-

---

<sup>75</sup> Samuel Pike, *A Letter Wrote By Mr. Samuel Pike to Mr. Robert Sandeman* (Portsmouth, 1766), 4-6.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Pike, *A Plain and Full Account of the Christian Practices Observed By the Church in St. Martin-le-grand, London* (Boston, 1766), 26.

<sup>77</sup> Pike, *A Letter*, 5.

conscious effort to demarcate theologically what the parish line had once demarcated geographically. Theirs represented an explicit effort to create what other churches still accepted as given. With them, there would be no illusion of a pre-existing unanimity. They would demand unanimity. And they would exorcise all of those who differed, even in circumstantial matters, rather than forbearing the particularities that so many other believers were now urging one another to ignore.

The future surely did not lie with the non-forbearing. The Sandemanians could boast of only six churches in 1775.<sup>78</sup> The years between the First Great Awakening and the imperial conflict that preceded the Revolutionary War witnessed the blossoming of ecumenical thought in America. Provincial Americans were coming to see themselves united—literally in fundamental ways—with other Protestants, other Christians, and even people of non-Christian faiths. In some cases, as in the flood of European migrants making their way to the colonies, they had no choice in the matter. But in many other cases, such as Edward’s Concert of Prayer, the meetings of Freemasons, or the interdenominational “Society for Useful Knowledge” that Livingston and his fellow *Reflectors* established in the late 1740s, mid-century Americans made deliberate choices to interact with those of other religious persuasions. Thus, for one reason or another, they found their fate bound up with those of very different beliefs and practices. To achieve the unity after which they so desperately strove, provincial Americans sometimes posited an instrument of spiritual

---

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Clap dismissed “two tutors for having espoused the grave heresy of Sandemanianism.” Hofstadter and Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom*, 175.

unanimity—piety, love, prayer, fasting, or just silence—through which differences had always already been resolved. More frequently than in the past, their imagined agreements were not of the sort that required the individual's spoken assent to a body of doctrine. They would often require only an inclination to do good for others and to sustain the faith, to love and to believe.

Few believers would have conceded that they could only love more when they believed less. Nonetheless, like their Old World contemporaries, American writers evinced a growing hostility toward the religious "BIGOT," the person "perversely wedded to an Opinion." A changed mind was no longer necessarily a corrupt mind. Indeed, it was become increasingly difficult to associate any particular faith with corruption, heresy or disease. To acknowledge the contingency of religious identity was also, in some ways, to concede the legitimacy of believing differently. Here was the ground upon which every religiously-inclusive society was founded. The cohesion of the interdenominational college, fraternity and government, rested upon the conviction that a variety of religious faiths could coexist within the same society as long as individuals were willing to privilege the beliefs they held in common. Indeed, if properly balanced, particular differences might even serve as a source of creative tension. To people like William Livingston, "Writing without opponents" was nearly as disturbing as the possibility of speaking "without Opposition" had once been appealing. Such a belief seems commonsensical today only because we live in a world that takes the virtue of inclusion for granted.

A subtle, but profound, change was transforming the way Americans talked about their religious differences. As religiously inclusive institutions became more

common and religious identities came to seem ever more contingent, the venerable language of “toleration” began to lose its currency. The *Reflector*’s debate with New York’s Anglicans had again raised the question of whether there was any room for the practice of toleration in a place as religiously diverse as the one in which they lived. The negative answer Livingston supplied was the one to which American religious discourse was tending. Opening provincial institutions to men of almost all religious persuasions ruled out the possibility that any one of them was merely tolerated. The language of toleration presumed that a few categories of description would suffice for everyone. Moreover, it presumed that those who controlled the institutions of the state would decide how those descriptions were applied. By contrast, the Freemasonic notion that inclusive institutions must accede to individual self-description—so long as those individuals kept that self-description to themselves—depended on the practice of saying very little about other people’s religious convictions. This notion, rather than Livingston’s conviction that various conflicting groups could balance one another out, eventually prevailed. Of course, such an outcome would not have been immediately evident to anyone who witnessed the vitriolic dispute over American Anglicanism that raged during the decade and a half leading up to the Revolutionary War.

**Chapter 4**  
**The End of Dissent:**  
**Religious Differences and the Imperial Crisis**

Psa 133:1 *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!*

“... there are no longer any innocent words.”<sup>1</sup>  
Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982)

Throughout the 1760s, plans were afoot to bring together the British Province's non-Anglican denominations into a single, loosely-associated, Christian union.<sup>2</sup> The idea received its most forceful articulation in 1761 with the publication of Ezra Stiles best-selling *A Discourse on the Christian Union*. Stiles, the pastor of a Rhode Island church, served as a conduit between Middle Colony Presbyterians and his fellow Congregationalists to the north. Encouraging reconciliation between non-Anglicans, Stiles dismissed the notion that any substantive issues had divided revivalists and anti-revivalists during the Great Awakening. A “different manner and phraseology in explaining the same principles appears to me to be their chief

---

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Never entirely comfortable with their own conspicuous diversity, and anxious about Episcopal advances, Stiles' Presbyterian and Congregationalist correspondents contemplated a “Christian Union” throughout much of the 1760s. These dreams ultimately bore fruit in a 1765 meeting of thirty-one clergymen from Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. “The convention,” which meant annually through 1775, “aimed to extend the union throughout the colonies, and laid plans to correspond with their own brethren in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, as well as with Reformed ministers in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.” See Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 206. Such ideas were less popular in Rhode Island and Massachusetts where the Congregational churches were not bound together in Presbyterian-like consociations like they were in Connecticut. See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 247. Quote from Bonomi, 206.

difference,” he wrote. Indeed, Stiles professed himself ignorant of “any very essential or general alteration of the public sentiment on what we all agree to be the fundamental principles of revelation.” When the object was to make men “virtuous and good,” it was of no consequence whether the “means are diversified.” Stiles thought that the American “experiment,” which mixed different, mutually hostile denominations together until they formed a cohesive union, could “be made in one century.”<sup>3</sup>

The *Discourse* contained the usual assortment of biblical and historical evidence. But two-thirds of the way through, Stiles appeal for Christian union took an unexpected turn. At that point, Stiles tabulated the estimated number of “Episcopalians,” “Friends,” “Baptists” and “Congregationalists” in New England in 1760 and the projected numbers for the next century.<sup>4</sup>

A.D.	Episcopalians	Friends	Baptists	Congregationalists
1760	12,600	16,000	22,000	440,000
1785	23, 200	32,000	44,000	880,000
1810	46,4000	64,000	88,000	1,760,000
1835	92,8000	128,000	176,000	3,520,000
1860	185,6000	256,000	352,000	7 MILLIONS

Stiles was not the first American provincial to engage in such demographic speculation. A decade before, his friend Benjamin Franklin, had predicted that the

---

<sup>3</sup> Ezra Stiles, *Discourse on the Christian Union* (Boston, 1761), 52, 95, 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

colonial population would continue to double every twenty-five years.<sup>5</sup> Franklin had concluded his internationally renowned work on demographic growth by lamenting the low proportion of Anglo-Saxons among the world's differently hued peoples, observing that "the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small." Stiles' innovation lay in the application of the tools of demography to religious faith.<sup>6</sup> Like most of his contemporaries, the Reverend was more concerned about denominational competition than he was about racial calculations.<sup>7</sup> In this regard he was representative of his time.

Stiles' appeal to demography was the first of many employed by both pro- and anti-Episcopal writers in the decade and a half leading up to the Declaration of Independence.<sup>8</sup> Such pious attention to numbers marked the onset of a heated competition between America's Protestant denominations for control of institutions that were increasingly open to all. Where authority was determined by vote and

---

<sup>5</sup> Stiles optimistically forecast a similar rate of growth in New England. A "modest land speculator," he possessed more than a passing interest in the spread of New England's population westward. My account of Stiles is heavily indebted to Carl Bridenbaugh's chapter on the minister in his *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 3-22.

<sup>6</sup> Stiles calculations may have built as much upon the numerical claims of the Society for the Propagation as much as it was on Franklin's calculations. According to Carl Bridenbaugh, "The clergy of the Northern Colonies wrote regularly to [the SPG's] secretary, and once a year submitted reports of numbers, membership gains, the state of churches and parishes, and other pertinent information, which was abstracted and published as an appendix to the Society's annual sermon."

<sup>7</sup> Stiles, *Discourse on the Christian Union*, 120. His sanguine calculation of Congregational expansion was premised on the continued availability of open land, the prompt creation of churches in New England's newly-established communities, and the persistent memory of the Puritan founders. Only then would the principles of individual religious liberty and church autonomy prevail.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Stiles' computations would themselves become a source of controversy.



individuals mixed with those of many different persuasions, demography promised the certainty that pluralistic societies did not otherwise provide. Numbers seemed especially attractive given the unstable quality of language. Indeed, contemporaries returned to the problem of linguistic indeterminacy again and again throughout this period. At the opening of one of their many anti-episcopal essays, the authors of “The Centinel” invoked this recurring theme:

Nothing has occasioned greater Mistakes, nor given Room for warmer Debates, than the varying and unsettled meaning of Names and Terms. A Word, which in one Age, has served to convey a particular Idea, at some succeeding Period, has been understood in a very different Sense: and controversial Writers have seldom been so candid as to state the Difference. ... It has been remarkably the Case of the Episcopal Character in the Christian Church. ...<sup>9</sup>

Four years later, the terms of the debate over a proposed American bishop apparently remained unsettled. At that time (1772), the man appointed to make the Church of England’s case for a colonial bishopric, the Reverend Thomas Bradbury Chandler, sarcastically remarked that it might be helpful for his anti-episcopal adversary to “publish a *Glossary*, wherein the Singularities of his Phraseology” would be “carefully explained.”<sup>10</sup> The proper definition of words, like the accurate calculation of

---

<sup>9</sup> “The Centinel XV, June 30, 1768,” *The Centinel: Warning of a Revolution*, in Elizabeth Nybakken, ed. (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1980), p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas B. Chandler, *An Appeal Farther Defended* (New York, 1771), 226-227. The increased weight placed on words anticipated the restrictions placed on dissenting speech during the Revolutionary. But it also owes a great deal to the increasingly popular notion that each individual, each group, was entitled to its own self-description, to the modes of faith that made it the particular and compelling institution that it was. Several developments help explain the novel stance that contemporary writers expressed toward language. First, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American churches evinced a growing reluctance to bind men to words, an increasing inclination to privilege piety over theology. While belittling the usefulness of human words to communicate divine truths, the opponents of creeds also paid implicit tribute to the power of words to bind, to restrict and to pervert. Second, the Anglican controversies formed part of a larger discursive

population, assumed greater importance when the dispute over the composition of religiously-diverse institutions had taken precedence over the toleration of dissent.

Despite their apparent instability, both words and the “prejudices” from which they sprang, were now thought to constitute “persecution.” Pre-Revolutionary Americans grafted the notion that harm could be caused by depriving a believer of his or her self-description onto the liberal notion that harm resulted from the tangible deprivation of property or office.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, they laid the groundwork for a broad conception of religious liberty, which would encompass legal protections for dissenting faiths and offer rules for regulating behavior in an integrated religious setting. Of course, “dissent” and “toleration” were so deeply ingrained in the discursive conventions of the day that even when their meaning could no longer be

---

context in which imperial and religious obligations were at risk of being over-articulated, when conflicting descriptions of religious difference were themselves becoming the source of conflict. In sustained debates such as these, words themselves—rather than the social and political environment to which they are supposed to refer—become the source of controversy. And whether they cared to admit it, both sides loaded particular religious doctrines with political consequences.

Finally, the proper definition of words, like the accurate calculation of population, assumed greater importance when the dispute over the composition of religiously-diverse institutions had taken precedence over the toleration of dissent. Indeed, ceding the description of religious experiences, beliefs and practices to the believers themselves meant foregoing the possibility that anyone could be described as a tolerating someone else, or that any institution could be described as dissenting from another. In the Anglican dispute of the 1760s and early 1770s, we can discern a new way of talking about religious differences that exceeded the constraints imposed by the discourse of toleration and dissent. The linguistic instability of the period reflects both the volatility of this Revolutionary moment, as well as a novel commitment to self-description. The ideal of self-description would permanently subvert any attempt to define believers and institutions from the outside. Thereafter, only numbers, and the majorities that followed from them, would be capable of challenging its authority.

<sup>11</sup> According to the historian Jane Kamensky, it had been evident to those living in the seventeenth century, particularly those who inhabited Puritan New England, that words hurt. But during the eighteenth century, she argues, the liberal principle, that only “sticks and stones” injured, gained favor. See Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

agreed upon, even when their relevance seemed to have faded, they retained their hold on the imaginations of late eighteenth-century Americans. Nonetheless, the cultural infrastructure that had once given those terms their rhetorical force was disappearing. American society was slowly moving beyond the confines that the language of dissent and toleration had long imposed.

The denominational competition Ezra Stiles wrote about was not simply a product of his overheated imagination. Whether there were 12,600 Anglicans now inhabiting New England or not, their membership was a far cry from the mere “handful” who had once populated the region.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, although Episcopal meddling had long vexed New England’s Congregationalists, the church’s rapid expansion since the Great Awakening, its control over King’s College, the recent ascension of the ambitious Thomas Secker to the London Bishopric, a conspicuous rise in the proportion of Anglican placemen assuming colonial offices, together with the increasingly intrusive efforts of Anglican missionaries, rendered that threat all the more ominous. The controversies of the 1760s thus noticeably widened the chasm between Anglicans and non-Anglicans. But they also convinced colonial non-Anglicans that they shared a good deal. In fact, it was ultimately the fear that an Anglican bishopric would be established in the colonies that motivated the non-Anglican denominations to make ecumenical gestures. It was this same fear that generated an unprecedented level of strident anti-Anglican sentiment during the pre-

---

<sup>12</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre*, 179.

Revolutionary years. During the 1760s and early 1770s, vitriolic conflicts over imperial obligations and political representation would only exacerbate tensions that had been building for some time.

The extraordinary circumstances that gave shape to the Anglican controversies, the desperately heated polemics through which it was argued, and the small sample of denominations involved in the controversy, might leave us wary of treating it as a faithful reflection of contemporary thought. However, the systematic nature of the debate, the starkness of the alternatives it posed, as well as the sheer breadth of interest it generated, do render it an exceptionally rich source for investigating the way people thought about religious differences in the late eighteenth century. During the 1760s and early 1770s, American writers devoted more attention to these differences than they did to any other others. This controversy, moreover, reveals a good deal about the larger late eighteenth-century problem of mixing legally equal religious groups. What could be said about other groups? What could not be said? Where did religious influence end and social and political power begin? Though not always answered, these questions were raised repeatedly in the pre-revolutionary Anglican controversies.

Concerns over Anglican hegemony flared up in 1763 in a dispute involving the missionary wing of the Church of England, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Four years earlier, the SPG had constructed a mission at Cambridge, the epicenter of New England congregationalism. Recognizing that victory over the French in the Seven Years' War suddenly rendered western Indians vulnerable to conversion, both the Anglicans and the dissenters were anxious to proselytize the

“Heathen” masses. In 1763, the year the Molasses Act passed the British Parliament, the Massachusetts General Court chartered the Congregational equivalent of the SPG. “The Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge among the Indians of North America.” But the British Privy Council disallowed the act, thereby angering its colonial supporters.<sup>13</sup> That same year, the brash young head of the Cambridge mission, East Apthorp, published a tribute to the SPG, which ignited the first of several print battles that made up the war of words before the War itself.

Tensions had not yet reached the boiling point in 1762, when Apthorp honored the newly-opened Christ-Church in Cambridge. The general thrust of Apthorp’s argument in 1762, as in 1763, was far from bellicose. As Apthorp saw it, the Church’s relationship to colonial religious life was additive. The missionary observed that the construction of Christ’s Church proceeded “on truly christian principles, with views of adding to the extent and stability of our common faith, uninfluenced by party, bigotry, or intolerance.” He reiterated the same premise in his 1763 sermon. “A Protestant Country, in such a Climate as ours,” he wrote, “cannot well be overstocked with Churches, and resident Ministers.” “The different persuasions,” Apthorp continued, “need not interfere with each other.” They might even cooperate in the achievement of their common ends. For Apthorp, the Church of England would add its own religious particularities to the expanding pie that was American christianity. This was no zero sum game.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Bridenbaugh, 209-211.

<sup>14</sup> East Apthorp, *Considerations of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (Boston, 1763). 23-24.

The notion that the Church of England merely added to the already prodigious stock of Christian faiths already in America seemed implausible to at least some part of Apthorp's colonial audience. Moreover, Apthorp's tribute to the SPG betrayed ambitions that would incite his non-Anglican adversaries. In the flush of Britain's recent triumph over the French and their Indian allies, he imagined "this extensive Country, just won to the British empire, gradually acceding, among its numerous inhabitants, to the empire of JESUS CHRIST." Such a sentiment might have seemed congenial enough to New England's congregational establishment had Apthorp not also suggested that the object of SPG proselytizing, the means of advancing Christ's empire, would not be the Native Americans, but colonial "dissenters."<sup>15</sup> Apthorp's 1763 pamphlet announced ceremoniously that the conversion of Native Americans was "subordinate" to the Society's "principal most excellent and comprehensive object, that of giving *all* the British subjects on this vast continent the means of public Religion."<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, very few colonial British subjects welcomed the prospect of being proselytized. In his controversial *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* (1763), the Boston Congregationalist Jonathan Mayhew contended that the Society should instead focus its efforts among the appropriate objects of "charity," "the Negroes and Indians," who were so evidently

---

<sup>15</sup> Apthorp suggested in his earlier work, that the still un-"civilized" Native Americans were not yet congenial to conversion.

<sup>16</sup> East Apthorp, *Considerations*, 13-14.

in need of the gospel.<sup>17</sup> There was no need to evangelize those who already enjoyed the benefits of a Protestant church.<sup>18</sup> Mayhew was convinced that the Anglicans were intent on making “*proselytes*” among the dissenters and then enforcing their ecclesiastical regulations.<sup>19</sup> They aimed to “become considerable for numbers” and “absorb all our churches.”<sup>20</sup> The only additions they hoped to make were to their own membership rolls (which the SPG had the unfortunate habit of publishing annually). Even East Apthorp’s language, Mayhew contended, indicated what the SPG’s real aims were: the clergyman’s “*good presumption*” on this matter was as ambitious, as imperialistic as the SPG’s practices.

According to Mayhew, the “airs of superiority” maintained by the Episcopalians resulted from their assumption that the other churches were merely “tolerated.”<sup>21</sup> “The missionaries certainly knew,” Mayhew argued in 1764, “that there were no legal episcopal parishes in New-England; and yet they write in this manner about their *dissenting parishioners*.”<sup>22</sup> Mayhew insisted that New England’s non-Anglican denominations did not require the indulgence of the Church of England.

---

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* (Boston, 1763), 13. Their efforts among the dissenters, Mayhew wrote, represented “a misapplication of that part of their fund, which has been employed in this way: to the neglect, prejudice and injury of other colonies, the Negroes and Indians, who were unquestionably proper objects of their charity.”

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Observations*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Remarks on an Anonymous Tract* (Boston, 1764), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Mayhew, *Observations*, 107.

<sup>21</sup> Mayhew, *Remarks*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

There, of course, could be no toleration where there was no dissent.<sup>23</sup> As Mayhew saw it, not only was Apthorp incapable of distinguishing between unchurched Native Americans and faithful Protestants, or between the authority of the Church in England and the prerogatives of the Church across the ocean, he had also demonstrated his ignorance of the variety of persuasions contained in the condescending term “dissenters.”

Like other eighteenth-century apologists for traditional institutions, some Anglicans suggested that the Church’s opponents were hostile to the numerically-determined decisions of the majority. After expressing the concern that Mayhew’s arguments were “capable of doing the church some prejudice among the lower and more ignorant sort of people,” Arthur Browne turned to the politics of demography. The real object of Mayhew’s animus, Browne insisted, was “the increase of the numerous and growing party.” “And what if the church of England should be established here?” he asked. “[I]f it were by the consent of the people (which will probably be the case when the episcopalians shall come to have the major vote in our houses of assembly) what harm can there be in it?” Furthermore, Browne noted, there was no difference between a test law that formally excluded dissenters and a democratic people’s choice to keep such people out of office. But he was optimistic

---

<sup>23</sup> Mayhew’s arguments echoed those of a lawyer in the infamous trial of the Presbyterian preacher Francis Makemie in 1707, who insisted that in colonial America: “there is no Room for, or need of any Toleration.” See Francis Makemie, *A Narrative of a New and Unusual American Imprisonment* (New-York, 1755), p. 35. In a commencement address delivered at Rhode Island College, Barnabas Binney noted that “... where there is a *full* toleration, there can be no establishment; (unless an establishment of toleration) for, they are not only inconsistent, but utterly exclusive of each other.” Barnabas Binney, *An Oration Delivered on the Late Public Commencement at Rhode-Island College* (Boston, 1774), 23.



about the Church's prospects. Browne expressed his gratitude that "there are now abundance of people in the country who are very inquisitive after the truth, and disposed to receive it."<sup>24</sup> Mayhew replied the following year that the "true protestant judges, not by the majority of votes or numbers, but by scripture and reason." Still, he was concerned about Episcopal growth. Unlike its dissenting counterparts, the Anglican church was already a unified body, and were it to obtain "near to an equality with us in point of number," he thought, it would be at a distinct "advantage."<sup>25</sup>

As colonial Anglicans saw the matter, Mayhew's language possessed the capacity for real harm. They accused Mayhew of "raising ... a violent spirit of opposition," cultivating "a prejudice in the minds of the people," and working to divide and alienate the minds of his Majesty's good subjects from each other ..."<sup>26</sup> One author decried the "malicious misrepresentations" leveled against the Church of England. He warned that the kind of "misaffection" and "party spirit" stirred up by Mayhew "are the natural fore-runners of persecution, where there is power to execute it"<sup>27</sup> According to another Anglican apologist, this dissenting practice was not new to

---

<sup>24</sup> [Arthur Browne], *Remarks on Dr. Mayhew's Incidental Reflections* (Portsmouth, 1763), 4-5. 27. Browne was not alone in his attack on Mayhew's alleged hostility toward the desires of the majority. While counseling that Mayhew "study the Quiet of [the King's] Government, and be afraid to speak Evil of his Religion" John Aplin echoed Browne's deference for legislative majoritarianism. If "by the free Votes of the People ... they should think fit to make Choice of it, and establish it, what would the Doctor do to prevent it?" See [Aplin, John], *Verses on Doctor Mayhew's Book of Observations* (Providence, 1763), 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Mayhew, *Remarks*, 6, 69

<sup>26</sup> [Henry Caner], *A Candid Examination of Dr. Mayhew's Observations* (Boston, 1763), 57-59.

<sup>27</sup> *A Short Vindication* was attached at the end of Caner's *A Candid Examination*. Quotations from *A Short Vindication*, 86, 57.

them. The Church of England's opponents, he contended, had long been inclined "[t]o answer sober Arguments with soure Coercives ... to debate by the Prison, and not by the Pen." This was "dispute by the Goal and the Hang-Man" rather than persuasion.<sup>28</sup>

The Anglican faction thus complained of a persecution that was cultural, rather than institutional, abstract rather than concrete. In this, they articulated the increasingly widespread assumption that written words could harm by themselves. Indeed, Jonathan Mayhew likened his Episcopal opponents to the "invisible savages" who shot from the safety of "dark thickets." He compared their disputational style to the "ungenerous, dastardly and dishonourable" fighting tactics of the Indians.<sup>29</sup> According to this dissenting position, the Anglicans' use of language constituted a disturbing combination of savagery and anonymity, of ruthlessness and institutional power. Like the Native Americans who preferred to fight from behind trees and rocks rather than adopting the European practice of lining up in fixed formation, the Anglicans were operating outside the boundaries of acceptable provincial discourse. Thus, on both sides of the controversies, violence seemed to inhere in language. An apologist for the SPG noted his dismay at the "injurious misrepresentations" spread by the dissenters.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary disputants seemed especially conscious of its capacity to distort, sully, or even injure.

---

<sup>28</sup> Thomas De Laune, *A Plea for the Nonconformists* (Boston, 1763), i.

<sup>29</sup> The Indians, he noted, were much better shots. Mayhew, *Observations*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> *A Short Vindication*, 86.

In a few cases, colonial Anglicans invoked the latitudinarian principles that had characterized English religious discourse for the past century. The campaign against Mayhew culminated in an extremely conciliatory response by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Secker. Anglican missionaries, Secker observed, were instructed to preach nothing but the duties of adhering to “*the great fundamental Principles of Christianity*” and the practice of piety.<sup>31</sup> In England, Secker observed, the Act of Toleration was held in unqualified esteem. Indeed, the Archbishop observed, he did not know one Englishman who wished to overturn it. But at times, Secker’s tract resorted to less “liberal” rhetoric. Who, Secker queried, could New Englander’s dissenters have possibly learned “Christian Charity” from if not the Church of England?<sup>32</sup> Then again, the Archbishop huffed, it was not clear that Mayhew or his fellow dissenters had learned charity. Secker passed on a report that a group of Presbyterians had expressed an interest in hanging Episcopalians, just as Mayhew had suggested the Anglicans were interested in shooting dissenters.<sup>33</sup> Secker speculated that were “Weapons” other than the pen at his disposal, Mayhew would surely turn to the physical persecution of Anglicans.<sup>34</sup>

Amid the bitter wrangling of the pre-revolutionary decade, the idea of proselytizing among the “heathenish masses” ultimately constituted the fundamental

---

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Secker, *An Answer to Dr. Mayhew’s Observations* (London and Boston, 1764), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Secker, *An Answer to Dr. Mayhew’s Observations* (London and Boston, 1764), p. 30-31

<sup>33</sup> It is not clear where, or under what circumstances the interest was expressed.

<sup>34</sup> Secker, *An Answer to Dr. Mayhew’s Observations*, 31, 30.

principle on which both Anglicans and non-Anglicans could agree. Near the conclusion of his tract, the Archbishop made the critical concession, endorsing Mayhew's proposal to proselytize Native Americans and African-Americans. Secker pledged to re-direct the SPG in its ends, prohibiting missionaries from proselytizing among other denominations, so that the "Eyes of the Society may be turned more attentively to the dark Corners of the Colonies, to the Methods which promise well for the more effectual Instruction of the Negroes, and to the Openings for doing good amongst the Indians, which his Majesty's new Acquisitions will probably disclose."<sup>35</sup> The idea that the SPG's task was to enlighten, or christianize the "dark" peoples of the world, rather than those it regarded as dissenters within its own (Protestant) community, hints at the possibility of a significant discursive shift. Long employed as a justification for intrusions upon Native American lands and the enslavement of non-Christian people, the object of converting Indians and slaves was one that individuals of all denominations could endorse. In comparison to the spiritual chasm that separated them from the un-christianized peoples of the world, Anglicans and non-Anglicans seemed to share a great deal in common. If their words were indeed infused with the capacity for violence, they might be justified when it came to the savages who fought from behind trees, or the slaves whose work was coerced and whose faith was co-opted. Here was an essential principle that a white Protestant of any denomination could embrace.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 50.

The dispute over Anglican missionaries was quickly superseded by an even more rancorous dispute over the proposal for a colonial bishop. Before concluding his apology for the SPG, the Archbishop broached the possibility. Secker argued that Mayhew and his fellow dissenters could not oppose the occasional presence of such an officer and still “call themselves Patrons of religious Liberty.”<sup>36</sup> Whether there was reason to establish an Anglican bishop in the colonies, and whether the colonists could call themselves “Patrons of religious Liberty” if they opposed this proposal, would be the subject of much discussion over the next several years. In the meantime, colonial attention was riveted upon the Parliament’s revenue raising measures. The unfortunate coincidence of unpopular imperial policies and the Anglican effort to establish a bishop in the colonies contributed to the demise of both. Within this context, religion and politics appeared inextricably tangled. To a greater extent than they would either in the years before or after, contemporaries treated particular religious institutions and beliefs as the extension of political actions. Of course, during wars and revolutions, even the most private acts take on public significance.

The American Revolution generated sustained, critical reflection on Anglo-American institutions. During the decade preceding the Declaration of Independence (1776), the American reading public was subjected to an unprecedented variety of political writing. Innumerable polemics against overwrought hierarchies and overbearing patriarchs radicalized American politics in much the same way that the Great Awakening transformed American religion. In addition to the vast quantity of

---

<sup>36</sup> Secker, *An Answer to Dr. Mayhew’s Observations*, 57.

ink spilled over the problem of British sovereignty and colonial duties, consumer boycotts, mass petitions, and mob protests widened the scope of political action to include the previously excluded, such as free white women and poor white men. The British Parliament's passage of the Sugar Act (April 1764), followed in short order by the Stamp Act (March 1765), provoked colonial Americans to reevaluate their thinking about government. Colonial writers argued that they were being taxed unjustly, without their consent. When Parliament's defenders responded that the colonists were "virtually Represented" within its halls, colonial writers responded, in turn, that every true representative of the people must be actually chosen by the people he was said to represent. The colonists argued, furthermore, that every true representative must "live among them and share their local circumstances."<sup>37</sup> The contours of this dispute, along with the same sort of intellectual soul-searching, would be reproduced in the debate over an American bishop.

As imperial tensions heightened, the friction between Anglicans and non-Anglicans increased. To at least some non-Anglicans, the parallels between the episcopal debate and the general imperial crisis were striking. William Livingston referred to the proposal for an Anglican bishop as "this ecclesiastical stamp-act."<sup>38</sup> A letter-writer featured in the anti-Episcopal newspaper series, the "Centinel," wondered whether Parliamentary authority might be easily extended from the imposition of

---

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of representation and its associated problems during this period, see Edmund Morgan, *Inventing the People* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), esp. 240-242. Quotation taken from p. 241.

<sup>38</sup> Quote from Patricia Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 251.

revenue-raising taxes on the colonies to the introduction of a tyrannical ecclesiastical system.<sup>39</sup> Without its own representatives in Parliament, the “Centinel” noted, the colonists could do little to prevent such an imposition. Opponents of a bishop could not help noticing that Episcopal missionaries were one of the first groups to support the enforcement of the Stamp Act.<sup>40</sup> After an extensive correspondence, the Church’s opponents came together to form a short-lived union of Congregational, Presbyterian and Baptist ministers. In September, 1768, delegates from these three denominations convened at Elizabeth Town, New Jersey, where they coordinated their defense against Anglican imperialism.

The Episcopal controversy was nearly as widespread as that which had surrounded the Stamp Act. In fact, it proceeded along the same lines of communication, through the port cities of Boston, New York and Philadelphia. It even made its way into Virginia’s newspapers, whose readers had not experienced the regularly-published polemics that had long occupied their northern counterparts.<sup>41</sup> The controversy, moreover, came packaged with many of the same theoretical problems that animated the Stamp Act Crisis. Both the extent of Parliamentary power, and, more generally, the extent of English sovereignty, were at issue in this controversy. The conflation of these ostensibly distinct issues—Parliamentary

---

<sup>39</sup> “The Centinel VI, April 28, 1768,” 118.

<sup>40</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre*, 255. The support of English Anglicans was apparently known to colonials as well.

<sup>41</sup> There, as Carl Bridenbaugh pointed out, it “merged with problems of toleration and establishment and led without a break to James Madison’s religious clause in the celebrated Bill of Rights of 1776, to the bill for disestablishment of the same year, and the final statute for religious freedom passed in 1786.” Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre*, 322.

taxation and the proposal for a bishop—vexed advocates for a colonial episcopate. Thomas Bradbury Chandler, the man who would lead the Anglican's campaign, complained that the unpopular proposals for colonial taxation had been “artfully blended together” with the proposal to introduce a colonial bishop so as to appear “Parts of one general System.”<sup>42</sup> The dissenters' confusion probably came as no surprise to most Anglicans, who would have been familiar with the old dictum that the monarch was unsafe without his bishops: No Bishop, No King. Echoing this traditional view was Jonathan Boucher, who noted that if it was believed that the opponents of a bishopric were truly “cordial friends to the State,” then, “we shall pay a compliment to their loyalty, at the expense of their consistency.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite Anglican protests, the connection between political and ecclesiastical tyranny was hard-wired into dissenting thought. Beginning with John Milton and John Locke, and continuing with the anti-Church polemics of *The Independent Whig* and *Cato's Letters*, English political writing had impressed upon colonial minds the invidious connections too often forged between arbitrary kings and ambitious bishops. The seeming complementarity between Parliamentary assertiveness and Anglican arrogance only reinforced what many colonist already believed. Charles I's

---

<sup>42</sup> “Advertisement” preceding Thomas Bradbury Chandler, *An Appeal to the Public* (New-York, 1767).

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Boucher, “On the American Episcopate,” *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution; in thirteen Discourses, Preached in North America Between the years 1763 and 1755: w/ an Historical Preface by Jonathan Boucher, A.M. and F.A.S. Vicar of Epsom in the County of Surrey* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 93. Boucher himself was pretty consistent. In a sermon 1769, he apparently advised his church that “a sect is a faction in the Church, as a faction is a sect in the State; and the spirit which refuses obedience to the one, is equally ready to resist the other.” Boucher, “On Sects and Schisms,” *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 79-80.



Archbishop, William Laud, was the prototype for such arbitrary rule. Colonial writers were quite certain that the impositions of Laudian-like policies were a prelude to civil tyranny.

The debate over a colonial bishopric raged throughout the northern colonies almost incessantly between 1767 and 1772, though it was most heated in the middle colonies. Seldom presenting itself as more than a rumor in the past, the very idea of a resident prelate came to be debated in full view of the colonial reading public during this period. In 1767, John Ewer, Bishop of Landaff, publicly recommended a colonial bishop in a sermon before the SPG.<sup>44</sup> However the rhetorical campaign did not begin in earnest until the publication of Thomas Bradbury Chandler's *An Appeal to the Public in Behalf of the Church of England in America* (1767). Appointed to vindicate the proposal for a colonial bishop, this New York minister took pains to emphasize the Church's vulnerability. Chandler insisted that "Every Opposition" to the plan for an American episcopate, "has the Nature of Persecution, and deserves the Name. For to punish us for our religious Principles, when no Reasons of State require it, is Persecution in its strictest and properest Sense. "Some perhaps may dispute the Propriety of the Word, as the great Grievance in Question arises not from any positive Exertion of Civil Power agt us," he conceded, "but if it be not properly Persecution, it is something that is as bad in its natural Consequences." Chandler appealed to the sympathy of his largely dissenting audience, asking whether, if they had to "suffer" the same hardships:

---

<sup>44</sup> John Ewer, *A Sermon Preached Before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (London and New York, 1768).

would they not esteem it an intolerable Grievance, and a cruel Persecution? ... Now, if this would be esteemed Persecution, in the Case of Presbyterians or Congregationalists, or of any other religious Denomination of People in this Country, why it should be esteemed less when suffered by the Church of England is hard to conceive. We have the same Feelings, the same Sensibility with other Persons, and are equally affected by any Sufferings.

Chandler generously praised the “liberal Turn” that many American “dissenters” had taken in their “Sentiments and Manners.” However, “an intolerant persecuting Disposition” still seemed to prevail among some.<sup>45</sup>

Like his dissenting opponents, Chandler suggested that persecution might be as much a “disposition” as a disability, as much a characteristic of the mind as a legal punishment visited upon the body. This position constituted a significant departure from the vocabulary employed by the traditional partisans of toleration, who reminded their contemporaries of the “persecution” suffered by those forbidden to hold English civil service positions because they could not conform to the established church, or those burnt at the stake for their commitment to Protestant reform. Chandler echoed the language employed earlier in the decade by apologists for the SPG, who had suggested that the colonists’ rhetoric was itself persecutory. It asserted, moreover, the increasingly widespread equivalence of feelings, beliefs and institutions, which were making charges of intangible harm seem plausible.

Chandler’s argument was significant for another reason. Rather than emphasizing the church’s legal pre-eminence within the Empire—as Anglican apologists had repeatedly done in the past—he appealed for an understanding of the particularities of episcopal worship. The Episcopalians were not, according to

---

<sup>45</sup> Chandler, *An Appeal to the Public*, 82, 40, 39–40, 93.

Chandler, demanding “superiority” in colonial affairs (though, he noted, they deserved it). They were “request[ing] only the Liberty of enjoying the Institutions of our Church, and thereby of being put upon an equal Footing with our Neighbours.”<sup>46</sup> As Myles Cooper, the President of King’s College put it four years later, “This Church is in an imperfect State, wanting an essential Part of its Constitution.”<sup>47</sup> In Chandler’s hands, religious liberty was something more than the freedom from physical or material punishment. It entailed a set of positive obligations on the part of the non-Anglican denominations. “The Principles of religious Liberty professed by the Dissenters,” he argued, “must not only restrain them from opposing an American Episcopate, as now settled and explained, but oblige them, if they would act consistently, even to *befriend* it.” For to suffer persecution one need only be denied that which made one’s church complete—in this case, a bishop. “[E]very Good we are deprived of,” he insisted, “is equivalent to an Evil inflicted.”<sup>48</sup>

Opponents of the proposal for a colonial bishop claimed to be confused by Chandler’s vocabulary. “The ‘Church,’ the ‘American Church,’ ‘the church of England in America,’ are the names which he affects to distinguish that denomination of Christians, to which he belongs,” the authors of the “Centinel” wrote. “I wish,” they continued, “the Doctor would please to define his terms, and tell us what he means, by Church, and why that name should be applied to English Episcopalians

---

<sup>46</sup> Chandler, *An Appeal to the Public*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> [Myles Cooper], *An Address from the Clergy of New-York and New-Jersey, to the Episcopalians in Virginia* (New York, 1771), 55.

<sup>48</sup> Chandler, *An Appeal to the Public*, 83, 82.

only.” Equally suspect was the Episcopalian practice of calling “other Denominations of Christians, Dissenters.” “[M]ust all these be termed Dissenters because the Doctor and they differ?” the authors asked.<sup>49</sup> The “Centinel” was not alone in its opposition to the Anglican practice of referring to non-Anglicans as “dissenters.” In response to an inflammatory tract written on behalf of Episcopal ordination, which also referred to non-Anglicans as dissenters, the Congregationalist Noah Welles wrote “’Tis pity, I think, these gentlemen don’t consider where they live, before they give themselves such airs.”<sup>50</sup>

During the ensuing five years of controversy, both Anglicans and non-Anglicans accused one another of pursuing something that exceeded toleration. An anonymous broadside, which called for a “union and coalition” among non-Anglicans in Philadelphia suggested that the Anglicans, “[n]ot content here with toleration ... aim at a superiority.”<sup>51</sup> Charles Chauncy argued that Chandler’s description of what counted as toleration for the episcopalians would constitute nothing less than its establishment.<sup>52</sup> The same arguments were advanced against non-Anglicans by Anglicans. The Presbyterians, in particular, one Anglican wrote, were “not content with Toleration,” but strove after “Dominion and Power.” Clearly exasperated, the so-called “Old Dutchmen” asked:

---

<sup>49</sup> “Centinel Number 1, March 24, 1768,” 85-87.

<sup>50</sup> Noah Welles, *A Vindication of the Validity and Divine Right of Presbyterian Ordination* (New Haven, 1767), 21.

<sup>51</sup> *An Address to the Merchants, Freeholders and All Other The Inhabitants of the Province of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1768).

<sup>52</sup> Charles Chauncy, *A Reply to Dr. Chandler’s Appeal Defended* (Boston, 1770), 174-5.

what would they have? Are they not tolerated? Have they any penal Laws to be afraid of? Are they not as free in their Worship as the Church itself? Are they not every Way easy, except what arises from the Uneasiness of their own Tempers?<sup>53</sup>

Despite their privileged condition, he continued, “it is impossible to oblige them. every fresh Concession is a Motive to new Encroachments; they are as insatiable as the Grave, and will never give over their Demands till they have swallowed up the Rights of every other Denomination.”

To some extent, there was nothing unusual about the Anglican controversy over the meaning of words. A careful reader could easily find examples of semantic disputation in nearly every heated print debate. Nonetheless, the problem of connecting words with their correct meanings seems to have had a particular resonance for this period. Indeed, the alleged distance between what was intended and what was ostensibly read, between different interpretations of the same words, remained vast into the 1770s. Others seemed to share the sentiment expressed by one minister in a 1772 pamphlet, that “so imperfect are our conceptions, and such is the ambiguity of language, the best medium we have of communicating our ideas, that even intelligent persons, and those mutually well affected, will many times strangely mistake the designed purport of each others expressions.”<sup>54</sup>

If both sides in the episcopal debate were convinced that the other side had abused the generally acknowledged meaning of words, each was also convinced that

---

<sup>53</sup> *To the Freeholders and Freemen of the City and County of New-York, in Communion with the Reformed Dutch Church* (New York, 1769). “The Old Dutchman” was probably an Anglican.

<sup>54</sup> Moses Hemmenway, *A Vindication of the Power, Obligation and Encouragement of the Unregenerate to attend the Means of Grace* (Boston, 1772), 2.

their opponents had engaged in gross acts of misrepresentation. To the perceived problem of lexical mis-use was joined the perceived problem of public misrepresentation. The opponents of an American bishop, like the opponents of Parliamentary taxation of the colonies, insisted that the views and interests of colonial Americans were inadequately represented in English institutions. Drawing on the language employed against the Stamp Act, which distinguished between the ideal of direct representation and the English Parliament's claim to virtually represent the entire empire, the "Centinel" predicted that once the Church of England had successfully allied itself with the colonial governments, "all *Dissenters* [would] be considered as *virtual* Churchmen, and made liable to Censures accordingly." The authors pointed out the absurdity of assuming the agreement of colonial Anglicans. By Chandler's reasoning, they contended, "every Episcopalian, as a true son of the *Church*, must, in the Doctor's judgement, be at least a *virtual* Supplicant on this important Occasion."<sup>55</sup>

Even more problematic was Chandler's assumption that the *slaves* of his "virtual Episcopalians" were themselves devoted partisans of the Anglican cause. Here, the misplaced presumption of virtual representation, the distortion of religious demography, and the arrogance of an English church seemed to converge. The "Centinel" suggested that Chandler was again assuming the assent of those whose speech was either ignored or disregarded. Disputing his calculation of colonial Anglicans, they asked: "Where then did the Dr. get above 500,000 of his

---

<sup>55</sup> "The Centinel XIV, June 23, 1768," 151, 158.

*Churchmen?*.” The reply to their rhetorical question was: “Only among the Negroes, those *virtual* Episcopalians, who chiefly belong to Episcopal Owners.”<sup>56</sup> The force of the “Centinel’s” argument traded on the slaves’ complete exclusion from colonial social life. But it also pointed toward the Anglo-episcopal capacity for counting on more support than they rightfully should have, and for deriving consent from nothing more than silence.

Anglican writers claimed that their words had been detached from their intended meanings, and thus “misrepresented.” Appropriately, Chandler’s defense of his first tract asserted that the dissenters had misconstrued the objects of his defense. Far from arguing for the supereminence of an Anglican bishop, he really was arguing for the mere toleration of a denominational peculiarity. “[T]he Episcopate of my Opponents,” Chandler wrote, “is not the Episcopate of the *Appeal*.”<sup>57</sup> He had been misrepresented, his intended meaning distorted. “[H]owever we may be misrepresented,” the “Freeholder” argued, “our Conduct has evinced the most liberal Sentiments towards every Denomination of Christians.” Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the “Independents” The Freeholder asked whether it was not “evident” that the Presbyterians had “discharged their whole Artillery of Falsehood and Misrepresentation, to blacken and traduce the Church?”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps most frightening for the Anglicans, these misrepresentations—“all the bitter Things, and all

---

<sup>56</sup> “The Centinel XIV, June 23, 1768,” 163-164.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Bradbury Chandler, *The Appeal Defended* (New York, 1769), 3.

<sup>58</sup> *The Freeholder, No. 3. A Continuation of the Answers to the Reasons* (New York, 1769), 3.

the unfair Things, as well as all the ludicrous Expressions”—had circulated with astonishing speed from the *American Whig* in New York to “the Gazettes of *Philadelphia* and *Boston*.”<sup>59</sup> Not only had the Dissenters attached their signifiers to the wrong objects, they also detached them from their original contexts.

The professed concern that the other side intended or had actually engaged in “violence,” despite the ecumenical language that both sides employed, suggests just how profoundly incomprehensible their respective motives must have seemed. But it also suggests just how concrete was the force that words were thought to carry. The image of local stamp collectors being hung in effigy testifies to the contemporary power of symbolic violence. Such representations were of particular force because of the vaguely ominous feeling then prevailing that religious persecution was, like imperial power generally, only being held in abeyance, and also because of the recent memory of physical punishment for dissenting beliefs.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the notion that the English Act of Toleration—which the great English jurist William Blackstone argued, merely suspended the coercive Act of Uniformity—reinforced this feeling. The “Centinel” expressed the fear that “the Spirit of persecution” would re-emerge “with its native Violence,” as soon as the opportunity presented itself.<sup>61</sup> Religious establishments, the “Centinel” wrote on another occasion, generate “pride” that “easily

---

<sup>59</sup> Chandler, *The Appeal Defended*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> That the Act of Toleration had only suspended the Act of Uniformity was not an interpretation that everyone shared, but it was at least the one advanced by William Blackstone. See Blackstone, “A Reply to Dr. Priestley’s Remarks on the Fourth Volume of the Commentaries on the Laws of England,” in *An Interesting Appendix to Sir William Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Philadelphia, 1772).

<sup>61</sup> “The Centinel IV, April 14, 1768,” 108.



proceed[s] to inquisitions, tortures, and death.”<sup>62</sup> On the other side, Chandler complained that the “Church of England, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, ha[d] been violently forced into this Controversy, and *violently* treated.” Their plan had been greeted “with Violence.”<sup>63</sup> When it was merely a disposition that constituted persecution, ill-informed words were indeed dangerous.

Attributing the potential for harm to mere words constituted a departure from the concerns that had prevailed among Anglo-American writers since the late seventeenth century. Within the Anglo-American world, the legitimate use of state power was confined to things that could be observed empirically, thereby placing so-called “speculative” beliefs, including religious beliefs, beyond the realm of civil action.<sup>64</sup> Although seditious libel remained a punishable offense into the nineteenth century, religious speech was largely immune from punishment. And yet, as the old laws constraining criticism of the established church fell into disuse, informal injunctions against un-charitable, or “rash,” judgments took their place. The imperial crisis, which invested social niceties with the gravity of an ethical obligation transformed an injunction to tolerance into an injunction against violence. There

---

<sup>62</sup> “The Centinel III, April 7, 1768,” 102.

<sup>63</sup> Chandler, *The Appeal Defended* (New York, 1771), 238, 1. Charles Chauncy was not far off the mark when he argued that Chandler was incapable of distinguishing between the denial of privileges and the imposition of physical punishment. See Charles Chauncy, *A Reply to Dr. Chandler's Appeal Defended* (New York, 1770), 140.

<sup>64</sup> This is the argument of Kirstie McClure in her brilliant essay, “Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration,” *Political Theory*, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 1990), esp. 376-7.

were, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, “no longer any innocent words.”<sup>65</sup> The proper definition of words, like the accurate calculation of population, assumed such importance when the dispute over the composition of religiously-diverse institutions had taken precedence over the toleration of dissent.

One way of escaping the injuries caused by misrepresentation was to claim nothing more for a belief than its value to the believer himself. This was precisely the strategy Apthorp and Chandler pursued. In his defense of the *Appeal* Chandler forcefully reiterated the pragmatic argument that he had already tentatively advanced. “[W]e maintain,” he contended, “that the Validity of our Plea for America Bishops depends not upon the absolute Truth, but upon our Belief of the Truth, of those Principles.”<sup>66</sup> The object of the appeal, he noted, was “to set before the Public, the Necessity and Importance of Episcopacy, *in the Opinion of Episcopalians*, and to shew the wretched Condition of the Church of England in America for Want of Bishops.”<sup>67</sup> Likewise, Chandler argued that English dissenters had never argued for toleration “on the absolute Truth and Certainty of their respective Tenets.”<sup>68</sup> They too had only maintained their right to worship in whatever manner best suited them.

---

<sup>65</sup> In the conversations that transpire between members of different classes and ethnic groups in colonial societies, the Bourdieu writes, “there are no longer any innocent words.” “Each word, each expression,” he observes, “threatens to take on two antagonistic senses, reflecting the way in which it is understood by the sender and the receiver.” Similar tensions seem to have permeated the conversations of Anglicans and non-Anglicans during the late 1760s and early 1770s. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 40.

<sup>66</sup> Chandler, *The Appeal Defended*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Chandler, *An Appeal to the Public*, 27-28.

<sup>68</sup> Chandler, *The Appeal Defended*, 14.

Seconding Chandler's pragmatism, the pro-Anglican essayist, *A Whip for the American Whig*, insisted that "the only fair Way for Men to judge of this Case is, to consider it upon the Principles of the Church, and not of those who differ from it."<sup>69</sup> How better to avoid the sin of mis-representation than to accede to the imperative of self-description.

In fact, while they sometimes hinted at the old Anglican presumption that their church, the established church in England, deserved privileged treatment, the leading Episcopalians directed attention away from the Church's persecutory past, and toward its present handicapped condition in the colonies. In doing so, they deferred to the notion that all churches were equal in their particularity. Thomas Secker insisted that he would certainly "have great Compassion for a Number of Dissenters in the same State" as the Church in America.<sup>70</sup> "We request only the Liberty of enjoying the Institutions of our Church," Thomas Bradbury Chandler wrote, "and thereby of being put upon an equal Footing with our Neighbours---with the various Sects of English Dissenters, who have the full Enjoyment of their respective Forms of Ecclesiastical Government and Discipline." Even the Moravians and the Catholics, he noted, were permitted their own colonial bishops.<sup>71</sup> Why then should the Church of England be denied its particular modes of worship?

---

<sup>69</sup> "From Mr. Gaine's Gazette, Nov. 28, 1768 [No. XXXIV]," *A Collection of Tracts from the Late Newspapers* (New York, 1769), 301.

<sup>70</sup> Secker, *An Answer to Dr. Mayhew's Observations* (London and Boston, 1764), 18-19.

<sup>71</sup> Chandler, *An Appeal to the Public*, 42. Of course, as their Anglican opponents saw the matter, the Church's apologists were only to be pitied on the grounds that they were not established—and these were hardly adequate grounds for sympathy of any sort. (The "Centinel" simply mocked Chandler's appeal for sympathy.) Charles Chauncy sarcastically remarked that "[I]f the church of

When words repeatedly missed their intended targets, as they seemed to so often during this period, the invocation of demography may have constituted an attractive rhetorical tool. But even such concrete “facts” were subject to dispute, to the mis-representations of malicious pens. In *The Appeal*, Thomas Chandler grandly estimated that one million Anglicans resided in the colonies—a number that included southern slaves. His Independent opponents, particularly the authors of the “Centinel,” treated Chandler’s calculations with contempt. The Centinel’s attack on Chandler’s math formed part of a larger assault on Anglican demography. By contrast, the “Centinel” referred reverently to the population accounting of the “inquisitive and accurate Dr. Stiles, of *Rhode-Island*, in his *Discourse on Christian Union*”<sup>72</sup> Drawing on Stiles statistics, the authors dismissed the notion that there were anywhere near a million Anglicans in the colonies. Although, Charles Chauncy denied Chandler’s implicit claim of numerical superiority, he expressed concern that the introduction of Anglican bishops would produce of rash of conversions, thereby

---

England cannot be FULLY TOLERATED in the Colonies, unless it is suffered to EXIST IN ALL ITS PARTS.” then the church could not be tolerated without being established. See Charles Chauncy, *A Reply to Dr. Chandler’s Appeal Defended* (Boston, 1770), 174-5. The conviction expressed by one commencement orator, that where there was “a full toleration there can be no establishment,” seems to have captured the general sentiment: the logic of full, or equal toleration, entailed an end to establishments. See Barnabas Binney, *An Oration Delivered on the Late Public Commencement at Rhode-Island College* (Boston, 1774), 23. The Church’s demand for toleration of its particular establishment perverted the notion that “full toleration” emerged from the establishment of none. It perverted the notion that each was to be indulged in its different—not its dissenting—practices and beliefs. As an anonymous *Letter from a Gentleman in New-York to His Friend in the Country* put it: there was “no more Reason why I should pay towards any particular Mode of Worship agreeable to another’s Taste but not to mine, than *vice versa*, that he should support one adapted to my particular Turn, and disagreeable to his.” *A Letter from a Gentleman in New-York to His Friend In the Country* (New York, 1772).

<sup>72</sup> “The Centinel XIV, June 23, 1768,” 162.

inverting the demographic status quo, so that “Episcopalians would quickly exceed the other denominations of Christians, as much as they now exceed them.”<sup>73</sup>

Comparable demographic anxieties emerged from Anglican pens. The “Anatomist” worried that without a bishop in America, the Church of England would have:

no chance of keeping pace in her growth, with Presbyterians or Independents, who have opportunities of filling up every corner of the country with their preachers at small expence, and no risk or delay of ordination. And therefore they think, if they can continue the Church under this hardship, and prevent the introduction of a Bishop into America, by painting the whole order in odious characters, and dangerous to liberty, they shall be able, when they arrive to their prophesied Ten Millions, to swallow her entirely up in this new world, and perhaps enable their brethren to do the like in the old.<sup>74</sup>

“We are not seldom tauntingly told that the dissenters are daily increasing,” Jonathan Boucher lamented in his 1771 apology for an American Episcopate.<sup>75</sup> “[A]lthough

---

<sup>73</sup> Charles Chauncy, *A Letter to a Friend* (Boston, 1767), 46. Not every Independent minister expressed anxiety regarding the growth of other denominations. Amos Adams, for instance, noted that “... it is with the greatest pleasure, we see, at *this* time, our numbers increase, numerous churches rising in the wilderness, firmly united, with us, in the same mind and judgment, and our *Colleges* supplying them with able and promising Pastors ....” See Adams, *Religious Liberty an Invaluable Blessing* (Boston, 1768), 55. But others, like Jonathan Mayhew, even worried about England’s demography. In 1764, arguing that the “papists” could not be “safely tolerated” in “a protestant government,” Mayhew observed that: “The papists, only in London, were by computation an hundred thousand, in the year 1745. Since which, their numbers are vastly increased there, and in other parts of the kingdom; the people being, as it is said, perverted by popish bishops, priests, jesuits, &c. by hundreds and thousands, if not ten thousands, yearly. Nor is this, as it seems, done in secret, and in corners; but openly and boldly, as this gentleman intimates.” See Mayhew, *Remarks*, 71.

<sup>74</sup> “From the Pennsylvania Journal, Oct. 6. The Anatomist. No. V,” *A Collection of Tracts*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Boucher, “On the American Episcopate,” *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 109. Whether Boucher wrote these exact words in 1771 is subject to doubt. In fact, as Anne Young Zimmer and Alfred H. Kelly point out, Boucher lost the original texts of his

thirty years ago there was not in the whole colony a single dissenting congregation," this Virginian observed, "there are now ... not less than eleven dissenting ministers regularly settled, who have each from two to four congregations under their care." The "numbers of sectaries and itinerant priests" were beyond his computational capacity. The embittered minister suggested that he might rather "count the gnats that buzz around us in a summer's evening" than calculate the number of "Baptists and new-lights" swarming around the colony.<sup>76</sup>

The debate over the New York Assembly election of 1769, which came at the height of the Episcopal controversy in that province, testified to the contemporary significance of religious demography. There the anti-Episcopal "American Whig" ran regularly for over a year, and was soon answered just as regularly by "A Whip for the American Whig," which "A Kick for the Whipper" answered in turn.<sup>77</sup> A group of

---

sermons when he went into exile during the war. See Zimmer and Kelly, "Jonathan Boucher: Constitutional Conservative," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 58, no. 4 (March 1972), 899.

<sup>76</sup> Boucher, "On the American Episcopate," *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 100. Even before the Episcopal controversy began, another Virginia Anglican observed that, until recently, "*we were all Members of the Church of ENGLAND, and had no Dissenters amongst us.*" Nor were these unwelcome malcontents likely to disappear anytime soon. Conceiving of dissent in demographic, rather than pathological, terms (as might have once been done), Richard Bland resigned himself to the presence of large numbers of them. "Indeed," he noted, "our religious Forefathers, in the Year 1662, did attempt to prevent their Increase." Unfortunately, they had not succeeded. Nonetheless, Bland insisted that the notion "that the greater Part of the colony, especially of the General-Assembly, are Dissenters" is a "manifest Untruth." And, with some vigilance on their part, he suggested, Virginia's Anglicans might retain their numerical edge in the colony. Richard Bland, *A Letter to the Clergy of Virginia* (Williamsburg, 1760), 6.

<sup>77</sup> According to Bridenbaugh, Livingston didn't succeed in persuading his Connecticut allies to start a paper, though "certain parsons did help by distributing the *New York Gazette* in the colony." "The Centinel," Bridenbaugh also notes, began running ten days after the *American Whig*. These tracts, as well as The "Centinel" and the Philadelphia essayists, "The Anatomist" and "The Remonstrant" were collected and published in two several hundred page volumes, totaling 837 pages—

non-Anglican New York politicians, led by William Livingston (author of the “American Whig”) first proposed that Anglicans and non-Anglicans divide the four contested Assembly seats between them. Their proposal rebuffed, the Livingston faction attempted to capitalize on anti-Anglican sentiment in the heated election campaign that ensued. In doing so, they vainly hoped to win over the province’s Dutch-Reformed population. A main bone of contention seems to have been the large proportion of Anglicans occupying colonial offices. *The American Whig* implored his readers to “Look around ... and then tell me what post or what office is not engrossed by them!” “Could all this happen by chance,” he asked, “in a province where they constitute so small a minority?”<sup>78</sup> *The Freeholder* plaintively responded that the number of Anglican officeholders, few as they were, could be “easily computed.” Nor, he noted, were there more than two Anglican candidates in the present election.<sup>79</sup>

During the election campaign, the Anglican faction publicly rejected the association of political worth with religious affiliation—thereby undermining the very rationale for computing majorities—insisting that “Party Attachments” should not be “made the *Test* of Merit.”<sup>80</sup> Defending the religious ecumenism of the city’s

---

almost all of which dealt with the issue of a colonial bishop See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre*, p. 300. The volumes were entitled *A Collection of Tracts From the Late News Papers, &c. Containing Particularly The American Whig, A Whip for the American Whig, with Some other Pieces, on the Subject of the Residence of protestant Bishops in the American Colonies, and in answer to the Writers who opposed it, &c* (New York, 1769).

<sup>78</sup> “From Mr. Parker’s Gazette, Jan. 16, 1769, *The American Whig* [No. XLV].” *A Collection of Tracts*, 390.

<sup>79</sup> *The Freeholder*, No. 3. *A Continuation of the Answers to the Reasons* (New York, 1769), 1.

<sup>80</sup> *Observations on the Reasons, Lately Published, for the Malicious Combination of Several Presbyterian Dissenters* (New York, 1769), 1.

“Churchmen,” *The Freeholder* replied that the loosely Anglican, popular party, had been “honoured with the Voices of every Denomination” at the last election. “Nothing could be more distant from their Thoughts,” he continued, “than to serve one Denomination, at the Expence of the Rest.”<sup>81</sup> “The Question, my Friends,” an anonymous author wrote, “ought not to be (and would not have been, had not the GLORIOUS COMBINATION [of dissenters] made it otherwise) to what CHURCH or Meeting a Candidate belongs; but whether he be worthy of a Seat in your House of Representatives. ...”<sup>82</sup> “Independent L-wy-rs,” *The Examiner* wrote, were attempting “to acquire absolute Sway in this City” by “endeavour[ing] to interest Men’s Consciences in the Quarrels they excite.” Their main object was the Dutch Reformed denominations, who, *The Examiner* informed his readers, were “to be converted into a political Ladder” until the election was secured.<sup>83</sup>

According to the opponents of a colonial bishopric, religious arithmetic of this

---

<sup>81</sup> *The Freeholder*, No. 3, 3. *The Freeholder* was not nearly as confident of his opponents’ alleged ecumenism, particularly when they seemed to be working under the conviction that “the established Religion disqualifies a man, for *electing*, or being *elected*.” “Will they call this *religious Liberty*?” he continued, “Is it not rather downright *Persecution* and *Intolerance*?” *The Freeholder*, No. 3, 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Observations on the Reasons, Lately Published, for the Malicious Combination of Several Presbyterian Dissenters* (New York, 1769), 3.

<sup>83</sup> *The Examiner*, No. III (New York, 1769). According to Patricia Bonomi, the strategy appears to have succeeded. Bonomi has argued that the Livingston party’s defeat was partly attributable to their evident anti-Anglican “bigotry,” which offended both the Anglicans and the Dutch-Reformed. Bonomi offers a thoughtful account of the election in her *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York*, esp. 248-257. The Presbyterians had been facetiously accused of pursuing the same strategy, of temporarily “halter[ing]” the Dutch to their campaign against the Quaker-dominated Proprietary party earlier in the decade. The Presbyterians, the author noted, were attempting to “blind” the Dutch with “Political Dust.” See *The Substance of a Council* (Philadelphia, 1764), 5, 8.



kind revealed precisely how un-representative its supporters were. Challenging an advertisement issued on behalf of a bishop for Virginia, an anonymous author refuted Chandler's suggestion that resistance was confined to a "few" "Non-Episcopalians." Indeed, he asserted, support for a bishop was actually confined to the eight clergyman—and their slaves. "Doctor *Chandler*," the author wryly noted, "ought to deduct from the number of Episcopalians, whom he suppose were for an American Bishop, all the white people in that dominion, except eight, and (as all negroes, according to his Argument, are presumed to be of their masters religion) all the blacks in that province, except those belonging to the said eight." The anonymous author also reproduced the protest of two William and Mary professors, who denied that the small number of clergymen that had actually declared their support for a bishop were "a sufficient representation" of the clergy as a whole.<sup>84</sup>

Demographic computations made colonial religious diversity tangible. Even contemporary Anglicans understood that they were competing for the affection of a diverse audience, which was accustomed to gestures of respect from other denominations. In making their case against the "GLORIOUS COMBINATION" of dissenters, Anglican writers were often compelled to distinguish between the various non-Anglican denominations that co-existed in America. An anonymous author asserted that the Presbyterians were deceitfully capitalizing on the aversion of New York's freemen "to submitting [their] Consciences to the Direction and Rule of any one Sect" by attempting to convince them that the Church of England "was striving to

---

<sup>84</sup> *To the Public* (New York, 1771).

tyrannize over her Sister Congregations.”<sup>85</sup> In his third and final apology for a colonial episcopate, Chandler noted that he undertook the task of articulating the need for a bishop with the conceivable objections of “People of different Views and Interests” in mind.<sup>86</sup>

To Anglican writers, colonial dissenters could seem at once appallingly homogenous and comfortingly diverse. Just as the Congregationalist and the Presbyterians, who made up what Anglican writers referred to as the “Combination,” or the “Confederacy,” were seeming united in their often seditious opposition to imperial policies, so were they embarrassingly diversified in their theological opinions. The idea that diversity constituted an embarrassment to those unfortunate enough to experience it was built upon the old notion that the more various any group, the less legitimate it was. Whether the “Church” was defined as all the world’s christian congregants, or as a particularly blessed ecclesiastical institution, everyone knew that there could only be one true church. It should come as no surprise, then, that established writers had long made light of their sectarian opponents’ heterogeneity. “The plain Truth is,” the Reverend John Beach had written in 1747, “that whatever Distance there is between you and us in this Point, there is the self-same distance and Disagreement between you, and yourself.”<sup>87</sup> Although this strategy appears to have fallen out of favor over the course of the century, Anglican apologists

---

<sup>85</sup> *Observations on the Reasons, Lately Published, for the Malicious Combination of Several Presbyterian Dissenters* (New York, 1769), p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Chandler, *An Appeal Farther Defended*, 234.

<sup>87</sup> [Beach, John], *An Attempt to Prove* (Boston, 1747), 23.

could hardly resist characterizing America's dissenters as "heterodox," as diverse as they were erroneous.<sup>88</sup> In a sermon written (at the earliest) in 1769, for instance, Jonathan Boucher described the various dissenters from the Anglican church in Virginia as "a confused heterogeneous mass of infidels and enthusiasts, oddly blended and united."<sup>89</sup>

Like their Anglican counterparts, apologists for non-Anglicans wavered between an assertion of the differences that rendered America's churches something more than "dissenters" and an assertion of conformity that distinguished them from chaotic sectarianism. During his dispute with the SPG, for instance, Jonathan Mayhew had complained that the organization's charter only distinguished between Protestants and Roman Catholics, not between different kinds of Protestants. For the various Protestant faiths to be conflated with one another was nearly as disfiguring as the reduction of "dissenting" Protestantism to heathenism. "It could not even be known from the charter, that there were any dissensions amongst protestants," Mayhew wrote.<sup>90</sup> But Mayhew was also careful to insist that there was a good deal of Christian unity among New England's Protestants. And, thankfully, little substantive diversity of belief. There was, in this land, "no such monster as an *Atheist*" and, until

---

<sup>88</sup> See, for instance, [Caner], *A Candid Examination*, 25. Such accusations sometimes fused charges of democratic leveling with those of irrational heterogeneity. The *Anatomist* derided "the motley government of Presbytery," which looked less like than "the tyranny of One" than it did "the tyranny and absurdity of many." See "The Anatomist," *A Collection of Tracts*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> Boucher, "On Schisms and Sects," *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 77. Zimmer and Young point out that this sermon, "if it was not entirely the work of the 1790s, was at the very least 'doctored' later to fit the stance toward the revolutionary controversy which Boucher adopted after 1772." Zimmer and Young, "Jonathan Boucher," 901.

<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Observations*, 21.

recently, only a few “transient ... Roman-catholic[s].”<sup>91</sup> Mayhew and his dissenting contemporaries would readily concede that were disagreements between them—enough to distinguish each from one another, but not enough to render a coalition between them untenable.

The diverse audience of which Anglicans were aware did not include the “heathen” masses. Nor was there any evidence that Native Americans and slaves would make it into Stiles’ Christian union. Significantly, the violent tactics of the Indians and the disenfranchised status of African-Americans served as models of misrepresentation for the opponents of an American bishopric. In an inclusive religious world, prejudice and misrepresentation constituted social and cultural persecution because they were instruments of de-recognition. The outsider status of Indians and slaves thus emblemized the experience of those who objected to having their assent taken for granted, their beliefs censured, and their souls proselytized. Such things mattered when inclusion was expected and self-description demanded.

Of the many conclusions that can be drawn from an examination of the Anglican controversy, one stands above all the others: in their efforts to persuade the colonial public that their own churches were the equal of every other, both Anglicans and “dissenters” embraced the notion that religious liberty entailed something more than toleration. The Anglican controversy reinforced the notion that, although there were would invariably be religious differences in America, there could be no religious

---

<sup>91</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* (Boston, 1763), p. 44.

dissent.<sup>92</sup> Of course, actual religious establishments persisted into the nineteenth-century, but their old justificatory foundations had been undermined. Furthermore, although no one had forgotten the brutal punishments exacted upon religious dissenters in previous centuries, the colonists had begun to broaden the concept of persecution to include more than the penalties imposed by confessional states. Rather than merely motivating people to acts of persecution, “prejudice” had come to be seen as a form of persecution in and of itself. Intolerance had been found in places no one had ever expected to find it.

The opening of provincial institutions to an increasing diversity of churches thus provided the occasion for new slights to be perceived and new injuries to be recognized. Yet, it would also permit religiously-diverse coalitions to be built upon “fundamental” principles. Anglican and Presbyterian appeals to New York’s Dutch Reformed congregations in the elections of 1769 represented just one instance of a more general contemporary effort to create Christian unions within, and across, denominational boundaries.<sup>93</sup> The largest such effort, however, would be undertaken during the American Revolution, when the exigencies of war transformed heavenly dreams of spiritual harmony into the worldly fact of colonial union.

---

<sup>92</sup> A similar notion seems to have entered European culture. Martin Fitzpatrick points to a “growing dissatisfaction with the whole notion of toleration in the late Enlightenment.” See Fitzpatrick, “Toleration and the Enlightenment Movement,” *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46.

<sup>93</sup> Those coalitions ostensibly formed during the Anglican controversy resembled those that Pennsylvania’s Presbyterian and Quaker churches accused each another of making earlier that decade. For mutual charges of attempting to “turn the Hearts of the ignorant Dutch,” see *The Substance of a Council* (Philadelphia, 1764). Quotation on p. 2 and 5. See also, The Scribbler, *Being a Letter from a Gentleman in Town to his Friend in the Country* (Philadelphia, 1764).

**Chapter 5**  
**A Union of the People:**  
**Religious Pluralism in the Founding of the Republic**

*Gal 5:1 KJV Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.*

“[L]et us agree to differ.”

Nathaniel Whitaker, *A Brief History of the Settlement of the Third Church in Salem, in 1769: And also of the Usurpation and Tyranny of An Ecclesiastical Council, in 1784* (Salem, 1784).

**Introduction**

In 1784, Hannah Adams published her innocently titled *Alphabetical compendium of the various sects which have appeared in the world from the beginning of the Christian era to the present day*. The book’s 220 pages contained brief descriptions of a dizzying array of groups. Adams began with the Abrahamians and the Artotyrites, made her way through the Hattemists and the Keithians, and concluded with the Servetians and the Zuinglians. Her encyclopedic account testifies to the extent to which late eighteenth- century Americans were cognizant of religious diversity, both within their community and without, in their own time and in the distant past. More significantly, however, the compendium was preceded by an “Advertisement” that articulated a series of extraordinary aspirations for the tract. Among its professed aims: “To avoid giving the least preference of one denomination above another,” “To give a few of the arguments of the principal sects, from their own authors,” and finally “To take the utmost care not to misrepresent the ideas.” The Advertisement’s promise of an un-biased account, which reproduced the voice of each

sect—to the point of allowing each to describe itself in its own words—exhibited the profound change American culture had undergone over the last several decades.<sup>1</sup>

The sentiments expressed in the Advertisement were tempered by the cautionary tone of the preface. There, Thomas Prentiss remarked:

It is truly astonishing that so great a variety of faith and practice should be derived with equal confidence of their different abettors, from one and the same revelation from heaven: but while we have the lively oracles, we are not to adopt any of the numerous schemes of religion, further than they have a manifest foundation in the sacred pages. To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, however specious their systems may appear, 'there is no light in them.'<sup>2</sup>

Prentiss' comments reveal some of the tensions that characterized religious thought in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The "variety of faith and practice" to which so many people confidently committed themselves presented an astonishing, even unsettling, prospect. Prentiss' familiar gesture toward the reliable compass of Scripture and past the doubly "specious" alternatives was entirely in keeping with late eighteenth-century conceptions of how different opinions might be sorted out. There

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Adams, *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects Which Have Appeared in the World from the Beginning of the Christina Era to the Present Day* (Boston, 1784). The volume proved extremely popular. It would be reprinted three more times in the United States and twice in England. In the United States, the encyclopedia later appeared as *A View of Religions, in two parts* (1791, 1801) and *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan, Christian, Ancient and Modern* (1817). The publisher of the third edition planned to sell two thousand copies alone. With each revision of the original, Adams added more religious groups. However, she retained the same ecumenical tone (as well as the opening advertisement), and generally omitted the harsher language of previous encyclopedists. For a helpful introduction to Adams' life and work, see Hannah Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan, Christian, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). Also see Adams' revealing account of her life, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams, Written By Herself with Additional Notices by a Friend* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1832).

<sup>2</sup> Adams, *An Alphabetical Compendium*, ii.

was no controversy so strident, no difference so stark, that the Bible, the final measure, could not resolve it. But whereas its specific meaning once seemed certain, now there was just a vast, undefined referent. In the absence of a creed to prescribe particular tenets and state power to enforce it, mere adherence to the Bible was becoming an inclusive standard from which only a very small minority could dissent.<sup>3</sup>

During the state-making period that began with the Declaration of Independence and continued through the construction of the Federal Constitution, it was hoped that the country's various republican constitutions would play the same role in politics that the Bible did in religion.<sup>4</sup> Within the crucible of war, the prospect of republican government and the threat of English oppression diminished the divisions that separated people of various denominations. Americans conjured fantasies of political, as well as Christian unions.<sup>5</sup> Yet if Revolutionary era Americans evidenced an extraordinary commitment to the binding ethical force of Scripture and the fundamentals of faith that were derived from it, they preached an equally devoted

---

<sup>3</sup> For instance, throughout much of the nineteenth century, Protestant educators regarded Bible reading, *sans* commentary, as an appropriate, and entirely nonsectarian, way to open a school day. See R. Laurence Moore, "Bible Reading and Nonsectarian Schooling: The Failure of Religious Instruction in Nineteenth-Century Public Education," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 86, no. 4 (2000), esp. 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Wood made this point in his excellent essay, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61 (1980).

<sup>5</sup> On the appeal of political and religious unions during the Revolutionary era, see Alan Heimert's monumental *Religion and the American Mind*. Richard Pointer concurs with Heimert. According to Pointer's account of New York's experience, "... the Revolution encouraged a sense of common religious and political cause that overshadowed ethnic or doctrinal differences." See Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism, and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988), 114.



adherence to their essential liberties. A desperate zeal to maintain their jeopardized rights, together with a forceful commitment to equality, formed the crux of an American identity more compelling than their English identity had ever been, and at least as compelling as many of their particular religious identities.<sup>6</sup> After the Revolution, a shared dedication to the rule of law, republican government and equal liberty would come to represent the essential tenets of American citizenship. These represented the fundamental principles that were, like the fundamentals of religion, somehow always already agreed upon.

The libertarian rhetoric that defined republican identity emboldened those whose rights were curtailed by colonial establishments, just as it confronted the supporters of religious establishment with the extent of their own hypocrisy. Between the Declaration of Independence and the framing of the Constitution, writers of all denominations gradually abandoned the language of toleration for the libertarian promises—to “religious liberty,” “liberty of conscience,” “freedom of religion,” and the “right of private judgment”—their revolution promised to fulfill.<sup>7</sup> These were rights to think independently, worship freely and, when appropriate, to speak openly. These were rights invoked to secure the equal recognition of every faith, according to its own self-description. These protections ensured that each individual would freely

---

<sup>6</sup> Even before the Revolution began, Amos Adams noted that “*Liberty* is the *fundamental* principle of our establishment ...” See Adams, *Religious Liberty an Invaluable Blessing* (Boston, 1768), 39.

<sup>7</sup> “... by our [Massachusetts] Constitution: the idea of toleration is inadmissible,” the “Society of Christian Independents Congregating in Gloucester” declared. See *An Appeal to the Impartial Publick* (Boston, 1785), 29.

choose his own communion, that each church association would be voluntary, and that both individuals and churches would enjoy the equal respect that characterized a republican society. All that was demanded, in turn, was a patriotic commitment to representative government and an appropriate deference to Scripture. Anything else, it was believed, could hardly be described as religion.

### **Fundamentals**

Preaching before the Massachusetts legislature in 1779, Samuel Stillman expressed his desire that the state enact “a BILL OF RIGHTS,” which would “contain its fundamental principles.” Apparently taken with the phrase, Stillman suggested that such “fundamental principles” were “perfectly agreeable to a fundamental principle of government, which we universally admit. We say, *That the power of the civil magistrate is derived from the people.*” A few pages later, Stillman noted that “if the magistrate destroys the equality of the subjects of the state on account of religion, he violates a fundamental principle of a free government ...” Here were universals built upon universals, premises built upon premises. Individual rights, popular sovereignty, legal equality all somehow managed to be “fundamental principles” in Stillman’s sermon. As unsystematic as this paean to the liberal state was, Stillman’s redundancy conveys a sense of how deeply the language of fundamentalism had shaped American thinking. Moreover, it conveys something of the need this culture felt to establish irrefutable foundations, self-evident positions, from which there could be no dissent.

some essential principle of union upon which a pluralistic society—in which there would be nothing but dissent—could be constructed.<sup>8</sup>

As every republic was founded upon a few fundamental principles, so were there a few fundamental tenets of faith through which every republic was sustained. By the end of the revolutionary war, there was general support for the notion, that if the nation could not be exclusively Calvinist, then at least it might be Protestant, and if it could not be exclusively Protestant, then at least it might be Christian, and if it could not be exclusively Christian, then at least it might be religious. Eighteenth-century Americans made the transition from the seventeenth-century notion that established religion preserves order to the nineteenth century notion that religion, in and of itself, preserves order. In the absence of private religious faith, public duties would suffer. If the civil authority paid no “regard to religion,” then the civil subject would be liberated from all the obligations that made him a good subject, there would be “no handle by which we can take hold of him; no principle by which we can bind him.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, if it would take some regard to the essentials of religion to sustain republican commitments; too much regard for the particulars of faith would fray the bonds of union without which there could be no commitments. Every good citizen required a church, every good citizen needed to believe a few essential things, but nothing would substitute for republican citizenship itself.

---

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Stillman, *A Sermon Preached before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts-Bay* (Boston, 1779), 10, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Annan, *Brief Animadversions on the Doctrine of Universal Salvation* (Philadelphia, 1787), 52.

Amid the flush of patriotic fervor that accompanied the Revolution, America's ministers were entirely convinced of the complementary relationship between their republican governments and their own religious institutions. Americans of all persuasions embraced what Robert Bellah identified over three decades ago as a "civil religion," encompassing a commitment to private worship and to the enactment of God's will through nonsectarian public policies.<sup>10</sup> There is probably no better example of this conviction than the sermon Samuel Williams published in 1780. Religion, Williams suggested, could be considered as both "a private thing" *and* a "public concern." Religion was a "private thing," in the sense that the magistrate had no right whatsoever to determine its doctrines or modes of worship. It was a "public concern," in the sense that the state had an interest in supporting preachers, who, at the very least, were the "keepers of the morals of the people." As Williams noted, "the religion of Jesus Christ will be found to be well adapted to do the most essential service to Civil Society."<sup>11</sup>

There appears to have been as much opposition to the idea of establishing one particular church as there was agreement that religion (or Christianity, or Protestantism) should be maintained.<sup>12</sup> In the flurry of constitution making that accompanied the Revolutionary War, eleven of the original thirteen states maintained restrictions on political officeholding. With the notable exceptions of Virginia and

---

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96:1 (1967).

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Williams, *The Influence of Christianity on Civil Society* (Boston, 1780), 20-21, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Curry makes this point persuasively throughout *First Freedoms*.

Rhode Island, all of the states limited such positions to either Christians or Protestants. Even Isaac Backus, that strident proponent of equal privileges for Baptists, was opposed to the mere possibility of Catholics holding public office.<sup>13</sup> But exclusive establishments of religion were indeed abolished in most of the states where they had once prevailed. All the Southern states disestablished the Anglican Church. In New England, change occurred much more gradually. Connecticut's Congregationalists clung stubbornly to their establishment. And the other New England states would still provide financial support for religion, though the apologists for this arrangement continued to deny the existence of a religious establishment, and the government did make it easier for religious minorities to make use of their own tax money.<sup>14</sup>

To support religion in general, but not to prescribe particular religious tenets, was the resolution to which many of the new states first tended. Such a position permitted Americans to persist in the series of elisions to which their public culture was committed, so that religious meant Christian, Christian meant Protestant, and Protestant often meant Calvinist. It was in Revolutionary Virginia, where patriotic zeal undermined support for the once powerful Anglican church, that this logic was first systematically deconstructed. There, evangelicals contributed the reforming

---

<sup>13</sup> This point is made in Curry, *First Freedoms*, 170. Curry cites Backus, in William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism, Pamphlets 1754-1789* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 422 and McLoughlin, "Isaac Backus and the Separation of Church and State," *The American Historical Review* 73 (1968), 1398. Indeed, Curry notes, a large number of Massachusetts towns (sixty-eight) petitioned the state legislature "to change the restriction on officeholding from Christian to Protestant." Curry, *First Freedoms*, 171.

<sup>14</sup> The issue is discussed at length in Curry, *First Freedoms*. See chapters six and seven in particular.

fervor, and enlightenment latitudinarians like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison the articulate liberalism, which secured equal religious rights for all Virginians.<sup>15</sup> Until this point, religious dissent was carefully circumscribed. For instance, although the vocal New Light Presbyterian Samuel Davies had been granted a license to preach, many like him were not granted such licenses, and were jailed when they preached anyway.<sup>16</sup> As late as 1774, James Madison could decry the fact that unlicensed preachers were still held in Virginia's jails.<sup>17</sup> In a little over a decade, however, Virginia would possess the most religiously tolerant of all the state constitutions. The process by which this change came about reveals something about the way America's nascent republican institutions were adapted to religious pluralism.

The legislative revolution in Virginia began in 1776 when the House of Burgesses passed "A Declaration of Rights," guaranteeing to each individual "the free exercise of religion."<sup>18</sup> Among the measures proposed over the ensuing years was that a prayer, acceptable to "all persuasions" be read in the House at the beginning of each

---

<sup>15</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, "Colonial Religion and Liberty of Conscience," *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*, eds. Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 40.

<sup>16</sup> See William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical* (Philadelphia, 1850), 160-161. Foote maintains that "Unguarded and passionate expressions, in religious controversy, were avenged by the strong arm of the law, whose aid was invoked to sustain the privileged church; but no notice was taken of any harsh expressions used agt dissenters however unjust and severe." See Foote, *Sketches*, 162.

<sup>17</sup> "James Madison to William Bradford, January 24, 1774," *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, ed. Robert S. Alley (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), 48.

<sup>18</sup> The act left the Anglican church established. Tax relief for dissenters was enacted over the next three years.

session.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, none such thing could be agreed to. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson's "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" was proposed and voted down. The bill finally passed in 1786, by which time it could claim overwhelming popular support. Between the original Declaration of Rights and the passage of Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, petitions poured into the House of Burgesses from parishes across the state. Most of them addressed the question of whether the state's churches would be supported by means of a general assessment. How and on what grounds tax monies could be allocated to particular churches was a contentious issue throughout the new nation, and no more so than in the Old Dominion.

As in several other states, the Virginia legislature seriously considered the possibility of providing public funds for the support of the ministry. In 1784, Patrick Henry's Bill "Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion," was submitted for the consideration of the House of Burgesses. Acting upon the wishes of those who wanted it defeated, the legislature actually solicited petitions related to the measure. The bill's preamble eschewed the traditional language of establishment; instead, it drew upon the egalitarian rhetoric of the period. Henry's bill insisted on the compatibility of state aid to religion with the state's commitment to "liberal" neutrality. "[I]t is judged," the statute's passive voice proclaimed, "that such provision may be made ... without counteracting the liberal principle heretofore adopted and intended to be preserved by abolishing all distinctions or preeminence

---

<sup>19</sup> *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. William T. Hutchinson and William M.E. Rachal, vol. 7 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962-1991) 46. Cited in Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 75.

amongst the different societies or communities of Christians.”<sup>20</sup> In the early going, the bill’s provision for the support of every Christian church generated a good deal of support. Almost immediately, however, the legislature was confronted with the difficulty of defining precisely what exactly was this thing, “Christianity.” James Madison recorded a series of questions posed during the 1784 debate over the bill:

3. What is Christianity? Courts of law to Judge
4. What edition, Hebrew, Septuagint, or vulgate? What copy—what translation?
5. What books canonical, what apocryphal? the papists holding to be the former what protestants the latter, the Lutherans the latter what other protestants & papists the former
6. In What light are they to be viewed, as dictated every letter by inspiration, or the essential parts only? or the matter in generally not the words?
7. What sense the true one, for if some doctrines be essential to Christianity, those who reject these, whatever name they take are no Christian Society?
8. Is it Trinitarianism, arianism, Socinianism? Is it salvation by faith or works also—by free grace, or free will—&c &c&c—
9. What clue is to guide Judge thro’ this labyrinth? When the question comes before them whether any particular Society is a Christian society?
10. Ends in what is orthodoxy, what heresy?

Madison noted later in a letter to Jefferson the “dishonorable principle and dangerous tendency” of substituting the word “christian” for the word “Religion.”<sup>21</sup> That danger was not the threat once thought to reside in the expression of an insidious theological principle, or the danger that his contemporaries saw in the absence of any establishment. That danger could only be identified by a pluralistic culture, for which the meaning of words, especially those that were legislated, held special import. By

---

<sup>20</sup> A Bill “Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion,” 1784. Cited in Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia*, Appendix I, 188.

<sup>21</sup> *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, 54-55, 67.



1786, Madison's fellow Virginians seemed to agree that the state should not legislate categories of religious belief, even for the seemingly benign purpose of supporting the pious in their worship. Jefferson's bill passed, and Henry's general assessment bill was defeated.

### **The Indifferent Republic**

From Philadelphia, John Swanwick observed the events in Williamsburg with dismay. Though "not immediately affected by [Virginia's] laws," Swanwick, "as a member of the general confederacy," thought the 1786 Statute for Religious Freedom worth his notice, as well as the notice of the "Clergy of all Christian denominations in the City of Philadelphia." For this contagion appeared likely to spread. Of course, "considering the tolerating spirit prevailing all over America," Swanwick argued, the bill seemed entirely gratuitous. Its enactment threatened to undermine the religious foundations of the republic, substituting the amorality of unbelief for the "sanctions of revelation." Under its unaccountably generous provisions anyone, even an atheist or "Mahometan" could serve in the legislature, however hostile or indifferent they might be "to liberty or the morals of a free country." Indeed, Virginia's commitment to disestablishment of any particular religion, Swanwick argued, constituted a commitment to subverting all religion, indeed all society. "[W]hat is the religion which Virginia calls 'our religion?'," he wondered, "Is it that no man is compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or minister whatsoever?" Why, he asked, if a "small part" of a "society of people" differed with the religious principles

embraced by the rest, could that minority not just pick up and move to another state? Why make everyone into “his own lawgiver”? Why dissolve the bonds of community, the adhesives of every church by making “every man ... his own pastor”? Our civil rights, were indeed dependent upon our “religious opinions, Swanwick suggested.” Liberty was founded upon true faith, and true faith could not subsist in the absence of the state’s commitment to support at least one particular variety of it.<sup>22</sup>

Swanwick’s concern may very well have been due to the fact that the atheist, who now appeared in the guise of the Deist or the Universalist, no longer seemed to represent the remote possibility that he once had.<sup>23</sup> Of course, with the exception of a handful of brave souls, no one publicly professed to embrace such theological positions.<sup>24</sup> This, however, did not prevent the suspicious from seeing them everywhere. Deism seemed particularly threatening. To confuse the Babel of human interpretation with the disinterested regard of a distant creator was to tread perilously close to the denial of God altogether. Nor was it acceptable, as a group called the

---

<sup>22</sup> John Swanwick, *Considerations on Act of the Legislature of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1786). iii, 1, 25, 9, 12. The pamphlet was addressed “To the Reverend Clergy of all Christian denominations in the City of Philadelphia, and to the Public Friends of the respectable Society called Quakers, in this Metropolis.” Whereas Jefferson’s bill had expressed the authors’ much celebrated confidence that “truth” would “prevail if left to herself” on the open field of public opinion, Swanwick feared that truth was actually quite “weak” and would find itself at a disadvantage, when alone, “in the conflict with error.” Swanwick, *Considerations*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Alarmed, a committee formed by the Associate Reformed Synod reported that: “[t]his age is distinguished by an alarming diffusion and prevalence of deistical principles.” *A Draught of an Overture, Prepared and Published By a Committee of the Associate Reformed Synod* (Philadelphia, 1787). 14.

<sup>24</sup> One exception was Ethan Allen, whose *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Bennington, 1784) came in for criticism.

Universal Restorationists did, to presume that every denomination merely embodied one part of the whole Truth.<sup>25</sup> Even the doctrine of universal salvation, which the famous Congregationalist Charles Chauncy had secretly embraced during his lifetime, could not be tolerated. A slew of pamphlets appeared during the early 1780s in New England debating the posthumous publication of Chauncy's *Salvation for All Men* in 1782.<sup>26</sup> As most viewed the matter, granting salvation to everyone would, like the denial of God itself, destroy the entire system of rewards and punishments upon which civil society rested. No omniscient deity could look favorably upon such a development.

Despite the apparent growth of infidelity, America remained thankfully free of Europe's philosophes, who openly embraced Deism. But to contemporaries this land seemed to be plagued by an equally troubling, if less conspicuous disease: religious indifference.<sup>27</sup> To those who had witnessed the coercion exercised by Europe's

---

<sup>25</sup> Elhanan Winchester complained that he was publicly harangued, on the streets and elsewhere, for espousing the doctrine of The Universal Restoration. According to Winchester, this group held "that all Denominations have it [the truth] among them in Part, and those divided Parts brought together, just makes up that Collection of Truths that we believe." See Winchester, *The Outcasts Comforted* (Philadelphia, 1782), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Chauncy, *Salvation for All Men, Illustrated and Vindicated as a Scripture Doctrine* (Boston, 1782). Charles Hanson describes the response to Chauncy's pamphlet in his *Necessary Virtue: The Pragmatic Origins of American Liberty* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 162 and ff. See also Timothy Allen, *Salvation for All men, Put Out of All Dispute* (Hartford, 1782; reprinted in 1783); Isaac Backus, *The Doctrine of Universal Salvation Examined and Refuted* (Providence, 1782); George Beckwith, *An Attempt to Shew and maintain The Wisdom, Justice, Equity and Fitness of God's Annexing Eternal Rewards and Punishments to His Righteous Laws* (Norwich, 1783). William Gordon, *The Doctrine of Final Universal Salvation Examined and Shewn to be Unscriptural* (Boston, 1783).

<sup>27</sup> In the preface to *A Mirror, Representing Some Religious Characters of the Present Times* (Philadelphia, 1786), the publisher suggested that the same malady—religious indifference—which had long afflicted Britain, now plagued America. *A Mirror* lamented that "[t]he principal religious

established churches, such indifference seemed a blessing. Detailing how these provincials were being transformed into the curious people that they were, the famous French observer J. Hector Saint John Crèvecoeur noted that American religion was becoming as “mixed,” as wonderfully diluted, as Euro-American blood was becoming. In fact, intermarriage and the subsequent production of an amalgamated race of people, he suggested, represented the quickest means to the dissolution of the country’s religious differences. “A very perceptible indifference, even in the first generation,” Crèvecoeur wrote, “will become apparent; and it may happen that the daughter of the Catholic will marry the son of the seceder, and settle by themselves at a distance from the seceder.”<sup>28</sup> What religious conflicts the mixing of bloods did not dispel, the vast American landscape surely would. In America, Crèvecoeur suggested, religious conflict “evaporates in the great distance it has to travel ... it burns away in the open air, and consumes without effect.” The residue of this benign mixture of various faiths and open space would be a harmless “indifference” regarding the religious differences that seemed to matter so terribly in Europe.

There was enough sentiment, contemporaries called it “liberal” sentiment, to lend credence to Crèvecoeur’s claims.<sup>29</sup> By the last decades of the eighteenth century,

---

characters of the present age seem to be, the fashionable Deist, the Temporizer, the selfish Devotee, the Waverer, and the serious but desponding Christian.” *A Mirror*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. Albert E. Stone (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 75.

<sup>29</sup> For an extensive account of the rise of “liberal,” or “liberality,” as a late eighteenth-century Anglo-American ideal, see Philip Hamburger, “Liberality” *Texas Law Review*, vol. 78, no. 6 (May 2000).

many Americans writers had adopted the fashionable preference for cosmopolitan open-mindedness, with its complementary hostility toward narrow-minded bigotry. The capacity to consider an issue from multiple perspectives was the ideal to which those who considered themselves “liberal” aspired. We should “turn a subject on all sides” before passing judgment on it, Harvard’s President, Samuel Locke, advised.<sup>30</sup> *An Essay on Education*, published that same year (1772), recommended that the individual whose mind was “contracted within a narrow circle” could, through a “gradual acquaintance with the things around him ... enlarge his views,” and learn “to regard himself as a CITIZEN OF THE WORLD, assert his native liberty, and despise a SLAVE of any sect or party.”<sup>31</sup> On this liberal view, the bigot slavishly clung to his particular interpretation of scripture and his peculiar practices without considering the validity of the alternatives. Most real slaves, of course, would have been fortunate to have even attended a church of their choosing.

The observations of contemporary Europeans suggest the extent to which such ecumenism had penetrated American culture. Another French transplant to the New World, Jacob Duché said in regard to Philadelphia that “there is less religious bigotry here, than in any place I have yet visited.”<sup>32</sup> Another Frenchman professed his astonishment at the enthusiasm with which a newly established Catholic parish was

---

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Locke, *A Sermon Preached Before the Ministers of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay* (Boston, 1772), 18.

<sup>31</sup> *An Essay on Education* (New-Haven, 1772), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Jacob Duché, *Observations on a Variety of Subjects, Literary, Moral and Religious* (Philadelphia, 1774), 62.

greeted in the traditionally anti-Catholic bastion of Boston. "The liberal part of the inhabitants (and to their honour there are but a few who are not liberal) are highly pleased with it," he wrote to a friend, "and many of the Boston people attend' the Catholic services, 'some from motives of curiosity, and others to evince that liberality which shines so conspicuous in the character of the Americans."<sup>33</sup> Other European observers, less sanguine about the prospect of such indifference, were no less convinced of its presence. In 1787, the newly combined Associate Reformed Synod of New York and Philadelphia came in for severe chastisement from its Scottish brethren in the Reformed Presbytery, on the grounds that it had "support[ed] the cause of promiscuous communion" in the name of Jesus Christ. In its eagerness for union, in its commitment "to offend none," moreover, the Synod had combined "persons formerly holding jarring principles" and resorted to "ambiguous forms"<sup>34</sup>

"Indifference" toward the particular forms that religion took should not be confused with "indifference" toward religion generally.<sup>35</sup> The historian Nathan Hatch has noted that a defining characteristic of early republican religion was the way "People veered from one church to another."<sup>36</sup> What European observers saw as

---

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Hanson, *Necessary Virtue*, 189-190.

<sup>34</sup> *The Constitution of the Associate Reformed Synod in America, Considered, Disowned and Testified Against* (Philadelphia, 1787), 5, 16.

<sup>35</sup> The accusation of "indifference" was not new. Seventeenth-century critics of John Locke leveled the charge against him. See James Tully, "Governing Conduct," *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24.

<sup>36</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 64.

indifference may have represented a generalized willingness to try out religious alternatives. Just prior to the turn of the century, a Scottish immigrant and president of Dickinson College, Charles Nisbet complained that “Religion” was likely to be snuffed out “by the “Equality & Indifference of Religious Opinions that is established by our Political Constitutions.” These compacts, he argued had “divided all our Citizens into two great Parties, the Anythingarians who hold all Religions equally good, & the Nothingarians who abhor all Religions equally.”<sup>37</sup> And, frighteningly enough, it appeared that the Anythingarians, bereft of “fix’d Principles,” would soon succumb to the blasphemous denial of the Nothingarians.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to England, where writers positioned themselves as indifferent “liberal[s]” in order to gain an audience, the mutability of attachments in this religiously diverse land may have led European observers to detect indifference where native believers saw the attraction of better commitments.<sup>39</sup> The disruptions of wartime, like the disruptions of the

---

<sup>37</sup> Charles Nisbet to Charles Wallace, October 31, 1797, New York Public Library. Cited in James H. Smylie, “Protestant Clergy, the First Amendment and Beginnings of a Constitutional Debate, 1781-1791” *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. Elwyn A. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 149.

<sup>38</sup> These sentiments were echoed in the note Jonathan Boucher made on a sermon he claimed to have delivered prior to the Revolutionary War (the note itself was probably not written until much later, perhaps even as late as 1796 or 1797). “[I]ndifference” to religion, he suggested, had followed the establishment of nonpreferential relationships between states and churches. “The instances are said to be not a few, of persons who, after having alternately professed themselves of several different religious persuasions, have come at last to avow their total irreligion. ...Those who, during their connexion with Great Britain, were contented to be called Dissenters of Independents, are now pretty generally become, or are becoming, either Universal Restitutionists, Arians or Socinians, or else Philosophers, i.e. Infidels.” See “Discourse VI. On the Toleration of Papists,” in Boucher, *A View*, 260n-261n.

<sup>39</sup> It was Charles Henry Wharton who wrote that in England, “a writer must affect to be liberal, if he means to be read ...” See [Charles Henry Wharton], *A Letter to the Roman Catholics of the City of Worcester* (Philadelphia, 1784), 10. In their excellent essay on church adherence in colonial America, Patricia Bonomi and Peter Eisenstadt note that “one finds many reports of religious ‘indifference,’ but in the eighteenth century this usually meant religious impartiality, or a blindness to

Awakening three decades earlier, generated a host of new religious choices for the generally pious people who populated the United States.<sup>40</sup>

The Revolution reinforced the ecumenical tendency in late eighteenth-century culture by compelling people of various denominations to work extensively with one another. During this long war, the messy particularity of human interaction replaced the comfortable certainty of theological abstraction. Excepting the hostility evinced toward pacifist Quakers and Moravians, the war generally extended the limited inter-denominational cooperation Americans had previously experienced. Indeed, as the campaign for independence began in earnest, Protestant Americans found themselves anxiously awaiting the assistance of Catholic France. In a surprising number of cases, they managed to reconcile themselves to the alliance. That such a transition could have been made at all, that the fundamentals of Christianity could have been stretched so far, must have been a source of consternation for those Americans who wanted to maintain a semblance of Calvinist uniformity in this predominantly Protestant country.

---

the fine points of doctrine that differentiated one denomination from another." See Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, "Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Ser. 3, vol.39, no.2 (April 1982), 247. Richard Pointer suggests that "[c]onfronted by both increasing options and what was sometimes a bewildering mix of sectarian claims, some laypersons found themselves becoming religiously 'indifferent.'" "Few churchgoers questioned the basic importance of religion or even their own need for salvation," he continues, "[b]ut a significant minority of them were finding it increasingly difficult either to know which one of the competing sets of beliefs and practices was worthy of acceptance or how to go about deciding." See Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> On the disruptions experienced by particular churches, such as the Anglican church, see Robert M. Calhoun, "Religion, Politics, and Ratification," *Religion in a Revolutionary Age* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994).



Something had indeed changed in America. In the generally expressed preference for piety over theology, in the generally expressed disdain for restrictive creeds, in the easy mixing of America's sects in voluntary societies, constitutional conventions and revolutionary war regiments, Crèvecoeur's claim that America was growing "indifferent" to the particular forms that their religion took rang true. To be an American was to be indifferent about other people's faith. Few people, however, could blithely countenance a nation of semi-committed (or indifferent) believers. Writing in 1783, with the once dreaded Anglican church now merely one of many churches, and with America its own republic, Ezra Stiles articulated a reservedly sanguine description of America's religious future. As long as it could sustain its commitment to the ways of God, Stiles predicted, the new nation would provide the world with a model of religious purity. But therein lay the problem. Everywhere, Stiles lamented, people were tearing down even their most "liberal and generous establishments." Civil magistrates were discouraged from having anything to do with religion, other than to keep the peace between "contending sects." "And hence," he wrote, "it begins to be a growing idea that it is might be indifferent ... whether a man be of this or the other religious sect ... and that truly deists, and men of indifferentism to all religion are the most suitable persons for civil office." In fact, Stiles huffed,

---

<sup>41</sup> On the subject of New England's stance toward Catholicism during the Revolution, see Hanson's *Necessary Virtue*, as well as Francis D. Cogliano, *No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1995). Cogliano argues that "[d]espite elite attempts to eradicate anti-popery, anti-Catholic feeling was never entirely eliminated there." Nonetheless, he does suggest that the Revolution "permanently undermined the foundation of anti-popery" in New England. See Cogliano, *No King, No Popery*, 3, 154.

there was a growing conviction that “to prevent partiality in governors, and emulation among the sects, it is wise to consign government over into the hands of those who ... have no religion at all.”<sup>42</sup> With disestablishment looming, Stiles feared for America the very thing that Crèvecoeur thought would make it great. He feared that the well-justified indifference of its institutions would encourage a soulless neutrality among its citizens. The concern was no longer that people would adhere to dangerous religious beliefs, as had been the case earlier in the century, but that—as Stiles feared—they would present a danger by adhering to *no religious beliefs*.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the reactionary tone of his rhetoric, Stiles had not been metamorphosed into a religious curmudgeon since his prerevolutionary days, when he had called for a union of all nonepiscopal Christians. Indeed, his worries over the rise of deism and “indifferentism” were accompanied by a fresh awareness of the new nation’s capacity for religious pluralism. European observers had studied America, he noted, in hopes of imitating the “friendly cohabitation of all sects” that it maintained. To the astonishment of the world, this country had demonstrated “that men may be good members of civil society, and yet differ in religion.” More interesting, however, was Stiles’ commitment to permitting every church to “complete” itself according to its own particular specifications. “The united states will embosom all the religious sects or denominations in Christendom,” Stiles predicted. “Here they may all enjoy

---

<sup>42</sup> Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven, 1783), 70.

<sup>43</sup> It was indeed common to suggest, as one contemporary put it, that “the [religious] principles [which] do not subvert the foundation of good government; may be safely tolerated; but the man of no religion is the most dangerous, and in fact is not a fit subject of moral government.” See *Brief Animadversions on the Doctrine of Universal Salvation* (Philadelphia, 1787), 48.

their whole respective systems of worship and church government, complete.” His next words are worth quoting because of the evident care that was taken to properly depict each group—even the Church of England—and to even endorse their respective activities:

Of these, next to the *presbyterians*, the *church of england* will hold a distinguished and principal figure. They will soon furnish themselves with a bishop in *virginia* and *maryland*, and perhaps another to the northward, to ordain their clergy, give confirmation, superintend and govern their churches; the main body of which will be in *virginia* and *maryland*, besides a *diaspora* or interspersion in all the other states. The *unitas fratrum*, for above thirty years past, have had moravian bishops in america; and *I think they have* three at present, though not of local or diocesan jurisdiction, their pastorate being the whole unity throughout the world. In this there ever was a distinction between the *bohemian episcopacy*, and that of the eastern and western churches; for in a body of 2000 antient bohemian churches, they seldom had above two or three bishops. ...<sup>44</sup>

The man who had once led the opposition to a colonial episcopate, now insisted that even the Anglican church in America was entitled to maintain its full complement of officers, including bishops. According to Stiles, all the churches possessed the right to enjoy their own particular institutions in all their peculiar variety. By 1783, American writers were calling this “religious liberty.”

### **Equal Recognition**

Even those who prescribed an instrumental role for civil government in maintaining worship rejected the notion that civil authority should have anything to do

---

<sup>44</sup> Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, 54-55.

with individual beliefs. Though subject to a maddening variety of definitions, the right of private judgment had assumed the status of an incontestable dogma during the first third of the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> At a minimum, this idea entailed that individuals were free to think whatever they were inclined to think, as long as they kept it to themselves. Something of this sentiment appears in the writings of “Hieronymous,” who defended the contested third article of Massachusetts Constitution, which provided that individuals could designate to the minister to whom their tax money went. “Hieronymous” denied that he was guilty of suggesting that “*speculative opinions*” might be legitimately regulated by the civil authority; the government, he noted, only possessed the right to regulate “*conduct*.”<sup>46</sup> But, he noted, societies imposed obligations on those who joined, including the obligation to be “instructed in their duty.” No rights were injured in the process, since everyone was permitted “to choose their own mode of worship.”

But for the most vocal advocates of “Religious Liberty,” the term implied more than a mere right of private judgment. Although the phrase “Religious Liberty” was often used as a synonym for the right of private judgment, it also exceeded “the right of private judgment” in the extent of privileges it could entail.<sup>47</sup> “By Religious

---

<sup>45</sup> According to Rhys Isaac, “Toleration was a shibboleth in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world: it was unthinkable to question it in the open.” See Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 150-152.

<sup>46</sup> “Hieronymous” in *The Boston Gazette*, January 18, 1779. “Hieronymous,” according to Evans, was probably Robert Treat Paine.

<sup>47</sup> The conservative Moses Hemmenway implicitly defined the contemporary distinction when he wrote “we should take heed that *Liberty of thinking* for ourselves, or the right of private judgment become not an occasion of infidelity, or scepticism, or of our being carried away with unsound doctrines, and our minds corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. *Liberty of speaking* our

Liberty,” Barnabas Binney declared in 1774, “we mean a free, uncontrolled [sic] liberty of thinking, worshipping and acting in all religious matters as we please. provided thereby, we are not prejudicial to the state.” This was as precise a definition as one was likely to get. And yet, it failed to convey the full range of rights now attributed to all individuals. Whereas “the right of private judgment” (a phrase he used interchangeably with “religious liberty”) had once been a matter of securing the independence of the will against the encroachments of a solitary, unified force of government power and Church doctrine, Binney suggested that it now entailed something else. “[I]f superior *power* cannot justify any man, or men in dictating what shall be the faith of their fellow creatures,” Binney wrote, “neither can superior *learning or knowledge*.” In this sentiment, Binney echoed the arguments of his contemporaries, whose animus toward church establishments emerged as much from a conviction of doctrinal equality as it did from an inclination toward individual autonomy. Religious liberty meant not having to recognize anyone else’s convictions as better or more central than one’s own.<sup>48</sup>

Many of the most forceful arguments for religious liberty in the late eighteenth

---

thoughts must not be abused to the dishonor of God, and religion and virtue; to the encouragement of vice, or hurtful errors; to the detriment of the commonwealth; or to the injury, grievance, or scandal of any one.” Moses Hemmenway, *A Sermon, Preached Before His Excellency John Hancock* (Boston, 1784), 33-34

<sup>48</sup> Barnabas Binney, *An Oration Delivered on the Late Public Commencement at Rhode-Island College* (Boston, 1774), 9, 12. Binney also suggested a conspicuously negative role for government in ensuring that dissenters were secure from the persecution of those who believed different. “If any members of a civil community, or persons under the same civil government, out of a mistaken zeal for God, or their own cause; think it their duty to destroy, molest or persecute those who dissent from them in their religious sentiments,” Binney wrote, “let the civil magistrate as guardian of the peace of that community, or government, take care of them.” See Binney, *An Oration*, 24.

century were published in New England. There, the old non-Anglican church establishments persisted with impressive tenacity. During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Baptist preacher Isaac Backus was the most prolific critic of established religion in those colonies. Backus' career exemplifies the emergence of self-description as an animating principle in late eighteenth-century discourse. At the height of New England's Great Awakening this young Connecticut farmer underwent a radical conversion experience.<sup>49</sup> Shortly after the Old Light majority in his Norwich church vetoed the proposal to demand a "public relation of their experience," Backus, as well as several others, separated from that church.<sup>50</sup> By 1742, this group of separates had established their own church, which adhered to the Puritan practice of requiring candidates for church membership to deliver oral testimony of their own conversion. Among the other measures to which the new church committed itself was lay ordination of ministers. Soon after he was so ordained, Backus began preaching itinerantly across New England.

In 1748, Backus became the minister of his own church. There, his life-long resistance to compulsory taxation began. The imprisonment of his brother and mother for their refusal to taxes in his old parish reaffirmed his commitment. Over the ensuing years, Backus gravitated toward Baptism, ultimately dissolving his church in 1756 to form another one organized on his newly adopted principles.<sup>51</sup> Thereafter,

---

<sup>49</sup> The fullest general account of Backus' life can be found in William McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Brown and Company, 1967).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from the decision of the Old Light majority in McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Confronted with the appalling atomization of perfectionist-inclining Baptist churches in New England, Backus eventually persuaded "the pre-Awakening or 'Old Baptist,' churches of all

Backus played a leading role in obtaining tax relief for his aggrieved fellow worshippers. Until 1780, Backus objected most vociferously to the Massachusetts law that compelled towns to pay toward the upkeep of the minister appointed by the majority in each town. From 1780 onward, the main object of Backus' animus was Article Three of the new state's constitution, which preserved state funding for the majority-selected minister selected in each town.

Backus' arguments for religious liberty were premised upon the strict Calvinist commitment to making the true church visible. This true, or visible, church was rendered "manifest" in the authentic description each individual offered regarding their faith, in expressions of their "*gracious* sincerity." According to Backus, Congregational ministers had alienated their parishioners by substituting "*written* accounts which have often been framed by somebody else" for the personal testimony of the individual believers themselves. Whereas even the judges in civil trials "ordinarily insist upon having *witnesses personally present* where all persons concerned may hear their testimony from their *own mouths*," Backus' fellow ministers persisted in substituting their own words for the believer's own. Even more reprehensible was the report Backus received from some "godly persons" who complained "that when they were admitted publicly into the church, the minister read off an account different in material points from what they gave to him in writing and so made them silently assent to a *lie*!" As Backus saw it, an individual could no more

---

shades of antipedobaptism to adopt the New Light outlook of the Separate-Baptists, that is, the Baptists who had separated from the standing churches during the Awakening." Quote from *Isaac Backus on Church and State, and Calvinism*, 10.

allow someone else to articulate his or her reasons for joining a church, than they could be subjected to the discipline of a church through the accident of their birth.<sup>52</sup>

Backus' plea for religious liberty was thus also a plea for self-description. The certificate policy maintained by Massachusetts compelled dissenters to officially register their dissent as a means of obtaining tax relief.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, the state's policy was defended as an indulgence to the self-description of dissenting sects. Apologists for the policy suggested that the state was demanding only that dissenting individuals be conformists in their own way, fully embodying and describing their particular, tolerated system. But as Backus saw things, the state was rendering dissenters discursive in *its* own predetermined way. Like the ministers who substituted written confessions for the spontaneous confessions of aspiring church members, the state supplied the description through which legitimate dissent was to be articulated. Backus could not have been more opposed to such a practice. Echoing the Antinomian rhetoric that always quietly supplemented the more rigidly Scripture-centered strains of Reformed Protestantism, Backus suggested that fellow believers could identify the signs of true grace. While expressing his regret for the rash judgments he had leveled upon those who differed with him in the past, Backus continued to insist that the saints could recognize authentic faith in each other.<sup>54</sup> They

---

<sup>52</sup> Backus, "A Fish Caught in His Own Net," *Isaac Backus on Church and State*, 10, 255, 219, 220. For Backus' argument that the accidents of birth cannot condemn an individual to a particular church, see Backus, "A Door Opened for Equal Christian Liberty" (Boston, 1783), 6.

<sup>53</sup> Backus, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty" *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 335.

<sup>54</sup> Backus, "A Fish Caught in His Own Net," *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 260, 223.



saw themselves in other true believers, "as face answereth face in the water."<sup>55</sup>

The development of Backus' thought suggests how American evangelicalism contributed to the emergent ideals of equal recognition and self-description. Backus had moved from the conviction that other souls could be judged to the conviction that kindred souls might be recognized. Judgment was now the sole preserve of the person being judged. In Backus' mind, to possess religious liberty was not merely to have the right to think for oneself, or even the right to speak. True religious liberty entailed the right to articulate one's own faith on one's own terms. "For as surely as *every man must give account of himself to God*," Backus wrote, "so sure is it that he cannot substitute another man as his representative in the affairs of divine worship."<sup>56</sup> Each believer, according to Backus, must represent himself, in his own words. The exercise of civil power required that a few people exercise power on behalf of the whole people. "But in religion," Backus wrote, "each one has an equal right to judge for himself, for we must all *appear* before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things *done in his body* according to that *he hath done* (not what any earthly representative hath done for him..."<sup>57</sup> A legislature might embody the people's collected civil power.

---

<sup>55</sup> "... there is on this account a spiritually natural answering of one to another as face answereth face in the water; they can see and discern that in others whereof they have experience in themselves, they taste and relish that in others which they feed upon in themselves, and wherein the lives of their souls do consist, the same spirit of life being in them, they have the same spiritual taste and savor." Backus, "A Fish Caught in His Own Net," *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 223.

<sup>56</sup> Isaac Backus, *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* (Feb. 22, 1779).

<sup>57</sup> Backus, Isaac, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty," *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 332.

and it might regulate the behavior of particular bodies, but religious faith was confined to the choices that particular individuals made.<sup>58 59</sup> Building upon the traditional Protestant conviction that there was no legitimate mediator between the believer and his God, and the liberal conviction that rights of judgment were inalienable, Backus articulated the increasingly pervasive belief that religious liberty entailed the autonomous expression of each individual's faith.<sup>60</sup>

The ideal of self-description was a particularly attractive notion to those—often evangelicals like Backus—who wished to separate from an existing church. Gaining the recognition of the Massachusetts government as a distinct religious body, for instance, required that a church come under the official description as a “Sect.” Failing in this endeavor, the aggrieved would be required to pay for the support of the church they had abandoned. Appropriately the “Christian Independents Congregating in Gloucester” characterized themselves as “a *Sect* different” than the church from which they wished to separate. In addition, they contended that the “principles” involved applied “equally to Episcopalians, Baptists, Quakers, Sandemanians, and Independents, and to every denomination of Christians whose society is not described and known by town or parish lines, or by a particular act of incorporation ...” In other

---

<sup>58</sup> See Backus, “Policy as well as Honesty, Forbids the use of Secular Force in Religious Affairs” *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 381.

<sup>59</sup> Backus, Isaac, “An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty,” *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 314, 332-333.

<sup>60</sup> (2 Cor 5:10 KJV) “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” For the argument that religious rights are inalienable, see Backus, “Policy as well as Honesty, Forbids the use of Secular Force in Religious Affairs,” *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 381.

words, unless their charter specifically precluded it, every denomination was entitled to supply its own description. Moreover, the Christian Independents insisted that the meaning of Article Three depended upon “the meaning of the word Sect,” which, they suggested, was ill-defined. In Massachusetts the term unjustly “include[d] and describe[d] those persons who dissent from legal establishments which are instituted for religious purposes.” The Independents also recommended that the term “sect” remain ambiguous, and that it be left open to future descriptions. It was bigoted to suppose that it could be “confined in its meaning to the Sects only which existed at that time.” Making that meaning permanent would stifle future religious inquiry. The authors added that it was not “persecution” they complained of, “but only of an oppression.” There might be something permanently debilitating about persecution, but even under this conservative constitution, it would only take a definitional shift, a redescription, to make render the Christian Independents a “Sect.” and to free them from oppression.<sup>61</sup>

The legitimization of self-description was not confined to seekers after religious liberty. Even the critics of dissenting minorities would have to frame their disapproval as a judgment reached after a sympathetic investigation into the “peculiar Principles” of the criticized. In a 1762 sermon, Robert Ross condemned several marginal sects in New England only after a “full and candid Examination of [their] religious Notions, and Practices proceeding from them” indicated that they were in error.<sup>62</sup> The

---

<sup>61</sup> Backus, “An Appeal to the Impartial Publick.” *Isaac Backus: On Church, State, and Calvinism*, 15, 16, 23, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Ross, *A Plain Address to the Quakers, Moravians, Separatists, Separate-Baptists, Rogerenes, and Enthusiasts* (New Haven, 1762), 3. Appended to a 1776 sermon of Ross’ was the

defensive tone of Samuel MacClintock's provocatively titled *The Artifices of Deceivers Detected and Christians Warned Against Them* (1770) testifies to the pervasiveness of this sentiment. Other people's religious "principles," MacClintock insisted, may be "censure[d] and condemn[ed]" "without infringing their liberty, condemning their state, or setting up his own opinions as a standard of orthodoxy for others."<sup>63</sup> MacClintock's angry denial indicates the strength of the conviction that an individual or group's liberty was infringed when their principles were censured or condemned. Nathaniel Hooker articulated the opinion that MacClintock despised, lamenting that so many were "reproached with the name of *Arminians* by those who never sufficiently informed themselves what their principles were ..."<sup>64</sup>

Some beliefs remained abhorrent to late eighteenth-century Americans, no matter what self-description its adherents supplied. Next to the absence of religious faith, Catholicism represented one of the few forms of belief that Americans still publicly treated as heretical. Even during the last decades of the eighteenth century Catholicism was still widely treated as an illegitimate religious system, as much for the attachments it purportedly forged between its adherents and European powers as it was for its reprehensible devotion to tradition, superstition and symbols. In the minds

---

resolution of a Revolutionary War committee "recommend to all the Inhabitants of this City and Liberties to forbear from any kind of insult to the [Quakers] or any others who may, from conscientious scruples, or from a regard to their religious professions, refuse to keep the said Fast." See Robert Ross, *A Sermon in Which the Union of the Colonies is Considered and Recommended; and the Sad Consequences of Divisions are Represented* (New-York, 1776).

<sup>63</sup> Samuel MacClintock, *The Artifices of Deceivers Detected and Christians Warned Against Them* (Portsmouth, New-Hampshire, 1770), 4-5.

<sup>64</sup> Nathaniel Hooker, *Six Discourses on Different Subjects* (Hartford, 1771), 49.

of contemporary Protestants, Catholicism threatened the independence of the nation as a whole, and the independence of every citizen individually. Despite professing himself “a warm friend to religious liberty in the largest sense” and although he enjoined “mutual forbearance ... where the differences are merely of a religious nature,” Jonathan Mayhew insisted that “roman catholicks cannot be safely tolerated in the free exercise of their religion, in a protestant government.”<sup>65</sup> The British Parliament’s passage of the Quebec Act in 1768, which limited representative government and accorded special privileges to Roman Catholics in Canada, seemed to confirm the suspicion that there was an Anglo-Catholic conspiracy to displace both Calvinism and republicanism in the New World. Hostility toward Catholicism persisted even in states where Protestant pluralism was embraced. As late as 1787, the Associate Reformed Synod of Philadelphia could say of the Catholic Church, that “God has described her as antichristian. ...”<sup>66</sup> The conviction that Catholics were obliged to a foreign power, and that Catholicism was incompatible with republican government, endured far past the eighteenth century.<sup>67</sup>

American Catholicism, however, benefited from the mid-eighteenth century

---

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Remarks on an Anonymous Tract* (Boston, 1764), 71.

<sup>66</sup> *A Draught of an Overture, Prepared and Published By a Committee of the Associate Reformed Synod* (Philadelphia, 1787), 118. Charles Hanson notes that “When the [Massachusetts Constitutional] convention adopted language requiring that governors and other civil officers declare their belief in ‘the Christian religion,’ the objection this elicited from voters was not that it was unfair to Jews and atheists but that it was overly indulgent of Catholics.” See Hanson, *Necessary Virtue*, 192.

<sup>67</sup> Remarking on the passage of the Quebec Act, James Dana argued that “Popery can prevail only under an arbitrary government, implying a general ignorance of civil rights.” See Dana, *A Sermon, Preached Before the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut* (Hartford, 1779), 15.

inclination to discount theological particulars in relation to the essentials of religious faith and worship.<sup>68</sup> The exigencies of war reinforced this tendency, even to the extent of temporarily minimizing its perceived political dangers. Among the strange alignments formed during the Revolution, none was stranger than the military alliance formed between the Continental Congress and the French government.<sup>69</sup> During the War, the United States desperately required the aid of Britain's major geopolitical rival. The resulting alliance, together with the invasion of Quebec, which depended upon the support of the Catholic majority there, placed American writers in the awkward position of rehabilitating a people and a religion they had long associated with the anti-Christ. Ironically, it proved easier to justify a political union with the French government, than it did to justify cooperation with Catholicism. Defending the alliance, David Sherman Rowland argued that "Differences in religion have no operation in the political system ..." Some, according to the historian Charles Hanson, even took comfort from the fact that Catholic France had been secularized by Deistic Philosophes.<sup>70</sup> Although the effort to rehabilitate Catholicism was not entirely successful, these politically motivated acts of ecumenism were nevertheless significant, bringing Catholicism closer to the point where it could garner the respect

---

<sup>68</sup> Catholics were among those groups—including the Baptists, Quakers, Lutherans—that Ezra Stiles noted, in an impressively effusive phrase, were "considerable bodies, in all their dispersions through the states." See Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven, 1783), 54.

<sup>69</sup> In his book on New England's Revolution-era sentiments regarding Catholicism, Charles Hanson notes that it "might be unexpected and difficult to get used to, but France's intervention in the Revolution was clearly good news. It was hinted at and hankered after well before it became public knowledge." See Hanson, *Necessary Virtue*, 103.

<sup>70</sup> Hanson, *Necessary Virtue*, 122, 132-135.

accorded to Protestant churches.

What diminished were critiques of Catholic religion, as religion. Indeed, Catholicism seems to have acquired at least a semblance of equal recognition by the last third of the century. While Barnabas Binney's 1774 injunction for religious liberty, even for "Papists," was a rare, pre-Revolutionary demonstration of sympathy toward Catholics, it was not the only such gesture.<sup>71</sup> In his 1771 sermon, Nathaniel Hooker lamented that Catholics were too frequently damned by those who "know not the principles of the Roman Catholic religion." "We have no right to damn a Papist in our own minds," Hooker went on, "till we have examined into what he professes, and on what grounds." A thorough investigation into "the grounds of his sentiments" was the duty we owed to "our neighbour."<sup>72</sup> Three years later, the Maryland Anglican Jonathan Boucher preached to his congregation on behalf of Catholic toleration. Boucher made it clear that "[t]he toleration for which I plead is not political, but religious."<sup>73</sup> He supported Maryland's prohibitions on Catholic officeholding. Such measures were only prudent. Nonetheless, according to Boucher, Catholics and Catholicism had been appallingly misrepresented for many years (not unlike his own church was said to have been in the recent past):

Hardly a book on any article of religion has been written; hardly a sermon on any controverted point has been preached; hardly any public

---

<sup>71</sup> Barnabas Binney, *An Oration Delivered on the Late Public Commencement at Rhode-Island College* (Boston, 1774) 24.

<sup>72</sup> Nathaniel Hooker, *Six Discourses*, 50.

<sup>73</sup> Boucher, "On the Toleration of Papists," *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 259.

debates, or private conversations, have been held on the subject of religion or of politics, in which ... the parties have not contrived to have what he called '*a thwack at Popery*.' We have exhibited them, as some of their own communion are wont to exhibit those they call heretics, in an *auto da fe*; in an horrid dress disfigured with monsters and devils....<sup>74</sup>

Here, and elsewhere in the sermon, Boucher's language drew on the ideals of equal recognition. However far they might be in error, Boucher granted, "I know of no right that we have to constitute ourselves their judges." Why, he asked, could Protestants not treat Catholics with the "decency" that Catholics bestowed upon Protestants?<sup>75</sup>

During the mid-1780s, the former colonies witnessed their first public debate on Catholicism, which consisted of a brief pamphlet exchange between a Catholic dissident and a Catholic clergyman. Charles Henry Wharton a "Late Chaplain of that Society" who had "relinquish[ed]" Catholic "Communion, and become a Member of the Protestant Church," published his reasons for leaving the church in 1784. Employing the language of equal recognition, Wharton reassured his former brethren that his intention was to apologize "for *my own* conduct, not to throw the most distant reflection upon yours." Nonetheless, he contended that the doctrines of Transubstantiation and the supposed ability of Priests' to forgive sins were both scripturally unfounded. In his rejoinder the following year, Wharton noted that

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 262-263. "There was no need thus to misrepresent Papists," he wrote later in the same text. Boucher, p. 267. It is not clear how much Boucher's sermon was modified before finally being published in 1797. I hope that it suffices to say that these are roughly similar to the ones Boucher actually employed when the sermon was actually spoken.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 255, 262-263, 267, 282.



Transubstantiation was “a matter that admits of experiment, upon which our reason can argue, and our senses can pronounce.” In other words, this essential Catholic doctrine was objectively disprovable. Yet, Wharton again recognized the equality of all believers, assuring Catholic readers that he had “distinguish[ed] between their persons and their opinions....” In other words, they were equal persons, distinct from their erroneous sentiments. And Wharton remarked that he was “proud to see them elevated to that equal respectability, to which, as zealous supporters of their country’s freedom and as a christian society, they are entitled.”<sup>76</sup>

In his rebuttal, John Carroll professed a complementary inclination “to do justice to the humanity of protestants.” Making note of the way Catholic doctrines were distorted generally, as well as the particular way Wharton had “misinformed,” Carroll called attention to how “painful” was the task of having to vindicate his Church’s doctrines. But he felt it necessary to ensure the proper representation of Catholicism. “These principles of our theology are so different from the common misrepresentations of them,” he wrote, that some would be inclined to think they were made up. The primary impediment to removing the too evident prejudices against the church, Carroll claimed, was to liberate it from the pernicious claim that the church insists “that out of HER COMMUNION no salvation can be obtained.” While he praised the practice of “fair argument,” Carroll’s primary concern was to ensure that Catholicism was not un-fairly represented.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Charles Henry Wharton, *A Reply to an Address to the Roman Catholics of the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1785), 4, 23, 97.

<sup>77</sup> [Carroll, John], *An Address to the Roman Catholics of the United States of America* (Annapolis, 1784), 10, 13, 15-16, 114..

The nation's other major episcopal church, the former Church of England, seemed to embody the same tension between religious faith and political commitment. In contrast to the pariah status of colonial Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism's Protestant origins guaranteed it some degree of respect. With Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, however, all pretence to its constituting a national establishment faded. America's independence transformed the Church of England into the Protestant Episcopal Church. Its allegiance, like that of the Catholic church, now seemed to lie outside the sovereign nation within which its churches stood: the newly-created United States. In a 1782 pamphlet, William White offered a modest plan, "a frame of government," that self-consciously appealed to American sensibilities. First noting apologetically (this was 1782 after all, and no time for an Anglican to communicate the church's traditional hubris) that Episcopalians "entertain a preference for their own communion," White contended that it would be "Inconsistent" with the allegiance they displayed during the war for the members of this church to be subject "to any spiritual jurisdiction, connected with the temporal authority of a foreign state." "Such a dependence," the author continued, "is contrary to the fundamental principles of civil society, ..." Such dependence seemed especially ill-suited to the fundamental principles of this particular society in which every denomination was treated equally under the law, where religious support was voluntary. Religious organizations, White advised, should avoid involving themselves in "political" matters. Members of particular denominations should avoid being "unite[d] ... on questions of a civil nature" or else "they will be suspected by all others, as aiming at the exclusive government of the country." White saw the writing on the wall, and his appeal may

have served as a warning to the country's more aggressive Episcopalians. This infant country would tolerate religious choices of all sorts, but would not take kindly to foreign attachments or political assertions of religious power.<sup>78</sup>

In several states, the Church of England attempted to maintain at least a portion of its former privileges. An example drawn from Maryland suggests that the Church's efforts in this regard occasioned resistance to the principle of establishment, rather than the Church's own "peculiar" principles. A public debate broke out in 1783 when Maryland's Episcopal clergy sought the state's assistance in altering its liturgy, services, and organizational structure. Summarizing the opposition's stance, the Presbyterian minister, Patrick Allison, argued that the debate itself "neither is nor can be properly called religious." Of course, Allison noted, he had no qualms with the Anglican church itself. "Certainly not a syllable has dropt from my pen reflecting on the articles, the discipline or devotion of any Christian society throughout the State." Allison declared, "nor the least endeavour used to diminish their importance on a religious score." There were various reasons for adhering to a particular communion, not all of which were compatible with one another, or with salvation for that matter: "One persuasion may admire the venerable order and beautiful form of their worship--another may admire the elegant simplicity and evangelical purity of theirs---a third, the spiritual, extatic [sic], heavenly raptures of theirs." As with the pre-revolutionary Anglican appeal for sympathy, and Backus' insistence on the priority of each believer's own description, Allison made no effort to draw qualitative distinctions

---

<sup>78</sup> [William White], *The Case of the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered* (Philadelphia, 1782), 6, 8-9.

between different modes of worship. Furthermore, he expressed the general conviction there was no cause for preferential religious establishments of any sort. No church, Allison argued, had the right to the state's "particular countenance, distinction and protection." "All possible descriptions of Christians are equally entitled to the countenance and favour of government," he maintained, as long as they posed no danger to the state or its citizens.<sup>79</sup>

A tiny religious sect known as the Shakers generated concern for the same reasons its more prominent Catholic and Episcopal counterparts did—less for its theology than its reputed foreign-bred, threat to republican government. Amos Taylor assumed responsibility for warning the country of the dangers posed by Shakerism. According to Taylor, "these Errors" had already "spread in several Parts of North-America." Taylor expressed concern, given the "infant state of civil power in America." Here, he argued, "every infringement on the natural rights of humanity, every effort to undermine our original constitution, either in civil or ecclesiastical order, saps the foundation of Independency." Such a state of affairs rendered the nation dangerously susceptible to corruption. Distant, unscrupulous forces appeared to be at work. "To see a body of more than two thousand people, having no will of their own, but governed by a few Europeans conquering their adherents into the most unreserved subjection," Taylor noted, "argues some infatuating power; some deep, very deep design at bottom."<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> [Patrick Allison], *Candid Animadversions Respecting a Petition to the Late General Assembly of Maryland* (Baltimore, 1783), ii, 3, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Amos Taylor, *A Narrative of the Strange Principles, Conduct, and Character of the People Known by the Name of Shakers* (Worcester, 1782), 3.

Taylor's alarmism harkens back to a very old model of religious difference, within which errors spread like a plague. His gothic portrayal of Shakerism, as well as his anxieties regarding European influence, gestures toward the boundaries of late eighteenth-century tolerance. To some, a republic so new and so fragile seemed as vulnerable to the subversion of political nonconformity and as inclined to alternative objects of allegiance, as the godly community once had. Shakerism, which required celibacy of its members, demanded such a rigorous internal conformity that it seemed to subordinate the common principles and practices that bound the larger society together. And like Catholicism and Episcopalianism, Shakerism seemed to cultivate loyalties beyond the bounds of the nation within which all forms of patriotic dissent were supposed to be legitimate. In these early years of the nation's history, few things were more suspect than a group whose demands radically exceeded the fundamentals of Christian faith and, by extension, paid scant attention to the essentials of good citizenship.

Even as late eighteenth-century thought tended toward the notion that every group was entitled to the self-description of its own beliefs and modes of worship, the perceived obligation to publicize these beliefs persisted. This imperative may have been inherited from the old idea that dissenting ideas might be purged through their very expression, which was still evident in the New England law's that demanded the articulation of specific dissenting beliefs as a means of obtaining tax relief. Within this context, a reluctant sociability was almost as much cause for suspicion as were suspected ties to foreign institutions. The Sandemanians, never popular to begin with, were taken to task for keeping to themselves. Why, John Huntington asked,

even on public occasions, as commencements and general elections, may we not have the benefit and pleasure of your conversation, as well as those of your own sect? why do you avoid our houses when you are journeying, and deny us the great favor and comfort of waiting on you, and asking of the welfare of your families, and how the cause of CHRIST prospers among your people, and the like?

In a fashion reminiscent of the way evangelical separatists had been criticized for at least three decades, Huntington went on to disparage the Sandemanians for their lack of charity toward other churches, for their stiff admission standards, and for their “schismatical spirit.” If late eighteenth-century discourse invested individuals and groups with ownership of their particular self-description, late-eighteenth century Americans grew anxious when such descriptions remained private, when they avoided civic occasions and social intercourse. Thus the Sandemanians, who seem to have been able to both preach and practice nonforbearance, trespassed against the civil religion. By isolating themselves from public contact, they carried out a refusal to be bound by any form of publicity. Their uncivil hostility to the friendly entreaties of the larger Christian community rendered their group unacceptably private. Their practices constituted a malignant opacity within a culture that championed the civic-minded, well-mannered private life. Such a private life was expected to manifest itself in public just as every respectable church was expected to embrace the larger public’s essential principles.<sup>81</sup>

Within the strange new context of late eighteenth-century religious discourse, injury was ascribed to acts that seemed to infringe upon each individual’s right to be

---

<sup>81</sup> John Huntington, *Letters of Friendship to Those Clergymen Who Have Lately Renounced Communion with the Ministers and Churches of Christ in General* (Hartford, 1780), 39–41.

recognized equally. To be excommunicated by a church society, the Reverend Dan Foster wrote in 1780, was to be “treat[ed] ... injuriously,” to be denied “the right of private judgment.”<sup>82</sup> “Withdrawing communion, in America,” Foster argued, “signifies the same thing with dragooning, beheading, or burning in popish countries: is practiced upon the same principles, and to be justified by the same reasons.”<sup>83</sup> Similar sentiments were articulated by the Reverend John Tucker over a decade earlier. “[I]f such exclusion sets a brand upon them as men of bad principles,” Tucker wrote, “if it hurts their reputation in the world and subjects them to other inconveniences and hardships;--and deprives them of privileges, which otherwise they would have had a right to, this, as effectually annexes a penalty to such a practice, as if this assent was imposed by a law, and the loss of goods or life, was the punishment of non-compliance.”<sup>84</sup>

In another tract, Tucker observed that it seemed as though every one of the theological doctrines enunciated in the creeds and confessions of New England, Scotland and England were being “kindly indulged and dignified with the same title to fundamentality.”<sup>85</sup> Ordinary religious terms, such as “Fundamentality,” “Orthodoxy.”

---

<sup>82</sup> Dan Foster in the Appendix to Isaac Foster, *A Defence of Religious Liberty* (Worcester, 1780), 168. Benjamin Franklin, always far ahead of his time, had uttered similar sentiments during the Hemphill debates of the mid-1730s.

<sup>83</sup> Dan Foster in the Appendix to Isaac Foster, *A Defence of Religious Liberty* (Worcester, 1780), 171.

<sup>84</sup> John Tucker, *Remarks on the Revd. Mr. James Chandler's Serious Address* (Boston, 1768), 42.

<sup>85</sup> John Tucker, *A Brief Account of an Ecclesiastical Council* (Boston, 1767), 36.

and “church” bound souls to social arrangements and descriptions, which deprived them of their inalienable right to define their own faith. All too cognizant of the distance that separated their “persecution” from that experienced by people in times and places, Foster and Tucker defined what it meant to experience injury in late eighteenth century America. To be excluded, to be de-recognized, to lose reputation, to be associated with “bad principles,” to be mis-represented: these were indeed the injuries that could be done, that could only be done, in a pluralistic culture.

### **Unanimous Unions; Majoritarian Decisions**

“[E]very Society has all those powers that are essential to Society in general.” Noah Hobart wrote in his 1765 defense of Connecticut’s Consociational church system. Voluntary societies, in particular, had the right to cast “out an unworthy Member, one that disgraces or indangers [sic] the whole.” Moreover, according to Hobart, there were certain extra-scriptural rules by which every church and consociation of churches operated, such as not permitting women to “vote in Church Meetings” that “persons in a State of Slavery, shall not sit as Judges” in disciplinary matters, or “that the major Vote of the Church shall be taken as the Act of the whole.” “These and such like Points, tho’ of Importance,” Hobart wrote, “have their Foundation not immediately in the Gospel of Christ, but in the Principles and Laws of Society.”<sup>86</sup> For Hobart and most of his contemporaries, majority rule ranked among

---

<sup>86</sup> Noah Hobart, *An Attempt to Illustrate and Confirm the Ecclesiastical Covenant of the Consociated Churches* (New Haven, 1765), 31.



those original exclusions that were logically prior to every religious society, and without which there could not be a “Society.” On the matter of majority rule, the “Freeholder’s Catechism” put it, “every man in the society [was] supposed to have given his assent in that matter already....”<sup>87</sup> Although it would be several decades more before American minds were troubled by the thought of keeping over one-half of the population from voting, not everyone was persuaded that majorities should wield undisputed authority.

During the second half of the century, the ideal authority was alternately direct representation and virtual unanimity. Late eighteenth-century Americans rejected the British notion that the general interest could be represented by a small elite, or “virtually” represented. They insisted, instead, on the right of each citizen to participate in the selection of their representative. They argued, fought, and died for this ideal. But late eighteenth-century Americans also resisted the notion that decisions had to be made by the factional majorities that often characterized the institution of direct representation. The Great Awakening, with its spontaneous, voluntary, affectionate union of individual souls, served as one model of virtual unanimity. The imagined social contract, which provided the legitimacy for all future political agreements, represented another. These were instances of unity that was always already there: the essential republican principles that had to already be in place or the fundamental beliefs from which no decent Christian could dissent.

---

<sup>87</sup> [St. John, Henry, Viscount Bolingbroke], *The Freeholder’s Political Catechism* (New London, 1769), 6.

This tendency to privilege unanimity culminated in that most famous of all conjurings—"We the People"—which opened the Constitution.<sup>88</sup> On July 7, 1787, as the Constitutional Convention wound down, an aged Benjamin Franklin advised the delegates that they strive for "unanimity" and avoid any pretension to their own "infallibility." People, like "sects in Religion," he observed, were reluctant to relinquish the notion that they were infallible. The author of *The Autobiography* then invoked his own life as an example:

For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others.<sup>89</sup>

In this spirit, Franklin urged those assembled to refrain from criticizing the document in its final instantiation. They should compromise, he suggested, rather than stubbornly adhering to their own private judgments. Franklin's words were followed by a proposal to reduce the number of constituents per representative. Apparently

---

<sup>88</sup> "The fiction of representation," Jay Fliegelman writes, "was most famously exemplified in the late 1780s by a small group of privileged white men who, though often strenuously disagreeing among themselves, yet described themselves as 'We the People,' a single homogenous entity that the Constitution and the delegates to it, in effect, invented." See Fliegelman's introduction to Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991). Julia Stern argues that the sentimental literature of the Federalist period presents a stark contrast to republican politics of the period, which caused the social deaths of African-Americans, Native Americans and white women. Novels such as *The Coquette and Charlotte Temple*, she writes, "gesture[d] toward a less coherent and more democratic vision of sympathetic communion" that contrasts with "the idealistic federalizing sentiment of 1787—the consensual aspiration that 'we the people' could come to speak in one voice ..." See Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>89</sup> *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 641-642.

unable to remain “silent” any longer, the famously silent President, George Washington, exhorted the delegates to pass the Amendment, which would have itself made representation more direct.<sup>90</sup> “No opposition was made” and the amendment “was agreed to unanimously.”<sup>91</sup> One of the delegates, Jared Sparks, later remarked that “[I]t was ... best for the convention for forming the Constitution to sit with closed doors, because opinions were so various and at first so crude that it was necessary they should be long debated before any uniform system of opinion could be formed.”<sup>92</sup> This was not the spontaneous, affectionate union of which evangelicals like Jonathan Edwards had dreamed, although many—Thomas Jefferson in particular—would claim that it had been.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the compromises that accompanied every assertion of unanimity, the Revolution had mobilized people into bodies that repeatedly claimed to speak for all Americans. Broad­sides proclaimed the indivisibility of public opinion, the union of the whole people.<sup>94</sup> The Sons of Liberty ferreted out, tarred, feathered, and generally

---

<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, the President was also a loyal Free Mason.

<sup>91</sup> *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 644.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix A.

<sup>93</sup> On Jefferson’s zeal for “unanimity,” see Peter Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 106-107. The term, “virtual unanimity” is Onuf’s.

<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, *To the Free and Respectable Mechanicks, and Other Inhabitants of the City and County of New-York* (New York, 1775) and “An ADDRESS to the Inhabitants of the City of New York,” *The New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* (July 2, 1770), signed by “A true Friend to Liberty and Unanimity.”

silenced political dissenters. Americans marveled at their own capacity for unanimity. A sermon preached on the eve of the war noted the “surprising agreement in opinion, that has prevailed in persons at a great distance from each other,” their letters containing “nearly the same proposals to each other, as though the inspiration of the Most High have them the like understanding.”<sup>95</sup> A graduation oration (1776) by Timothy Dwight expressed gratitude that “this continent [was] inhabited by a people, who have the same religion, the same language, and the same essential forms and principles of civil government. ... That a vast continent, containing near three thousand millions of acres of valuable land, should be inhabited by a people, in all respects one, is indeed a novelty on earth.”<sup>96</sup> But when did a large majority of the people become “one” people? When did many similar opinions become a single sentiment? A Thanksgiving sermon preached before encamped troops in Massachusetts (1775) captured the prevailing sentiment:

It has been universally admitted, that the greater part of a community should govern the minority in all matters of public concern. When nine or eight tenths of that community unite in any matter, commonly speaking, they are not divided: their voice is in every sense the voice of the whole. That the continent is as much united, if not more perfectly, cannot be denied.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> William Gordon, *A Discourse Preached December 15th 1774* (Boston, 1775), 26.

<sup>96</sup> Timothy Dwight, *A Valedictory Address to the Young Gentlemen, Who Commenced Bachelors of Arts* (New-Haven, 1776), 11.

<sup>97</sup> Mansfield, *A Sermon, Preached in the Camp at Roxbury, November 23, 1775* (Boston, 1776), 21. “[T]he people might have been divided with regard to the mode of resistance,” Mansfield wrote in another conspicuous invocation of religious rhetoric, but they had “*all* join[ed] in the expediency of resistance.” See Mansfield, *A Sermon*, 20.

When the “community” appeared as imperiled as this one did, a large majority was indeed near enough to “the voice of the whole” to be treated as though it were.

The zeal that could so easily transform majorities into unanimous wholes must be seen in the context both of a decades-long progression toward the institutionalization of majoritarianism and the rise of egalitarianism. As the century progressed, religious organizations grew increasingly comfortable exercising their authority in the name of the majority. Majoritarian rule acquired additional sanction through the Revolutionary defense of direct representation and representative prerogative. But the triumph of civil majoritarianism only highlighted the theoretical problem that had persisted since its emergence during the Great Awakening. How might a body, premised on the loving unity of its legally-equal, individual members, deal with the internal dissent of a minority? There was undisputed agreement that (in Elisha Williams words) “in civil Societies where the Right of each Individual is subjected to the Body, or so transferred to the Society, ... the Act of the Majority is legally to be considered as the Act of the whole, and binding to each Individual,” but no similar consensus when it came to “religious Matters, where Conscience and Men’s eternal Interests are concerned.”<sup>98</sup>

Ezra Stiles prerevolutionary demographic ruminations had expressed these very tensions. Indeed, Stiles shared his reservations about majority rule with contemporary anti-establishment writers, but such concerns were clearly exceeded by

---

<sup>98</sup> Elisha Williams, *A Seasonable Plea for the Liberty of Conscience and The Right of Private Judgment* (Boston, 1744), 48-49.

his enthusiasm for the numerical superiority that non-Anglicans enjoyed in the colonies. Stiles calculated that:

exclusive of the Lutherans who seem to retain a species of episcopacy, the reformed presbyterian churches comprehend double the number of souls to those of the british episcopacy. Tho' strictly speaking, the whole protestant world, except the church of England, agree in the validity of presbyterian ordination. If therefore the matter was to be decided by numbers, it must resolve in our favor by a very ample majority—tho' truly not numbers, but the *scriptures* alone ought to decide the truth. It however must be confessed no small satisfaction to find the largest body of protestants on our side, in imitating the apostolic practice in this as well as some other things ...

His doubling back from “If therefore the matter was to be decided by numbers” to “tho' truly not numbers,” and back again to “It however must be confessed no small satisfaction to find the largest body of protestants on our side” illustrates the eagerness that Stiles' generation felt to transform the concrete fact of a majority into the theoretical satisfaction of scriptural validity. The hope persisted, as much in Stiles' discourse as in other religious writings, that majoritarianism would become irrelevant in the face of a vast demographic advantage. Indeed there would eventually be so many Congregationalists that their projected population in 1860 could be rounded off to “7 MILLIONS.” At this point, there was no use in precisely tallying the total. The sheer enormity of the figure gestured past the secular accounting of voting majorities toward the heavenly accounting of scriptural truth.<sup>99</sup>

Philadelphia's recently formed Associate Reformed Synod, which proposed a new system of church government in 1787, was less ambiguous in its endorsement of

---

<sup>99</sup> Ezra Stiles, *Discourse on the Christian Union* (Boston, 1761), 36.

majoritarianism. Acknowledging that some “who have a peculiar opinion with respect to the day that should be called the Lord’s day” might object to the enforcement of Sabbatarian laws, the Synod asserted that “the day ... commonly observed by Christians,” should be observed by all. “[T]hose who are of another opinion,” should “be compelled so to behave as to give no disturbance to the great majority who profess to believe it should be religiously observed.”<sup>100</sup> Likewise, Benjamin Thurston insisted that, as far as civil governments went, if a minority was “dissatisfied with the civil constitution, they were at liberty to elope, and put themselves under some other government.” “All governmental compacts are formed and established by the majority of the people,” Thurston wrote, “and must be considered as binding upon all the community, ... and all opposition to it by the minority or individuals is a violation of a covenant, is high treason and rebellion.”<sup>101</sup>

It was again in New England where the most determined critics of majority rights could be found. The Massachusetts system of awarding tax revenues to the minister chosen by the majority in that town drew repeated criticism from those, like the anonymous author who thought “LORD MAJORITY” at least as oppressive as

---

<sup>100</sup> The Synod also counseled that “[w]hen the most orthodox protestants are the minority in a nation, they should meekly submit to the government established by the majority; praying and patiently waiting for a more reformed state of policy.” The United States had been “established by a combination of different denominations of Christians, who are so intermixed, as that separate governments, would be impracticable.” This “combination,” the Synod claimed, “implies a compact, which secures to them their respective peculiarities.” The government might thereby suppress promote “such matters as are objects of general agreement” and suppress “vices, which in their obvious tendency, are political injuries to all these denominations.” *A Draught of an Overture, Prepared and Published By a Committee of the Associate Reformed Synod* (Philadelphia, 1787), 106-107.

<sup>101</sup> [Benjamin Thurston], *An Address to the Public, Containing Some Remarks on the Present Political State of the American Republics, &c.* (Exeter, 1787), 29-30.

“LORD DIOCESAN.”<sup>102</sup> Another author complained that the government compelled individuals to cede an inalienable right to “the majority of each town.”<sup>103</sup> Article Three of the Massachusetts Constitution was criticized for compelling the minority in each town to cede its rights of conscience to the majority.<sup>104</sup> While the Constitution was still being debated, Isaac Backus complained that the state’s ecclesiastical laws embodied “partiality.” They were “imposed taxes upon the minor part, with whom neither lawgivers nor judges ever intend to change places.”<sup>105</sup> The equal protection of the laws, Backus suggested, entailed the constant exchange of positions, or at least the possibility of such an exchange. But when a part of the population represented a permanent minority, the lawgivers could rest securely in the knowledge that they will not have to exchange places with them—secure, in other words, in their partiality.

Backus’ newspaper adversary, *Hieronymous* replied that it could:

be no grievance to require that a minister shall be learned, while our academies are open for the benefit of all persuasions. As for the right of the right of the *majority* to choose a minister for the *minority*, it is incident to a

---

<sup>102</sup> *A Letter to a Gentleman; containing a Plea for the Rights of Conscience, in Things of a Religious Nature* (Boston, 1753), 6. The author appears to have been quoting Edward Goddard (if he himself was not Goddard). Isaac Backus attributed the following lines to Goddard: “LORD majority would claim the purse,/For his incumbants [sic]: than which nothing worse, LORDLY diocesan, himself, can claim:” Backus, *A Seasonable Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (Boston, 1770), 14.

<sup>103</sup> *To the General Court of the Massachusetts, Assembled at Boston* (Boston, 1780). Israel Holly attempted to put it another way for his readers: “if Majority throughout the World, were to determine what Religion should be received and embraced, and if the Rest were bound to subject to Majority’s Opinion and Determination: then the christian Religion might entirely be voted out of the World.” Israel Holly, *A Plea in Zion’s Behalf* (Hartford, 1765), 9.

<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, *To the General Court of the Massachusetts, Assembled at Boston* (Boston, 1780).

<sup>105</sup> Isaac Backus, *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* (Feb. 22, 1779).



state of society, that the majority should govern the whole. To insist upon an unanimous vote for the choice of a minister, would be an hardship much greater than that complained of: and the greater part of our parishes would be totally destitute, when it has been already proved, that they ought to be provided with ministers.<sup>106</sup>

*Hieronymous* interpreted Backus' position as an unwillingness to abide by one of the fundamental rules of society and, instead, to wait for that unanimity which could never be attained here on earth.

Perhaps the most radical criticism of the Massachusetts establishment flowed from the pens of the Reverend Isaac Foster and his brother Dan in 1780 and 1781. Using an equation first employed by Connecticut's Thomas Darling in a 1757 dispute with Yale's Thomas Clap, Isaac Foster calculated:

The right any public body has to impose their judgment, is certainly made up the *sum total* of their individual rights. If no individual therefore has any right to impose his judgment on any man, then no public body hath: For ever so many cyphers will not amount to a *sum*. By this it is undeniably evident that the essentials of church-communion are not left to be decided by men.<sup>107</sup>

His brother invoked the same antimajoritarian equation. Isaac, whose local consociation accused him of embracing "unscriptural and dangerous" doctrines, even challenged the notion that religious bodies were entitled to determine what doctrines were "essential to Christian communion and fellowship." These decisions, he argued,

---

<sup>106</sup> "Hieronymous" *The Boston Gazette* (January 18, 1779).

<sup>107</sup> Isaac Foster, *A Defence of Religious Liberty* (Worcester, 1780), 23-24. Darling wrote: "Because the Judgment of Publick Bodies and Communities, is nothing but the private Judgments of every Individual of that Body or Community, added together, and brought into a Sum Total: So that if there was no Right of private Judgment, there could not be in nature, any such Thing as the Judgment of publick Bodies or Communities of Men." See Thomas Darling, *Some Remarks on President Clap's History and Vindication* (New Haven, 1757), 67-68

“are either left to be decided by man’s judgment, or they are decided by Christ.”<sup>108</sup>

Take away majoritarian rule, take away the essentials of faith, and you were left with the logical extreme of evangelical imaginings—and the realization of the fears expressed by church establishment apologists.

Take away these things and you were left with John Tucker. The Fosters’ arguments echoed those of this renegade Massachusetts minister, whose disaffected church members called together a council of neighboring churches to investigate his preaching.<sup>109</sup> Among other transgressions, Tucker seems to have been accused of denying the doctrines of original sin, divine election and grace. Never quite disowning the charges, Tucker argued that every society could go on “unitedly as a body, so long as they are perfectly agreed, but no longer.” There was just cause for remaining a society, on Tucker’s view, so long as there was unanimity. Creeds and confessions of faith, he argued, might properly be employed as guidelines for worship but could in no way warrant the “explicit consent” that was too often demanded on their behalf. Indeed, Tucker thought it “a palpable absurdity” to assume that neighbors could be invested with the authority to “impose confessions on each other.” There could be no such authority because no rights of conscience that could ever be justly alienated.<sup>110</sup>

Like Elisha Williams before him, Tucker could not accept authority grounded

---

<sup>108</sup> Foster, *A Defence*, 24.

<sup>109</sup> Tucker must have had some friends, he delivered the annual election sermon in 1771.

<sup>110</sup> John Tucker, *Ministers of the Gospel* (Boston, 1767), 16n-17n, 23.

on anything less than voluntary unanimity. Groups premised upon such notions would continually emerge in early America. The spirit that favored voluntary unanimity was continually reinvigorated by the generally shared belief that the nation had been founded in a “perfect union.” Such sentiments were not wholly confined to America. They prevailed where democratic egalitarianism was held in high esteem—among European philosophes, for instance, like Jean Jacques Rousseau. Mona Ozouf captures the appeal of volunteered unanimity in her description of the eighteenth-century concept of “public opinion”: “[I]n its verdicts,” she writes, “every individual could hear the voice of all, thus the voice of no one, and could, in the last analysis, believe he was hearing his own voice ...”<sup>111</sup> Unanimous agreements appealed in America’s democratic, egalitarian cultural environment because they seemed to offer a basis for unity that was independent of even the mildest coercion. Within the imagination of the late eighteenth century, social unanimity permitted both collective action and individual autonomy. Where unanimity prevailed, the act of submitting oneself to collective authority represented nothing less than an act of pure self-description. This represented a far more satisfying outcome than could be achieved through a mere majority.

### **Conclusion: Distinguishing a Man from His Opinions**

We have thus come full circle. Whereas the enunciation of dissent had once

---

<sup>111</sup> Mona Ozouf, “‘Public Opinion’ at the End of the Old Regime,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 60, Supplement (September 1988): S11.

been encouraged as a means of conforming individual consciences to rigid doctrinal standards, the disclosure now required made no substantive demands. This new form of transparency was largely bereft of theological content. Having relinquished the idea that any particular belief was false or dangerous, late eighteenth-century Americans were more worried that there would be no belief than that there would be erroneous beliefs. Piety itself, rather than the institutions and beliefs of a particular church, was now looked upon as the guarantor of a good society. And undue criticism of other people's beliefs, rather than an epidemic of heretical beliefs, now posed the most urgent challenge for this religiously diverse society.

In addition, whereas beliefs had once been inextricably tied to the persons who embraced them and the consequences that resulted from them, they were now distinguished from both. Separating beliefs from their potentially dangerous consequences had been a central project of Anglo-American liberals since the late seventeenth century. Largely because of the persistence of church establishments, this project remained a staple of eighteenth-century writing long after the principle itself had gained wide acceptance. Thomas Jefferson famously extended the arguments of seventeenth-century writers such as John Locke when he argued, 1782, that an individual's private speculations caused no damage to his neighbor.<sup>112</sup> Religious beliefs that lent themselves to unpopular political positions also required legitimation. A 1778 appeal on behalf of Quaker pacifists asserted that it was unjust "to impute to

---

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 159.

any man the *remote consequences* of his opinion.”<sup>113</sup> The less celebrated effort to distinguish beliefs from the people who held them began later than the effort to detach belief from worldly harm, but it was nonetheless significant. “[W]e are intolerant.” one minister wrote, “when, in the common offices of friendly intercourse, we refuse to *have any dealings* with any respectable and worthy men, either as individuals, or in any corporate capacity, merely because they are of a different communion from ourselves.”<sup>114</sup> Evangelical cooperation, coalition politics and fraternal socializing all required that individuals be treated with dignity no matter what their particular beliefs.

Some important forms of exclusion remained intact. Even in a place as diverse and as tolerant as Philadelphia, “Jews, Turks and heathens” remained suspect.<sup>115</sup> Everywhere, Native Americans and African-Americans represented potential objects of evangelization, rather than equally recognized members of civil society. But like the liberal rights to which they were so intimately bound, the ideals of self-description and equal recognition reproduced themselves. Religious pluralism in early America owed a great deal to the rise of reflexive egalitarianism, a development Charles Taylor has called “the politics of universal dignity.”<sup>116</sup> Equal recognition could not be

---

<sup>113</sup> [Isaac Grey], *A Serious Address to Such of the People Called Quakers* (Philadelphia, 1778).

<sup>114</sup> Boucher, “On the Toleration of Papists.” *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 257.

<sup>115</sup> *A Draught of an Overture, Prepared and Published By a Committee of the Associate Reformed Synod* (Philadelphia, 1787), 118.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 234.

denied to any group without threatening the universalist foundation upon which *all* claims to recognition were made. Not coincidentally, over the next several decades, religion remained the one sphere of American life in which people of both genders and all races came closest to participating as equals.

The astonishing variety of religious groups in this new nation was matched only by the variety of self-descriptions those same groups maintained. Writing from the post-Revolutionary seclusion of England, the Anglican Jonathan Boucher lamented that “[t]hose who, during their connexion with Great Britain, were contented to be called Dissenters or Independents, are now pretty generally become, or are becoming, either Universal Restitutionists, Arians or Socinians, or else Philosophers, i.e. Infidels.”<sup>117</sup> Even before the Revolution, few believers were willing to cede their self-description to someone else. Afterward, such an act would have presented an affront to a central component of American identity. To make a concession of this nature would be to sacrifice the claim to equal recognition that the eighteenth century gradually afforded to nearly every Christian believer, the claim on which Americans of all persuasions prided themselves.

Self-description had its limits, of course. In addition to the boundaries established by race, those groups and individuals who refused to be confined by Scripture, or the fundamentals of faith that were ostensibly derived from it, would have a hard time gaining respectability. Similarly, those who could be construed as rejecting the fundamentals of American democracy would always be treated as

---

<sup>117</sup> Jonathan Boucher, “On the Toleration of Papists,” *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, 259-260n.

outcasts. But the principle endured: no one could be deprived of the right to determine their own mode of faith, to describe their religious experiences in their own terms, and to be free of physical and emotional harm as a consequence of their beliefs and practices. Eighteenth-century culture did more than liberate religious judgments from external constraints. It also freed believers from the indignities that external judgments had once imposed.

## Epilogue

Religion, Alexis de Tocqueville observed, contained the explosive energy that American democracy generated. “[W]hile the law allows the American people to do everything,” he wrote, “there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare.”<sup>1</sup> Religion curtailed the disorder that permissive laws would have otherwise produced. Although few of them lived to see the radical populism that Tocqueville described following his travels through the nation, most eighteenth-century commentators would have agreed with his assessment. As they viewed the matter, no republican government was sustainable in the absence of a rigorous civic religion that embodied the essentials of faith.<sup>2</sup> No republican government, in other words, was sustainable in the absence of the morality that every respectable religion provided. When religious establishments were defended in the early republic, it was usually upon the grounds that they maintained the moral vigor necessary for republican government. “A little while ago it was for religion,” Isaac Backus wrote, “...now ’tis to maintain civility.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J.P. Mayer ed. (New York: Perennial Classics, 1969), 292.

<sup>2</sup> See Colin Kidd, “Civil Theology and Church Establishments in Revolutionary America,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4 (1999): 1007-1026. Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore argue that religious is conspicuously absent from the Founder’s writings, particularly the Constitution. See *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Backus, “An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty,” *Isaac Backus on Church and State*, 324. Cited in Curry, *First Freedoms*, 165.



But as everyone at the time recognized, politics and religion were subject to distinct discursive conventions. If the pious citizen of the United States might describe himself in whatever religious form he pleased, if his church merely added to the general religious life of the nation, his political principles could not be so freely fashioned, nor his political instruments unobtrusively heaped onto the stockpile of existing institutions. In a 1786 pamphlet outlining a plan for the establishment of public schools in Pennsylvania, Benjamin Rush noted that “to secure to our youth the advantages of a religious education, it is necessary to impose upon them the doctrines and discipline of a particular church.” “That fashionable liberality,” he continued:

which refuses to associate with any one sect of Christians is seldom useful to itself, or to society ... Far be it from me to recommend the doctrines or modes of worship of any one denomination of Christians. I only recommend to the persons entrusted with the education of youth, to inculcate upon them a strict conformity to that mode of worship which is most agreeable to their consciences, or the inclinations of their parents.

But then, Rush went on to say that his intentions were “to convert men into republican machines.” And thus, while “the great machine of the state” might leave individual citizens to their own beliefs, those citizens would function best who had, at one time or another, affiliated themselves with a particular church. “[S]trict conformity” was valuable in and of itself. Thus, Rush was as amenable to the variety of religious systems that made their home in the colonies as he was convinced that republican citizens should be disciplined by one of them. He was as amenable to the subjective conditions of religious experience as he was to the objectified technique of republican citizenship. Rush embraced this notion because the habit of disciplined choice

promised to translate itself into a strict conformity with republican principles. For those of his generation, there was very little tension between the heterogeneity of religious self-description and the homogeneity of republican citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

In an essay on ethnic identity in America, which consciously recalled Henry St. John Crèvecoeur's famous 1782 question, by asking "What is to be an American?," the political philosopher Michael Walzer pointed out the "nonexclusive character" of American identity. America, he wrote, "is not a jealous nation." According to Walzer, "... the virtues of toleration in principle though by no means always in practice, have supplanted the singlemindedness of republican citizenship. We have made our peace with the 'particular characteristics' of all the immigrant groups (though not, again, of all the racial groups) and have come to regard American nationality as an addition rather than a replacement for ethnic consciousness."<sup>5</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, it was religious identity that often served as an addition to American nationality.<sup>6</sup> Although early republicans may have emphasized the Protestant, Christian or simply religious principles they shared with one another.

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Rush, *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and The Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1786), 17, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Walzer, "What Does It Mean to Be an 'American'?" in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, ed., *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Sourcebook*, vol. 2, 3d ed. (1997), 447. The best and most thorough discussion of the relationship between religious identity and American identity can be found in R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). According to Moore, "Americans needed an unusual differentiation of religious persuasions because they had an unusual need for a wide variety of social identities." (208)

<sup>6</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch makes a similar point in his work on American Romanticism. According to Bercovitch, American identity represents an "and/or," rather than an "either/or" proposition. See Bercovitch, "The A-Politics of Ambiguity in *The Scarlet Letter*," *New Literary History*, vol. 19 (Spring 1988).

they would also demand equal recognition for particular churches and particular religious beliefs. Over the ensuing decades, Americans would continue to burden their religious identities, and increasingly their ethnic identities, with the cultural diversity that stood in contrast to their professed republican uniformity. When it came to national identity, religious beliefs were the particulars that distinguished people who shared the same fundamental political principles.

Perhaps as a consequence of these developments, it became more acceptable to denounce a neighbor's politics than his religion. While the right to voice particular religious views was lastingly secured, this right was curtailed by the ever increasing demands of civility, of which equal recognition was a central component. Religion was on its way to becoming an expression of self rather than a judgment of others. In this respect, the Republic was a macrocosm of the Masonic meeting. There, faith was spoken of reverently, but not criticized. By contrast, political opinions remained theoretically falsifiable. Into the nineteenth century, political opinions were still subject to the laws of libel and sedition. In Virginia, for instance, early national opponents of Federalist policies were forced to invoke the principle of federalism in defense of their right to criticize. Liberty of conscience was still an insufficient justification for political dissent.<sup>7</sup> However, political dissent would benefit from the notion that the best judge of public policy was public opinion. And thus, while it may have been the seeming implausibility of collectively determined truth which first justified autonomous religious judgments, it seems to have been the seeming

---

<sup>7</sup> See Richard R. Beeman. *The Old Dominion and the New Nation, 1788-1801* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1972), 191.

plausibility of collectively determined knowledge which eventually justified autonomous political judgments.

In other words, while late eighteenth-century political judgments may have been authorized by what historians call the “public sphere,” religious expressions were not. Recent historiography has fallen over itself to discover new and ever more marginal instances of what Jürgen Habermas first identified as the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> Within this social and ideological space between the realm of economic affairs and the realm of state activity, rational-critical discourse is said to have taken place. Within this space, the rules governing the use of state power and the regulation of the economy could be debated by individuals for whom the price of admission was their social particularity. The development of the print trade, along with rights to speech and assembly, did create something resembling Habermas’ conception of a critical public sphere in America. And, in many ways, colonial religious discourse would seem to represent a perfect candidate for the status of a “public sphere”—individuals of many different denominations publicly debated such things as theological doctrine, ecclesiology and membership standards. However, by the late eighteenth-century, religious discourse in America lacked a central component of the Habermasian critical public: criticism.

---

<sup>8</sup> Habermas’ seminal argument is developed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). On the over-extension of Habermas’ argument, see Harold Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians,” in *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 72 (March 2000), 153-182.

The emergent notion that each group and individual was entitled to its own self-description carried with it the conviction that the criticism of religious beliefs, institutions and practices were impermissible. Silence, once demanded of individuals, regarding the seditious, contagious things that might emanate from their corrupt minds, gradually became a mechanism for civility, the foundation of popular association. If the interdenominational fraternal society and the evangelical camp meeting shared one thing in common, it was the belief that particular beliefs warranted recognition independently of their validity. In thus conceding the *a priori* legitimacy of particular religious beliefs, late eighteenth-century Americans asserted the non-negotiability of these beliefs—not their resistance to reconciliation so much as their resistance to compromise. For evangelicals, of course, particular beliefs would be reconciled at the millennium. In the meantime, however, they agreed with their liberal counterparts that some things were best left unsaid. What could not be compromised could not become a matter of open debate.

In many respects, then, political opinions received different treatment than religious opinions. Nonetheless, those who wrote about political disagreement would have been hard pressed to ignore the lessons learned during a century of religious disagreement. In his first inaugural address (1801), Jefferson would make his famously generous declaration that “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle.” The President proclaimed that Americans should not “countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions” as the “religious intolerance” they had already “banished.” Jefferson’s invocation of a

common republican “principle” thus recast the potentially explosive problem of political criticism into the benign matter of differentially applying the same essential convictions. He made all Federalists into Republicans, while generously hinting that all Republicans might be Federalists. Whether Jefferson intended it or not, he had also articulated a basic condition of party politics: agreement on certain fundamental principles.

For the man who later claimed that he wanted to be remembered, above all else, for Virginia’s Act for Religious Freedom, the lessons learned in religion matters were readily transferable to politics. In this, Jefferson was like Franklin. Indeed, it was in the realm of things spiritual that Americans had learned to value fundamentals above particulars, to change affiliations without condemning the affiliations of others, to speak but not judge. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the fundamentals of American politics—the commitment to representative government and certain essential rights—would be more rigidly circumscribed, and that political opinions would always be subject to greater criticism. As everyone at the time knew, political disagreements would always need to be resolved in this world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### A Note on Primary Sources:

The vast majority of primary sources cited in this dissertation are catalogued in *Early American Imprints, The Evans Bibliography (Series I), 1639-1800*, which contains entries for nearly every work published during the eighteenth century. The pamphlets themselves have been microfilmed and stored in most major libraries. Some sources were drawn from eighteenth-century newspapers, which are also widely available on microform.

### Bound Primary Sources

Adams, Hannah. *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan, Christian, Ancient and Modern*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992.

Adams, Hannah. *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams, Written By Herself with Additional Notices by a Friend* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1832).

Backus, Isaac. *Isaac Backus on Church and State, and Calvinism, Pamphlets, 1754-1789*, ed. William G. McLoughlin. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.

Boucher, Jonathan. *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution; in thirteen Discourses, Preached in North America Between the years 1763 and 1755*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1967.

Brown, Charles Brockden. *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, intro. and ed. Jay Fliegelman. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Bushman, Richard L., ed. *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

Clap, Thomas. *The Annals or History of Yale-College*. New York, 1766.

Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John. *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. Albert E. Stone. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

- De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer. New York: Perennial Classics, 1969.
- Farrand, Max. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.
- Foote, William Henry. *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical*. Philadelphia: 1850.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree. Vol. 2 and 2. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *The Great Awakening*, ed. C.C. Goen. Vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Ed. Norman Pettit. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972.
- Hall, David D. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).
- Heimert, Alan and Perry Miller, eds. *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*. The American Heritage Series. Ed. Alfred Young. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967.
- Hume, David. *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- Katz, Stanley Nider, ed. *A Brief Narrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Klein, Milton M. ed. *The Independent Reflector*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1963.
- Madison, James. *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, ed. Robert S. Alley. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1985.



Nybakken, Elizabeth, ed. *The Centinel: Warning of a Revolution*. Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1980.

### Secondary Sources

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed. London and New York: Verso, 1991.

Bauman, Richard. *For the Reputation of Truth: Politics, Religion, and Conflict among the Pennsylvania Quakers, 1750-1800*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins, Press, 1971.

Becker, Carl. *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1932.

Beeman, Richard R. *The Old Dominion and the New Nation, 1788-1801*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1972.

Bellah, Robert. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* Vol. 96, no. 1 (1967), 1-21.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. "The A-Politics of Ambiguity in The Scarlet Letter." *New Literary History*, Vol. 19 (Spring 1988): 629-654.

Bonomi, Patricia. *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York*. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971.

-----, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

----- and Peter R. Eisenstadt. "Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., Vol. 39, no. 2 (April, 1982): 245-286.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Breen, T.H. "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776." *Journal of British Studies* 25 (October 1986).

- and Timothy Hall, "Structuring Provincial Imagination: The Rhetoric and Experience of Social Change in Eighteenth-Century New England." *American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no. 5 (1998): 1411-1439.
- Bridenbaugh, Carl. *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689-1715*. London: Oxford UP, 1962.
- Buckley, Thomas E. *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977.
- Bullock, Steven. *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Butler, Jon. *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Hoffman, Ronald and Peter J. Albert, eds. *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994.
- Cogliano, Francis D. *No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England*. Contributions in American History. Series ed. Jon L. Wakelyn, no. 164. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1995.
- Colley, Linda. *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Curry, Thomas J. *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Eldridge, Larry D. *A Distant Heritage: The Growth of Free Speech in Early America*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.
- Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- Fliegelman, Jay. *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language and the Culture of Performance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

- Frost, William J. *A Perfect Freedom: Religious Liberty in Pennsylvania*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Grasso, Christopher. *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth Century Connecticut*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Grell, Ole Peter, Jonathan I. Israel, and Nicholas Tyacke, eds. *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Grell, Ole Peter and Roy Porter, eds. *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Hall, Timothy. *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1984.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
- Philip A. Hamburger. "Equality and Diversity: The Eighteenth-Century Debate about Equal Protection and Equal Civil Rights." *The Supreme Court Review* (1992) 295-392.
- , "Liberality" *Texas Law Review*, vol. 78, no. 6 (May 2000): 1216-1285.
- Hanson, Charles. *Necessary Virtue: The Pragmatic Origins of American Liberty*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999.
- Haskell, Thomas. "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility. Part I." *American Historical Review* 90 (April 1985).
- Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.
- and Harry S. Stout, eds. *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Heimert, Alan. *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966.

- Hofstadter, Richard and Walter P. Metzger. *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*. New York, 1955.
- Hudson, Winthrop S., "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth Century Conception." *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell E. Richey. Nashville: Abingdon, 1977.
- Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. Published for The Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg VA. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- Juster, Susan. *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Kamensky, Jane. *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Ketcham, Ralph L. "Conscience, War, and Politics in Pennsylvania, 1755-1757." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser, vol. XX (July 1963): 416-439.
- Kidd, Colin, "Civil Theology and Church Establishments in Revolutionary America." *The Historical Journal*, Volume 42 Issue 4 (1999): 1007-1026.
- Kramnick, Isaac, and R. Laurence Moore. *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.
- Le Beau, Bryan F. *Jonathan Dickinson and the formative years of American Presbyterianism*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.
- Leites, Edmund, ed. *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Levy, Leonard W. *Emergence of a Free Press*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Mah, Harold. "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians." *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 72 (March 2000): 153-182.

- Marietta, Jack D. "Conscience, the Quaker Community, and the French and Indian War." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. XCV, no. 1 (January 1971): 3-17.
- Martin, John. "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe." *American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1309-1342.
- McLoughlin, William. *New England Dissent, 1630-1833*, vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- , *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*. Boston: Brown and Company, 1967.
- McClure, Kirstie. "Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration." *Political Theory*, vol. 18, No. 3 (August 1990): 361-391.
- Miller, William Lee. *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic*. Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1986.
- Moore, R. Laurence. "Bible Reading and Nonsectarian Schooling: The Failure of Religious Instruction in Nineteenth-Century Public Education." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 86, no. 4 (2000): 1581-1599.
- , *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Morgan, Edmund, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988.
- , *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962.
- Noll, Mark A, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds. *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Nybakken, Elizabeth. "New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences on Colonial Presbyterianism." *Journal of American History* 68 (1982): 813-32.

- Onuf, Peter. *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000.
- Ozouf, Mona. "'Public Opinion' at the End of the Old Regime." *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 60, Supplement (September 1988): S1-S21.
- Peterson, Merrill D. and Robert C. Vaughan, eds.. *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Pointer, Richard W. *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988.
- Kroll, Richard, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin, eds. *Philosophy, Science, and Religion 1640-1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Rossiter, Clinton. *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953.
- Shapiro, Barbara J. *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Sibley, John Langdon, *Biographical sketches of graduates of Harvard University. in Cambridge, Massachusetts*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1945.
- Smylie, James H. "Protestant Clergy, the First Amendment and Beginnings of a Constitutional Debate, 1781-1791." *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. Elwyn A. Smith. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.
- Julia Stern. *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Stout, Harry S. *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991.
- Taylor, Charles. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Tracy, Joseph. *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield*. Boston, 1842.

Trinterud, Leonard J. *The Formation of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism*. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1949.

Vinovskis, Maris A.. *Studies in American Historical Demography*. New York: Academic Press, 1979.

Walzer, Michael. "What Does It Mean to Be an 'American'?" *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Sourcebook*, eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, vol. 2, 3d ed. (1997).

Warner, Michael. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Wokeck, Marianne S. *Trade in Strangers: The Beginnings of Mass Migration to North America*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Wood, Gordon. "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism." *New York History*, vol. 61 (1980): 359-86.

Zimmer, Anne Young and Alfred H. Kelly. "Jonathan Boucher: Constitutional Conservative." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 58, no. 4 (March 1972): 897-922.