

An Approach to American Historiography of the Revolutionary Period (I)

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.....Judge Mellen Chamberlain in 1842, ..., interviewed Captain Preston, a ninety-one-year-old veteran of the Concord fight:

“Did you take up arms against intolerable oppressions?” he asked.

“Oppressions?” replied the old man. “I did not feel them.”

“What, were you not oppressed by the Stamp Act?”

“I never saw one of those stamps. I certainly never paid a penny for one of them.”

“Well, what then about the tea tax?”

“I never drank a drop of the stuff; the boys threw it all overboard.”

“Then I suppose you had been reading Harrington or Sidney and Locke about the eternal principles of liberty?”

“Never heard of ’em. We read only the Bible, the Catechism, Watt’s Psalms and Hymns, and the Almanac.”

“Well, then, what was the matter? And what did you mean in going to the fight?”

“Young man, what we meant in going for those redcoats was this: *we always had governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn’t mean we should.*”

(Morison, S.E. *The Oxford History of the American People*)

We recognise conflicting cultures which can be origins of political conflicts which, in turn, produce conflicting or cooperating political thoughts. The author’s point is that the careful examination of conflicting cultures or “ways of life” is able to supply us with standards for not only understanding political conflicts in the past but also judging imports of contemporary political conflicts.

American Historians have become self-conscious regarding sources and interpretations of the American Revolution.¹⁾ Differing interpretations of the American Revolution and its political ideas involve a variety of political teachings and serve as an index of the political commitments in power and cultural visions of American intellectuals. This is not to say that the materials used in writing history are infinite. This paper intends to show that sources available to every historian are themselves products of cultural and political conflicts. These materials are ready-made for the transformation by historians into weapons in continuing policy conflicts. The chief feature of this historiography is not its splendid variety, but its repetitive duality and its rigid reproductions within the

forms set in the late-colonial through early-independence period. In form, there have existed a “progressive” and a “Whig” history striving for superiority throughout American historiography, for these contending histories of American political thought are images and carriers of the materials studied.

Whig perspectives on political thought have always assumed the intimate connection between political institutions and political ideas. According to this school, political ideas have existence and histories because political institutions have existence and continuity through time and space. Consensus and unity regarding leading political ideas are assumed by Whigs. Progressive perspectives on American political thought, on the other hand, have assumed the intimate connection between political conflict and political ideas. This school maintains that American political ideas are unique, just as America herself is unique in the world history, because the conflicts which mark American political thought are between those ideas always immanent in the land and people and those historically changing ideas which corrupt and divide the community. To progressive history, political ideas closely

bound up with institutional and intellectual tradition are always suspect because they offer a corrupting taint of time, of the old world, of aristocracy and privilege.²⁾

The first objective of this paper is to show how the commonly-used sources of American political thought in the revolutionary period are evidence of systematic cultural conflict in American society around the period 1763-1787. Three major issues of cultural and political conflicts to be dealt with are (1) issues of the place of religious belief and the role of religious institutions in political life (2) issues of the role of common law and trained lawyers in colonial, state and federal politics (3) evaluations of constitutional doctrine and history. All of these topics were the occasion of conflicts over many decades. Each of these issues contained conflicting images and evaluations of the American past. In religion, at stake was the origin and meaning of Reformed Protestantism in church history, in Christian prophecy and in the New World destiny. In law and legal profession, at issue was the authority of English legal precedent and the relationship between the historical evolution of English common law rights and the imperatives of natural rights. In constitutionalism, conflicts were over the relevance of major English constitutional settlements to colonial authority and to the fate of liberty on the new soil.

A second objective of this paper is to indicate ways in which histories of the American Revolution tend to incorporate the major elements and styles of one side or the other of these cultural and political conflicts. One can say that progressive and Whig historiography are relatively authentic echoes of longstanding traditions of thought, and that there are the strengths and weaknesses of perception in each mode of interpretation.

1. Religious life in the Revolutionary period

...the character of Anglo-American civilization... is the result ...of two distinct elements, which in other places have been in frequent hostility, but which in America have been admirably incorporated and combined with one another. I allude to the spirit of Religion, and the spirit of Liberty.
(de Tocqueville, A., *Democracy in America*)

Religious conflicts in colonial America provided both the form and substance for political conflicts. In 17th and early 18th century America, religion provided a measure by which American colonists could

mark their primary ties with (or the distance of their separation from) England and the New World. Beginning with the Great Awakening and the rise of denominationalism in the 1740's and 1750's, overt political divisions reflected religious divisions within and between churches, political divisions which persisted up to the settlement following the War of 1812.³⁾

The Great Awakening was an explosion of anti-institutional ideas and energies sparked by the belief in a millennium of earthly justice whose first marks would be a collective rebirth of religious faith throughout the colonies. Stress on the importance of the experience of conversion and on the unmediated power of the Biblical Word threatened directly the intellectual and institutional structures of both Anglican and "Old Dissent" churches in America. Indirectly, the Great Awakening and its denominational products threatened the extant social order and patterns of deference by devaluating standards of good behavior which inevitably are defined by and serve to support the upper parts of social hierarchies.⁴⁾ Anglicans in the middle and southern colonies, Unitarians in New England and "old side" Presbyterians were at one in opposing the beliefs and institutions of the Great Awakening. In short, those clergymen who stood for an increasingly latitudinarian theology informed by the enlightened views of natural religion were also the defenders of church establishments. Almost all of them professed the values of religious toleration but opposed religious equality.

The paradox of the church history in the revolutionary period seems that the increasing liberalization of religion among the educated clergymen and their followers in the coastal towns blunted the sense of a distinct new world purpose and consequently the colonial self-definition. The seemingly progressive movement towards rational theology put these clergymen and their audience at the mercy of general English standards and 18th century English Whig ideas. The retreat from a millennialistic theology was a retreat from the 17th century Puritanism and its "errand into the wilderness." Good behavior replaced belief in a continuous "necessity of reformation" in preparation for the coming millennium in the New World. Consequently enlightened theology in mid-18th century America had the effect of making these clergymen and their audience more socially conservative towards domestic affairs and more close to political arguments shaped in old England.⁵⁾

On the other hand, the movement towards a rat-

ional or enlightened religion was effectively countered by evangelical efforts to recapture the importance of the 17th century prophetic themes and to reinstate a vision of the church in America as a unique calling in the Christian history. The Great Awakening was, in fact, an attempt to revive those features in America which most separated it from England of that day. The awakened clergymen and their followers rejected once and for all the English standards at the precise time when those standards were coming to dominate a good portion of colonial theological, intellectual and political leadership. Central to the Great Awakening was the revival of memories of the early Puritans in England and America.⁶⁾

The millennialistic fervor of evangelical protestantism created a direct threat to a rational theology and an indirect threat to the entire system of secular or social institutions of liberal churches. Charles Chauncy, a leading figure in New England theology, saw nothing but danger in the popular energies and power released by the Great Awakening. He complained that "women and girls; yea, Negroes, have taken upon them to do the business of preachers" and warned that "people must stay in their place, following their calling." The rhetoric and response of the Congregational and Unitarian clergymen in New England were almost identical to those of the Anglican clergymen in Virginia and Carolinas: the appeals to enlightened and decent behavior and dark warnings of incipient anarchy were reinforced by the reliance on fines and imprisonments, oaths and confiscations.⁷⁾

Opponents of the Great Awakening often led the colonial resistance to the establishment of an Anglican bishop in America in the 1760's, but this opposition was filled with contradictions. Any impulse to draw on the heroic memories of the English Revolution and the first settlers to America was checked by embarrassment over the zeal of those churchmen who opposed the Great Awakening and the disorder of their times. These pietists, on the other hand, who took initiatives for schism and so insistently demanded religious equality could readily draw on the early colonial history as inspiration for their movement. And from this starting point, they could accuse their liberal opponents of falling into the corrupt ways of England.⁸⁾

The political significance of these conflicts over religious establishments becomes evident when one looks at the actions of the various religious denominations in the revolutionary period.

Baptist churches were the only religious body to

urge independence from England prior to July, 1776. Members of the churches which were formed during the Great Awakening were the only consistent supporters of the "radical" Pennsylvania Constitution. In the South as well as the North, the most democratic features of early state constitutions, including equality of religious sects, were often proposed by the same men and groups which insisted on oaths asserting the truth of the biblical revelation and belief in the trinity. These pietists provided the organizational supports for dismantling the last vestiges of religious establishment.⁹⁾

Disestablishment and religious equality were most powerfully urged on religious grounds. The alliance between the few radical deists and the many pietists was temporal: the purposes of each always remained somewhat separate. These anti-institutional notions of religious order were part of a larger theory of political order, one which was quite different from radical Whig and more traditional models of deference, "balanced societies" and "mixed Governments." If one's worth as a citizen was to be independent of institutional and social location, it was an easy step to the conclusion that all of the "converted", taken together, make up the body of the nation, infusing all of its institutions with a common impulse. In this view, America cannot be defined as a system of institutions and laws, but rather, as one people with a distinct historic mission on their back. This body of men could neither discover nor undertake these tasks bound together only by the external ties of "meere Justice" or be motivated to selfless action only "by force of Argument from the goodness or necessity of the worke."¹⁰⁾ Experiential religion and the reliance on grace would create one body of men "knit together" by the "ligaments" of love.

These themes, articulated by John Winthrop aboard the *Arabella* in 1630, were restated and transformed during the Great Awakening to become powerful sources of "nationalist" opposition to England and to forms of allegedly English corruptions in colonial life. In the minds of the awakened, history became theodicy: to stand at the edge of the millennium was to endow political judgements and political actions with a significance far greater than that taught by the 18th century forms of Whig history. To view America as the contemporary theater of the prophetic history was to transform particular grievances and enemies into opposition to God's plan of redemption.¹¹⁾

The political and social theory of the spokesmen

for radical theology was both ambivalent and defensive in the decades before the American Revolution. Their published works were simultaneously addressed to the two different readers: their peers and mentors at home and in England, and their increasingly non-deferential inferiors at home. Having lost a providential view of time, they were at once proud of and embarrassed by their puritan past. Most could see only a provincial view of the American future...perhaps the best of imperial England, but no more.¹²⁾

A famous sermon by Jonathan Mayhew in 1750 neatly captures the ambivalence of enlightened religion as a vehicle of American revolutionary political thought. So often used as exemplary of later colonial resistance to England, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers" can equally be read as a plea for acceptance of the colonial gentry by English Whigs.¹³⁾

The occasion of Mayhew's sermon was the Church of England practice of calling for fasting and humiliation on the anniversary of the 1649 execution of Charles I. Mayhew first distinguishes between resistance and rebellion and then defines the former as an integral part of the British Constitution. Resistance to Charles I, he reassures his readers, was "not by a private junto.....not by a small seditious party;not by a few desperadoes.....but by the LORDS and COMMONS of England." The men who "raised an army.....and maintained the war" were none other than "the whole representative body of the people;guardians of the public welfare." Mayhew's perspective continues to be secular, institutional and Whig when he then turns to rebellion and regicide. The trial court which condemned the king "was little better than a mere mockery of justice." Cromwell and his allies "might possibly have been very wicked and designing men" and Mayhew will not be one to justify either Cromwell's "male-administration" nor the reigning hypocrisy of those times." The civil war in its resistance phase was the reestablishment of constitutional balance which ultimately made possible the "1688 Revolution, upon the justice and legality on which depends (in part) his present MAJESTY'S right to the throne."¹⁴⁾

And Mayhew seeks to show, in the remainder of the sermon, that it is the more aristocratic sectors of the Church of England who now carry the germs of disloyalty to the settlement of 1688. Mayhew assured his audience that he and they are the heirs of those who in fact protected and then reestablished the British Constitution. So firmly had

Mayhew, the most "radical" clergyman in Boston, located "his" ancestors within the category of English Whig history, that even the connections between its earlier radical versions and millennialist themes seemed to have been quite forgotten or, rather, seemed too dangerous in an awakened America to recount. The concluding paragraph of the sermon is a celebration of the reigning colonial order "under the government of a PRINCE who is satisfied with ruling according to law." The final lesson for his colonial audience befits a leading opponent of colonial religious revival:

It becomes us, therefore, to be contented, and dutiful subjects.....There are men who strike at liberty under the term licentiousness. There are others who aim at popularity under the disguise of patriotism....There is at present among us, perhaps, more danger of the latter, than of the former. For which reason I would exhort you to pay all due Regard to the government over us.....and to lead a quiet and peaceable life.¹⁵⁾

Since the religious spokesmen for resistance to England after 1763 were those who most closely attuned to enlightened perspectives in theology, philosophy and politics, one might assume that these men would be riding high on the waves of institutional popularity, heading thriving churches filled with increasing numbers of eager auditors of their political and religious teachings. This was not the case. Religion was thriving, to be sure, but at the expense of churches whose leading lights were men such as Jonathan Mayhew, Charles Chauncy or Samuel West. Indeed, as early as 1748, Mayhew already had constructed a sophisticated defense of the declining popularity of his views.¹⁶⁾ In contrast, between 1756 and 1796, the number of the Baptist churches in New England increased from 36 to 325 while the churches of the Standing Order lost approximately 40,000 members. Far from being at the forefront in shaping a religious and political language to resistance and revolution, these leaders were increasingly forced after 1765 to replace their language with that of an earlier age in order to maintain a popular hearing. Those who refused to do so and continued to speak exclusively in the language of rational religion, moral philosophy and Whig constitutional history often discovered that they had little to say after 1774. Because of the political conflicts engendered by the Great Awakening, large sectors of the American public had been taught to equate Whig resistance perspectives with rational religion and both with

privilege, arrogance and persecution. During the war period, it is no wonder that evangelical clergymen urged both battle against the British and civil disobedience to religious disabilities enforced by some of the revolutionary leadership.

Students of the American Revolution have continued to be puzzled by the relationship between this domestic religious conflict and resistance to and war with England. One way of handling this relationship is a periodization. This solution avoids direct conflict of political ideas on the one hand by placing liberal Anglicans, Unitarians and Old Lights on the pre-1776 division, preparing the colonists for eventual revolution, and on the other hand by placing all New Sides, New Lights and Baptists on the post-1776 division, urging Americans to give their all for a new heaven and a new earth. Frank Moore's extensive *Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution* is a good example, which erects a division which disguises the fact that the spokesmen on either side were implacable enemies decades before independence and remained so not only during the war period but also through the political and religious struggles occasioned by the early state constitutions. *All five sermons* adduced as examples of patriotism (1766-1775) were by clergymen who led the opposition to the Great Awakening. Three of those same five became Loyalists, while a fourth, Mayhew, died in 1766. All five of Moore's 1776-1782 spokesmen were the evangelical products of the Great Awakening and the veterans of struggles for religious equality prior to and after the Revolution.

The periodizational handling above suggests that the two distinctly different voices were simultaneously abroad in America even if one vocabulary tended to dominate the "resistance" and that another language tended to dominate the "revolution." The surface plausibility is greater than Whig reliance on a theory of "contagion" from one group to another, from one generation to another, or progressive assertions of a sudden discovery of democratic and revolutionary ideas which had no articulate past on the American soil. Rational theology and tolerant establishment were institutionalist and culturally anglophile. Here is a good example of these perspectives, the Unitarian Jonathan Mayhew's celebration of the self-correcting beauties of the British Constitution upon the repeal of the Stamp Act.¹⁷ Before and after independence, this side of American Protestantism was the bulwark of religious establishment. Losing members relative to the national population growth, its adherents and

clergymen found it difficult to cope with national political life, especially after 1800. By the time of the War of 1812, New England Congregationalists were rewriting their church history to stress their origins from and ties to the Church of England.¹⁸

The political voice of evangelical and millennialist religion was paradoxically clearer and more problematic. Recent studies have shown the strong correlations between radically democratizing political beliefs and evangelical religion in the 1750's. They suggest the continuities in theory and action with the 19th century social reforms culminating in the Civil War.¹⁹ More specific to the revolutionary period, many of the most radical doctrines of the English Revolution were revived via the Great Awakening. This revival looked like a rebirth of the Puritan Revolution in its Leveller phase. To American evangelicals.....quite without their counterpart in 18th century Englandthe notion of "corruption" was not merely an indictment of constitutional imbalance and fiscal deception which were correctable by any institutional reform. Rather, corruption was a condition which flowed inevitably from unconverted men and could be found wherever men's moral and political vision was bounded by the institutional parameters of "works." To pietists in America, religious revival and prophetic theology were intensely political: millennialist doctrine stipulated the sudden convergence of religious beliefs, institutional destruction and social harmony in America.²⁰ (to be continued)

Notes

1. Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution", *23 William and Mary Quarterly* (3rd Series); Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (Vintage, 1970); Kurtz and Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Norton, 1973).
2. Robert A. Scotheim, *American Intellectual Histories and Historians* (Princeton, 1966), chaps. II, IV, V.
3. R. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee* (Harvard, 1967); Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Harvard, 1966); E.F. Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America 1774-1789* (Chipman, Boston, 1924), chaps. 2-5 and 13.
4. Perry Miller, "From Covenant to Revival," *Nature's Nation* (Harvard, 1967) and *Errand into the Wilderness* (Harvard, 1956); Heimert, *op. cit.*, chaps. IV, V and IX; A. Heimert and P. Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1967),

- selections Nos. 2, 4, 27, 45, 47, and 52; E.L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, 1968), chaps. I, II, III.
5. Heimert and Miller, *op. cit.*, selections Nos. 25, 28, 31, 34, 49.
 6. Heimert, *op. cit.*, chaps. II, III, VII.
 7. Heimert and Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 293-304; Humphrey, *op. cit.*, chap. XIII.
 8. Heimert, *op. cit.*, chap. VII; Miller, "An American Language," *Nature's Nation*, *op. cit.*
 9. Humphrey, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-123, 363-367, on Baptists.
 10. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 77, 84. James Madison clearly recognised the two different sets of arguments for religious liberty: deistic and natural rights arguments and his evangelical and sacred history arguments, in his "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," (1785) in J. Madison, *Mind of the Founder*, M. Meyer, ed., (Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), pp. 9-12.
 11. J. Edwards, "A History of the Work of Redemption" and J. Bellamy, "The Millennium", both in Heimert and Miller, *op. cit.*; Tuveson, *op. cit.*, chap. III.
 12. Charles Chauncy, "Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against," and J. Mayhew, "The Right and Duty of Private Judgement," in Heimert and Miller, *op. cit.*
 13. H.T. Colbourne, *The Lamp of Experience, Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (North Carolina, 1965), pp. 61-62; Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, Vol. I (Harvard, 1965), pp. 204-211.
 14. J. Mayhew, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission...", in Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets*, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-242.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 247; see the condemnation of earlier millennial movements by Charles Chauncy, in Heimert and Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-304.
 16. J. Mayhew, "The Right and Duty of Private Judgement," in Heimert and Miller, *op. cit.*
 17. J. Mayhew, "A Snare Broken," in F. Moore, ed., *Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1860)
 18. W. Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (Yale, 1973), p. 120.
 19. See Note 3 above; Tuveson, *op. cit.*; R.A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860* (Quadrangle, 1964).
 20. See Note 19 above.