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**The Altar of Liberty:
Enlightened Dissent and the Dudleian Lectures, 1755-1765**

By

Leslee K. Gilbert

In 1750, Paul Dudley of Massachusetts endowed an annual lecture series at Harvard College for the purpose of upholding the dissenting Protestant Church against the “damnable heresies of the Romish religion.” To any student sitting in the audience, the substance of the lectures was neither shocking nor unusual. These disputations simply encapsulated an ideology that pervaded the colonies during the Revolutionary period. The Dudleian lecturers promoted a specific strain of Protestantism that wedded Low-Church ideals with Enlightenment rationality. The resulting amalgamation upheld an anti-authoritarianism that was inescapably tied to the mind. The attentive students understood that attacks on “Romish” doctrines and practices had a religious and a political meaning. High-Church ecclesiology, whether Anglican or Catholic, contained a principle of subordination that had long been associated in these dissenters’ minds with “arbitrary” and “tyrannical” political rule. By upholding the freedom of conscience and the right of private judgment, lecturers defended a religious philosophy that denied any role of a human mediator between God and humans. On the eve of the American Revolution, this antiauthoritarianism provided a coherent ideology that gave meaning to British imperial actions, such as the Stamp Act crisis, that vexed the colonists.¹

¹ Paul Dudley, “To all Christian People unto Whom these Presents Shall Come...,” 2 Jan. 1750, in Harvard College Papers, microfilm, Harvard University Archives, 1:88.

Scholars of the British Enlightenment have spent the last few years detailing the parameters of this intellectual movement. Dubbed by one scholar as “Enlightened Dissent,” this worldview united Low-Church Protestantism, Newtonian science, and Whig political thought. Moderate churchmen emerged in the seventeenth century to create the basis of what became a “middle way” between “skepticism” or Deism and religious “enthusiasm.” By relying on the mathematical certainties in nature discovered during the Scientific Revolution, several British Anglicans and dissenters tried to bolster a rationalized Christianity that emphasized natural law. These men created an outlook that stressed the rationality and benevolence of God and man. They also supported religious and political toleration because they believed the individual conscience was the most important link between God and man and should be protected at all costs. Therefore, efforts to expand the freedom of the conscience by breaking down doctrinal barriers or expanding participation in political affairs became a standard feature in their writings. Restoration proclamations such as the Act of Uniformity in 1662 drove the dissenters out of political and ecclesiastical power and the Revolution Settlement of 1689 did not fully settle the debate. For the next century, Enlightened Dissenters continued to challenge what they viewed as “arbitrary” political and ecclesiastical authority grounded in tradition and convention rather than reason. These men promoted the belief that the mind created a democratic existence where God directly communicated a Truth to all rational humans, which they were expected to grasp and freely act upon.²

While Enlightened Dissent rested on a core set of beliefs, the eighteenth-century movement incorporated a broad and often disparate group of people. It could, and did, include Unitarians like Joseph Priestley and Arians like Richard Price, orthodox dissenters like Robert

² Knud Haakonssen, “Introduction,” in Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1996); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (New York, 1976). The best collection of essays on Enlightened Dissent is Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion*. This essay is also influenced by John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York, 1989); Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983); Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1985); and James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism* (Cambridge, 1990).

Robinson and Robert Hall, and latitudinarian Anglicans like Bishop Hoadley and Samuel Clarke, who challenged strict doctrinal matters and the divine right theories of church and state while maintaining their positions in the Church of England. Enlightened Dissenters in America spanned an equally broad range. Unitarians like Thomas Jefferson and Ethan Allen constituted the most radical of these dissenters. By denying the divinity of Christ and the revelatory aspects of many of the scriptures, this small, but important, group of men represented the extremes of rational religion. While their doctrines would come under the scrutiny of most Americans, they shared with all Enlightened Dissenters a belief in a benevolent, rational God, an orderly universe, and a general toleration toward religious matters. Moreover, they were vociferous critics of any attempts to limit the freedom of conscience and private judgment. Like their English counterparts, American latitudinarian Anglicans, such as Alexander Garden, also shaped Enlightened Dissent. While the Anglican Church had been the established church of Virginia since 1624, the lack of a colonial bishop produced a peculiar circumstance for the church in America. In Virginia and Maryland, where the vestry had a great deal of control over clerical selections and church operations, a diversity of practices ensued. As a result, many ministers and lay leaders rejected principles of uniformity and inculcated a sense of toleration in the parishes. Thus, Enlightened Dissenting doctrines played well in these areas of the colonies as they too rejected high church and state values. Finally, the majority of Enlightened Dissenters came from orthodox dissenting churches in the New England and Middle colonies. Many Presbyterians and Congregationalists became “liberal Christians” as they supported doctrines that emphasized God’s benevolence and humans’ ability to mitigate the sins that inevitably shaped their lives. As a whole, Enlightened Dissent in the colonies was marked by a proclivity to use the discoveries of the Scientific Revolution to bolster and clarify religious belief, a general toleration toward specific doctrinal matters across religious sects, and an anti-authoritarianism that challenged high church ecclesiology and Tory political ideology.³

³ For Thomas Jefferson’s religion, see Charles B. Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, 1984); and Paul K. Conkin, “Priestley and Jefferson: Unitarianism as a Religion for a New Revolutionary Age,” in *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1994). Kerry Walters has also explored the religious beliefs of

The Dudleian lecturers who spoke in the years leading up to the colonial conflicts, were ministers from New England who emerged from orthodox dissent and fit into the category of “rational” or “liberal” Christians. Most of these men hailed from vital port cities like Boston and Salem and represented prominent families. The divines were often Arminian in their doctrinal focus, but some could be classified as “Old Light” Calvinists. Importantly, they shared a common intellectual background that united them despite often vehement doctrinal splits. Most of the early speakers received their degrees from Harvard under the presidency of John Leverett. Scholars describe the Leverett curriculum as “catholick,” meaning that the tutors adopted a latitudinarian stance on many doctrinal issues. Students imbibed an increasingly rationalistic approach to studying natural and scriptural truths. Those doctrines that were not explicitly described in the scriptures or did not conform to the eternal laws of reason were not viewed as essential to religious duty. The Leverett curriculum emphasized the works of several English thinkers such as Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and William Derham. However, the writings of latitudinarians Tillotson, Stillingfleet, and Wilkins received the most accolades. Students took away from their college training a belief in a benevolent God who created and maintained an orderly universe. They also gained an appreciation for a rational style, and they believed that Grace would be attained only after a slow, methodical nurturing of the spirit. The God that animated their minds was not the angry God of Cotton or Increase Mather, but a kind, loving, and guiding governor.⁴ While the ministers’ splits over the doctrines of

Allen and Jefferson, although he places them under the rubric “deists.” See Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent* (Lawrence, 1992). For colonial Anglicanism, see Nancy K. Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism: The Colonial Church of England Clergy During the American Revolution* (New York, 1999). Most of the literature on “liberal” Christianity in America is horribly out of date. Some good treatments include Robert J. Wilson III, *The Benevolent Deity: Ebenezer Gay and the Rise of Rational Religion in New England, 1696-1787* (Philadelphia, 1984); Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians* (Cambridge, 1970); and John Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety: Catholick Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York, 1991).

⁴ John Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety: Catholick Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York, 1991); and Norman Fiering, “The

Calvin produced some of the most vitriolic writings of the period and created a divisive church factionalism in and around Boston, they managed to find a great deal in common. These Enlightened Dissenters did more to separate themselves as a group from their evangelical or “New Light” counterparts in New England than any scholar has done since, and their arguments against the Stamp Act likewise point to a greater intellectual cohesion than their church politics suggest. In both cases, their continued insistence on reason and the conscience as the endangered key to spiritual and temporal liberty bespeaks their common enlightened dissenting position.

For the better part of the last quarter century, scholars of the American colonial and Revolutionary periods have emphasized an anti-authoritarian movement that brewed amongst the common people against the social and economic elite. The colonial Englishmen not only engaged in a revolution against British authority, but they also created a social revolution against their “betters” and ushered in a new, democratic nation. Seeking to address Carl Becker’s enduring query of whether the American Revolution was primarily a question of “home rule, or who should rule at home,” recent historians have answered that it was the latter. According to these scholars, the social changes that occurred on a local level constituted the main thrust of the American Revolution. Evangelicalism often fueled the engine of this social revolt, as they rejected older church hierarchies, took on a more “emotional” style of preaching and worshipping that connected with the masses, and criticized a decided shift toward more rationality in Christianity. As a result, fewer Americans were willing to defer to their intellectual and social betters and they demanded a greater voice in public and private affairs.⁵

First American Enlightenment: Tillotson, Leverett, and Philosophical Anglicanism,” *New England Quarterly* 54 (1981): 307-44.

⁵ The most representative work of this trend is Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (New York, 1990). For evangelicalism, see for example, Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, (1982); Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York, 1986); Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, 1966); and Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, 2000).

The Dudleian lecturers were precisely the people who bore the brunt of these evangelical attacks. While Enlightened Dissenters' rather smug disdain for emotional worship and the "undiscerning multitude" often fanned the flames of evangelical protest, their antiauthoritarianism was no less heated. It was, however, different. By upholding the free, rationally guided conscience as the ultimate arbiter of Truth, they challenged the High-Church authority of Catholic and Anglican priests who "enslaved the mind" to arbitrary mystical practices, and they attacked the authority of evangelical ministers who "clouded" the mind with the smoky facade of a bombastic sideshow. The dissenting position of these lecturers was not just a matter of style and delivery. The substance of their beliefs derived from a democratic principle of human rationality that they believed would unite Americans in a common cause of liberty.

The connections between ecclesiastical and political tyranny that animated the revolutionary writings of Enlightened Dissenters in America has not gone unnoticed by historians. Indeed, Patricia Bonomi asserts that "attacks on episcopacy and on blind obedience to government came most often from rational-minded liberals of the educated elite." Nevertheless, Bonomi is much more interested in how church organizations nourished dissent (broadly conceived) than on an exploration into these religious liberals specifically. Nathan Hatch has likewise attempted to explain the political unity of the Congregational clergy in New England by arguing that "Country" ideology fit the outlook of a broad range of religious dissenters as they molded their Puritan tradition into the secular debate over liberty and power. While it is clear that low-church dissenters of various persuasions could, of course, share a common disdain for high church and state principles, Hatch's position necessarily obscures differences between evangelical and rationalist arguments that can provide us with a more complete understanding of the dissenting tradition and the revolutionary ideology. The Enlightened Dissenters, for instance, placed such an emphasis on the mind as the arbiter of truth, that they feared the tyranny of "enthusiasm" as much as "popery." The Enlightened Dissenting model, with its focus on the conscience, places these rationalists' arguments in a trans-Atlantic context and gives meaning to charges against the evangelicals beyond a class critique. By not understanding the role that the mind played in their political and religious ideology, we are left with the argument that these men only used the rhetoric of rationality to shore up their deferential

social position in New England. The Dudleian lecture series encapsulated Enlightened Dissent and thus provides a vehicle to understand this ideology in New England. Moreover, while the lecture series did not specifically deal with political issues, prominent lecturers and members of the audience used the anti-authoritarianism developed in these speeches to challenge British political rule.

Paul Dudley came from a family of prominent New Englanders. His father, Joseph, and his grandfather, Thomas, were both governors of the Massachusetts Province. This notable ancestry did not intimidate the youngster. After graduating from Harvard in 1690 and attending law school in England, Queen Anne made him the attorney general of the province in 1702. Dudley's most prominent post, however, came in 1745, when he was appointed Chief Justice of the Superior Court of Judicature. Dudley's legal mind was impressive, but the New Englander was also a naturalist who became a fellow of the Royal Society of London.⁶

Dudley considered himself a loyal British subject. Beyond his attachment to the Crown through his judicial appointment, his writings suggest that he saw Great Britain as the bastion of liberty in the world. The judge depicted the glory of the empire in political and religious terms. It was a place where civil liberties flourished because the Protestant religion had successfully been established against the "tyranny" of the Church of Rome and its political adherents. Dudley realized that this glorious Protestant legacy was always under threat. The wars between Spain, France, and England in the 1740s constantly reminded the New Englander of the struggles between Catholics and Protestants, and almost certainly contributed to his insistence that part of the lecture series expose the evils of the "Romish" religion.

In January of 1750, Paul Dudley bequeathed to the college at Cambridge "one hundred and thirty three pounds, six shillings and eight pence" for the support of an anniversary sermon or lecture. The Judge stipulated that the lecturers would cover four topics in rotation so that students at the college would hear each one before graduation. The first lecture was to focus on the principles of natural religion, while the second would illustrate the truths of scriptural revelation. The third

⁶ Pauline Maier, "The Pope at Harvard: The Dudleian Lectures, Anti-Catholicism, and the Politics of Protestantism," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 97 (1986).

lecture was “for the detecting and convicting and exposing the idolatry of the Romish church, their tyranny, usurpations, damnable heresies, fatal errors, abominable superstitions, and other crying wickedness in their high places.” Where the third lecture tore down the “Romish church,” the fourth built up the “validity of the ordination of ministers” as practiced in New England. Dudley made a special note that this lecture needed to uphold the ordination that was practiced in Scotland and Geneva, and amongst the English dissenters in opposition to the episcopal ordination of the Church of England. In other words, it needed to prove the validity of the presbyterian ordination of ministers.⁷ The lecture series continues until today, but by the late nineteenth century lecturers had tempered the virulent anti-Catholicism. Furthermore, the contemporary lecture topics are far more “academic” in nature.⁸

For the most part, Dudley left it up to the trustees and president of the college to appoint the lecturers. He did insist, however, that the president of Harvard deliver the first of the four disputations. Likewise, the last lecturer needed to be a respected minister of at least forty years of age. The executors of this bequest did not have trouble meeting the demands. Over the next several years, students at the college attended the mandatory lectures delivered by such noted New England divines as John Barnard, Charles Chauncy, Ebenezer Gay, Jonathan Mayhew, and Edward Wigglesworth. Most of these men were pastors at churches in surrounding towns like Marblehead, Hingham, Danvers, and Boston. Considering the nature of divinity in New England in the eighteenth century, it is not surprising that the lecturers had received their degrees from Harvard College and considered it an honor to give the annual lecture.

In the spring of every year, the Dudleian lecturers entered the main hall at Harvard, rose to the lectern, and delivered a speech on “true religion.” It is fitting that the first anniversary lecture covered the topic of natural religion. For Enlightened Dissenters, natural religion was the center that grounded all other doctrines and beliefs. The key point of

⁷ Dudley, “To all Christian people unto whom these presents shall come...,” 1:88.

⁸ Pauline Maier, “The Pope at Harvard: The Dudleian Lectures, Anti-Catholicism, and the Politics of Protestantism,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 97 (1986), 16-40.

natural religion was the proof of God's existence and being. These speakers proclaimed that the proof of God's existence lay in the order and purpose of the natural world. Using the mathematical regularities proposed by Isaac Newton, men like Ebenezer Gay of the First Church in Hingham and Peter Clark of the First Church in Danvers insisted that there must be a supreme first cause that created and continued to maintain the universe. When these men studied the universe, they usually found that it had a beneficial nature. The natural world provided food for thousands, cures for debilitating diseases, and as Gay put it, a great degree of "help and comfort." This goodness that they witnessed throughout creation led them to believe that God was the ultimate benevolent being. The lecturers insisted that they were not deluding themselves to think that everything in the world was good; rather, they argued that the misery of some was due more to their own human follies and "irregular passions" than to God's faulty benevolence.⁹

While the eighteenth century witnessed the spread of the "clockmaker" God, Enlightened Dissenters in America preferred the analogy of the divine governor. Like a benevolent civic governor, God set down reasonable laws, that if followed, would ensure peace and happiness for all involved. When the lecturers spoke of natural religion, they referred to the universal laws that could be discerned in the natural world. "The characters of the Deity" Ebenezer Gay suggested, "are plainly legible in the whole creation around us." Natural laws extended to every living creature, including humans. Like other aspects of the orderly world, laws governed men and guided them toward right actions. Lecturers often described this phenomena as an "inward spring of motion and action" that drew them toward pleasure and happiness and away

⁹ Ebenezer Gay, "Natural Religion, as Distinguished from Revealed: A Sermon," (Boston, 1759), 5-6; Peter Clark, "Man's Dignity and Duty as a Reasonable Creature," (Boston, 1763), 7-8; Gay, "Natural Religion," 7. For, other examples of this view of natural religion in colonial America, see James Allin, "The Wheels of the World Governed by a Wise Providence," (Boston, 1727); John Adams, "The Earliest Diary of John Adams," in *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1966), 63; and John Lathrop, "Sermons, 1758-1816," Box 3 Folder P, No. 1106, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston [Hereafter referred to as MHS].

from pain. Like the planets of the solar system, men too were drawn into a type of gravitation toward goodness in this way.¹⁰

The lecturers reminded them that they were rational creatures, and as such, were under a moral law that they must discern and dutifully carry out. By employing the natural powers of the mind, men could understand this universal “religion of nature.” The more men understood the workings of the natural world, the more they understood the moral precepts as well. These lecturers always insisted that the benevolent law of nature applied to all things in the universe. It was up to humans to spend their lives in the careful study of both. “God has put this principle of intellectual light into the nature of man to discover his duty to Him,” intoned Peter Clark, “and to direct him in his whole moral behavior.” Enlightened Dissenters often called this “intellectual light” the conscience, and due to its central role in discerning the Divine, they guarded it with vigor.¹¹

The Dudleian lecturers insisted that natural religion pointed to a moral law that men were obliged to follow. If humans neglected their reasoning capabilities and became driven by their “passions,” then they rebelled against the only true sovereign-God. Because men could distinguish between virtue and vice in the natural world, God required them to follow this moral law. Such a position assumed a degree of free will that would allow people to embrace or reject this universal moral system. For these ministers, failure to conform the will to natural law did not mean the inevitable wrath of an angry God. Wayward men would undoubtedly receive a correction, but these lecturers chose to describe God as a being who wanted to “guide” rather than “punish.” This emphasis on God’s benevolent nature inevitably separated them

¹⁰ Gay, “Natural Religion,” 6, 13. For similar sentiments not expressed as Dudleian Lectures, see, Abraham Williams, “An Election Sermon,” (Boston, 1762); John Perkins, “Thoughts on Agency; Wherein the Article of...Is Particularly Examined; and the Origin, Nature, and Bounds of Moral Freedom, Considered in a New Way,” (New Haven, 1765); Robert Strettell Jones, “An Abridgment of Metaphysicks,” (1761), B/J732#3, in Robert Strettell Jones Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

¹¹ Clark, “Man’s Dignity and Duty,” 12. For other contemporary writings on this topic, see Lathrop, “Sermons, 1758-1816”; John Tucker, “Thanksgiving Sermon,” (1768), Reel #49A, Edward Everett Papers, MHS; Samuel Davies, “A Sermon on Man’s Primitive State, and the First Covenant,” (Philadelphia, 1748).

from the evangelicals of the Awakening. While men like Jonathan Edwards were startling audiences with images of “dangling spiders” and the fiery wrath of God, Enlightened Dissenters were reaching their audiences with a calm reasonableness that was supposed to emulate God’s infinite reason. As the revivalists emphasized the passions to capture the attention of their audience and return them to a fiery vision of an angry God, Enlightened Dissenters retreated further into rationalism. Stressing that evangelicals’ passions had become “ungoverned” and “wild,” men like Charles Chauncy implored ministers and parishioners to return to a “reasonable state” to find truth and divine benevolence. Lecturers had little patience for the bombastic sermons of the evangelical revivalists; they reminded their students that “right reason” rather than emotionality was the best tool for discovering the Divine. The revivalists’ attempts to stir the passions only created a dense, pea-soup fog of notions that clouded the mind.¹²

Although reason could discern the moral law, lecturers never abandoned the usefulness of scriptural revelation. As the second lecture indicated, some of the early speakers remained committed to the idea that human reason suffered from “the Fall.” The result of Adam’s sin was not the production of a new law, but rather the emergence of a new revelation of the same old law. The scriptures, as the apostles wrote them, represented an additional method of attaining Truth. Thus, it became important for lecturers to reconcile scripture with rational tenets. As one sermon indicated, these men believed that students needed to approach the scriptures like a “science,” intent on drawing out the Truths that existed therein.¹³

Ministers illustrated the inherent rationality of scriptural revelation while detailing the continued power of God and the proof of the divine nature of Christ. In his 1768 disputation, Thomas Barnard implored his audience to actively examine the evidences of God’s power in the scriptures. The gospels needed men’s intellectual attention, but they also

¹² Samuel Langdon, “The Co-incidence of Natural with Revealed Religion,” (Boston, 1776), 17. These ideas were widely held among Enlightened Dissenters. See also, Armistead Smith, 1757-1817, “Sermons Delivered at the Protestant Episcopal Church, Matthews County, VA,” Tompkins Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond; Williams, “An Election Sermon.”

¹³ Langdon, “The Co-incidence of Natural with Revealed Religion,” 25.

pointed to a divine rationality that was beyond men's capabilities. Through Grace, men could arrive at their completeness as God's subjects. Importantly, these men spoke of Grace as something that would be attained by a slow and rational process. While humans were not the ultimate arbiters of Grace, they could "prepare" themselves to receive Grace by committing their minds to a long process of study. For this reason, Enlightened Dissenters further distinguished themselves from their evangelical counterparts. The mid-century revivalists insisted that Grace was ultimately an irrational phenomenon that would convert the soul in a sudden, instantaneous moment. These conversion experiences often involved a passionate catharsis when the spirit took hold of the mind and body. The lecturers preferred to remain sedate and wait for divine inspiration to gradually illuminate their minds. Indeed, they distrusted the validity of such an instantaneous conversion. God, as the ultimate rational being, would surely try to influence the human mind instead.¹⁴

For the liberal Christian intent on demonstrating the inherent reasonableness of the scriptures, explaining Christ's miracles proved especially challenging. The lecturers certainly did not want to suggest that Christ's actions were the result of some magical, mysterious force. His works were not, however, in accord with natural laws. Thus speakers like John Barnard of the First Church in Marblehead explained that Christ performed these actions to simply demonstrate his messiahship. The fact that he performed them obviously pointed to his divinity, and the fact that his miracles "were wrought for the benefit of mankind," proved that he was the son of the benevolent God. Christ's actions were not meant to trick, deceive, or frighten the viewers, but rather to confirm his holy mission. Beyond detailing Christ's miraculous actions, lecturers also illustrated that Jesus was the promised messiah by mining for specific references in the Old Testament. Indeed, John Barnard used the bulk of his sermon to prove, in an almost legalistic manner, that Jesus' life followed the prophecies as laid out in the Hebrew Bible. Barnard concluded by stating that any man who engaged his conscience in scriptural study would come to the unquestionable conclusion that Jesus Christ was the messiah. Parishioners need not

¹⁴ Thomas Barnard, "The Power of God, the Proof of Christianity," (Salem, 1768). See also, Jonathan Mayhew, "Two Sermons on the Nature, Extent, and Perfection of God's Goodness," (Boston, 1762).

subject their “understanding and conscience to the lordly authority of any man” to follow Jesus’ teachings and be redeemed in Christ.¹⁵

The Dudleian lecturers were liberal Christians, both Calvinist and Arminian, and they openly separated themselves in the second lecture from more radical forms of Enlightened Dissent, namely Unitarianism and Deism. In the first twenty years of the lecture series, these latter two movements were certainly not large or popular enough to threaten the stronghold of liberal Christianity in New England. Nevertheless, the Harvard students endured an extended sermon on the proofs of Christianity by a minister who believed these forms of infidelity were on the rise. When an eighteenth-century intellectual spoke of Deism, he specifically referred to the belief in a mechanistic, self-governing universe. Ministers often pointed to the mechanical philosophy of the seventeenth century, particularly Cartesianism, as the root of the Deist heresy. By denying God’s continued involvement in the workings of the world and His position as governor of free souls, the Deists struck at the core of liberal Christianity. Unitarianism was not as distasteful as Deism to these New Englanders, and indeed this new philosophy dominated the faculty and curriculum of Harvard College by the end of the century. But for the early lecturers, Unitarianism had nonetheless challenged the essential doctrines of Christianity. The Unitarians of Britain and America, such as Joseph Priestley and Ethan Allen, did not deny the governorship of God or the inherent morality present in the scriptures. They did, however, attack the divine nature of Christ, and in doing so, strayed beyond the pale of rational Christianity.¹⁶

Paul Dudley could not have been more damning of the Catholic Church in his will, and as the early lectures demonstrate, the ministers carried through the spirit of the document. The third annual lecture was designed to detail the “errors” of the Romish Church. The primary “errors” the lecturers focused on were the infallibility of the Pope and the superstitious idolatry of the sacraments. Coming out of the tradition of

¹⁵ John Barnard, “The Proof of Jesus Christ; His being the Ancient Promised Messiah,” (Boston, 1756), 46, 50.

¹⁶ See especially, Thomas Barnard, “The Power of God, the Proof of Christianity,” (Boston, 1768). For other contemporary critiques of Deism, see George Gillespie, “A Treatise Against the Deists or Freethinkers; Proving the Necessity of Revealed Religion,” (Philadelphia, 1735).

Low-Church Protestant dissent, these ministers believed that humans had a direct connection with God and were under His dominion only. Lecturers decried the existence and power of the Pope. “One person,” Edward Wigglesworth pointed out, “could not possibly be the exclusive receiver of God’s dictates.” As natural religion indicated, divine Truth could be ascertained by all rational beings. Thus, there could be no human superiors who had more access to God. To assume so would necessarily place men under the supervision of another man, not God. The lecturers’ attack on the position of the Pope ultimately came down to a question of human conscience. As the discourses on natural religion illustrated, the mind was the guide to Truth in the world and needed to be applied to the study of natural as well as scriptural law. These speakers believed that through actions such as the absolution of sins, priests had “usurped powers over the conscience and fortunes of men.” By placing Popes and other high church officials in the position of interpreting the scriptures, the Catholic Church had “enslaved” human conscience to their own agenda.¹⁷

Beyond challenging the authority of the Roman Church, early Dudleian lecturers also attacked what they saw as the superstitious idolatry of the institution. Jonathan Mayhew, the outspoken pastor of the West Church in Boston, focused on the Eucharist as an example of idolatry. In his mind, the changing of bread into body and wine into blood bordered on paganism. While he was not against the symbolism of the Last Supper, he suggested that within the Catholic religion men, like the ancients, worshipped creatures and objects as if they were gods who could intervene in men’s lives. Such idol worshipping, Mayhew reminded the audience, took away from the glorification of God, the only true governor over men’s lives. Lecturers like Mayhew saw a connection between idol worshipping and superstitious mysticism. The Catholic Church had gone beyond the Gospels to infuse the Bible with doctrines that supported their peculiar political and ecclesiastical position.

¹⁷ Edward Wigglesworth, “Some Thoughts on the Spirit of Infallibility Claimed by the Church of Rome,” (Boston, 1757). For other such critiques, see, John Lathrop, “Sermons, 1758-1816,” Box 4, “Sermon Preached March 5, 1775,” MHS; Ebenezer Gay, “Ministers Are Men, of Like Passions with Others,” (1765), Hingham First Church Collections, MHS; Timothy Hilliard, “A Sermon Preached October 24, 1787, at the Ordination of the Rev. Henry Ware,” Hingham First Church Collections, MHS.

“Magical” liturgical practices, Mayhew believed, were only meant to confuse the audience and give them the false impression that priests had some sort of divine power. By drawing their minds away from the morality of Christ, these practitioners “enslaved” men’s conscience to their own human authority. Scriptural and natural study was the only sure way to dissolve this “sandy pillar of Babylon!”¹⁸

While the third annual lecture dismantled the church Dudley hated the most, the fourth lecture erected the foundation of the best churches—those that upheld the presbyterian ordination of ministers. When these speakers looked into the scriptures, they simply could not see a justifiable ground for the ecclesiastical structure involving a hierarchy of bishops and priests. Charles Chauncy focused on the failure of some men to understand how the words “presbyter” and “bishop” were used in the gospels. In his reading, the New Testament authors employed the words interchangeably as synonymous terms. Jesus never meant there to be a hierarchy of religious offices. Chauncy took this argument a step further when he suggested that even if Christ gave offices to the apostles, these positions were “temporary and not successive and communicable.” Therefore, attempts by High-Church authorities to set up a structure of apostolic succession were considered invalid and against the will of Christ.¹⁹

These arguments against apostolic succession struck at the heart of church and state authority. High-Church ecclesiology had long relied on a concept of the Church as a divine society where participating in communion mystically united all worshippers with the body of Christ. Only by participating in the one Church that Christ had ordained could a Christian form this mystical union with other members. By denying that Christ devised a system of apostolic succession and infused it with divine authority that continued with the mystical “body” of the Church, these ministers also denied the divine authority of the Church. For these

¹⁸ Jonathan Mayhew, “Popish Idolatry: A Discourse,” (Boston, 1765).

¹⁹ Charles Chauncy, “The Validity of Presbyterian Ordination Asserted and Maintained,” (Boston, 1762), 48. See also, Thomas Barnard, “Tyranny and Slavery in Matters of Religion, Cautioned Against; and True Humility Recommended to Ministers and People,” (Boston, 1743); Amos Adams, “Religious Liberty an Invaluable Blessing,” (Boston, 1768); Hugh Alison, “Spiritual Liberty: A Sermon,” (Charleston, 1769).

dissenters, the Church became a private organization of like-minded worshippers under the direction of a much more personal Christ and God. Christ was still the mediator for His Kingdom of Christians. But for the Dudleian lecturers, that mediatory role never extended to other humans. While the Catholic Church bore the brunt of the criticism, the speakers were careful to point out that the Anglican Church was not immune to this lament. By maintaining the practice of episcopacy, the post-Reformation Church of England drew its legitimacy from Medieval custom, not Biblical authority. As the Anglican Book of Common Prayer indicated, the High-Church structure was still united with the old custom of Pauline ecclesiology wherein Christ mediated through a series of divinely ordained officers who led the “body” of the Church. The New Englanders particularly challenged the Laudians, who insisted on maintaining this High-Church structure that quashed dissent. As Low-Church dissenters, these ministers consistently avowed that religious authority ultimately resided in the people. No one had more authority than others in Christ’s Kingdom. All men were ultimately fallible and subject to God’s rule equally.²⁰

The lecturers necessarily associated ecclesiastical tyranny with civil tyranny. In the early modern period, most Europeans and Americans connected High-Church principles with Divine Right monarchy. Both contained a principle of subordination that was imbedded in their doctrines. The Catholics and Anglicans viewed the Church as a divinely instituted “Body” that had a hierarchy of functions. In the seventeenth century, this “body” metaphor implied a type of patriarchy that encircled all aspects of society from father-headed households to the King as “father” of the state. As Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha* illustrated, this patriarchal relationship extended throughout society as all aspects of the mystical “Body” were knit together in one divine community. The American colonists were not that removed from the reality of this philosophy. The Stuart rule, and the Restoration politics that animated it, was never far from their minds. As loyal readers of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s *The Independent Whig* and *Cato’s Letters*, they were familiar with civil and political tyranny, particularly in relation to high-profile events like the Sacheverell trial that pitted High-Church

²⁰ Chauncy, “The Validity of Presbyterian Ordination Asserted and Maintained,” 48.

ecclesiology and the Tory Party against Low-Church dissent and the Whigs.²¹

The lecturers at Harvard reminded their listeners of the constant threat that loomed large over the liberties of the colonists. By the early 1760s, New England was abuzz with fears of an arrival of an Anglican Bishop. The lack of a resident bishop created problems for many colonial Anglicans because they had no easy mechanism with which to ordain local ministers and confirm new church members. While seemingly harmless in its intent, the plan to send a Bishop to the colonies produced some of the most vitriolic rhetoric of the Revolutionary period. When the rector of the Cambridge Anglican church, East Apthorp, printed comments that attacked the Puritan basis of Congregationalism, Jonathan Mayhew responded with an attack of his own. The ensuing Mayhew-Apthorp controversy filled the newspapers and led to even further recriminations against the Anglican church and its missionary arm, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Dudleian lecturers like Mayhew and Charles Chauncy saw more afoot than an undermining of the Congregational establishment; they necessarily connected the arrival of a Bishop with the deterioration of civil liberties. Americans needed to stop episcopacy before it went any further, Mayhew asserted, because “people are not usually deprived of their liberties all at once, but gradually; by one encroachment after another, as it is found they are disposed to bear them.” Mayhew’s frequent laments over an impending Bishop echoed his arguments against Catholicism. In his 1765 Dudleian lecture, he reminded the audience that:

Our controversy with her is not merely a religious one. It is not, on our part, only a defence of the worship of one God by one Mediator, in opposition to that of idle legends and traditions; and of sober reason in opposition to the grossest fanaticism: But a defence of our laws, liberties, and civil rights as men, in opposition to the proud claims and encroachments of ecclesiastical persons, who under the pretext of religion and saving

²¹ A.M.C. Waterman, “The Nexus Between Theology and Political Doctrine in Church and Dissent,” in Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion*, 193-218; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York, 1986), 192-94.

men's souls, would engross all power and property to themselves, and reduce us to the most abject slavery.

The Catholic and Anglican civil and ecclesiastical structure was not only built on the “unreasonable” claims of superstition and mysticism, but it also necessarily usurped the divine right individuals had over their conscience. By the right of private judgment, people not only had the authority to establish their own churches through contractual agreements amongst members, but they also had the authority to establish their own legislatures to protect their mental and physical property by the same mechanism.²²

While arguments against a colonial Bishop animated the dissenting ideology of the lecturers, so too did the Stamp Act crisis. Employing virtually the same language and ideas as Mayhew, a fellow Dudleian lecturer, Samuel Cooper, defended the colonial position against the “enslaving” tendencies of Great Britain. “If the Mother Country has a right,” Cooper began, “in any one instance to impose an arbitrary law, she has the right to be despotic in every instance; and with the same propriety that she inequitably forces the Colonies to bear the minutest part of her burdens, she may oblige them to groan under the weight of the whole.” He maintained that such unlimited sovereign authority, not granted by the reasonable dictates of the British Constitution, could only lead to pernicious effects that quashed the natural rights of the colonists. The “arbitrary” and “despotic” nature of governments was often the subject of Cooper’s writings. His Dudleian lecture on the Catholic Church reminded the audience that tyrannical rulers, whether civil or ecclesiastical, ultimately sought to “trample on” and “enslave” the rights of conscience because by doing so they undermined the basis of “true religion” and “civil liberty” and secured their own despotic power. Cooper concluded his lecture by repeating his central point that the mind acts against the “enslaving” tendencies of leaders who use as their *modus operandi* pageantry and tricks that stir emotions and “mislead the understanding.” “May a liberal inquiry, a free and temperate discussion,

²² Jonathan Mayhew, quoted in Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 202; Mayhew, “Popish Idolatry,” 48-49. For background on the Bishopric Controversy, see Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faith, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689-1775* (New York, 1962).

dissipate error of every kind, and by advancing truth, secure the true order and felicity both of church and state !”²³

Colonial leaders, such as John Adams, also responded to the Parliamentary action by drawing on the themes of the Dudleian lectures. In his treatise against the Stamp Act, Adams even evoked the memory of Paul Dudley and his lecture series by stating “methinks there has not appeared in New England a stronger veneration for their [Puritan settlers] memory, a more penetrating insight into the grounds and principles and spirit of their policy, nor a more earnest desire of perpetuating the blessings of it to posterity, than that fine institution of the late Chief Justice Dudley.” Adams saw in the Dudleian lectures reasonable arguments for an attack on “popery” and a support of the powers vested in the people to choose church officials. He extended this argument to the government by stating that “popular power must be placed as a guard ...to the powers of the monarch and the priest, in every government, or else it would soon become the man of sin...” Adams concluded that the Stamp Act particularly violated the liberties of colonists because it was a tax on printed materials—the font of knowledge. In an argument mirroring those of the lecturers, he describes a tyranny over the minds of the colonists devised by “popish” administrators intent on keeping people in a state of “slavish obedience.” As the law of nature made clear, reason was a gift from God intended for humans to use to guide and govern their actions and decisions. Like the priests of the Catholic church, British administrators intentionally wanted to hide truth from their subjects and to cloud their minds with arguments reaching back to the mysterious traditions of old. Thus, the Enlightened Dissenting concepts embodied in the Dudleian lecturers’ speeches shaped the anti-authoritarian ideology of leading defenders of the colonists during the political crises of the 1760’s.²⁴

As Paul Dudley was well aware, the four topics promoted an integrated philosophy. They upheld the doctrines of Low-Church

²³ Samuel Cooper, “The Crisis. Or, A Full Defence of the Colonies,” (London, 1766), 8, and Cooper, “A Discourse on the Man of Sin,” (Boston, 1774), 15, 58-59.

²⁴ John Adams, “Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law,” (1765) in C. Bradley Thompson, ed., *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams* (Indianapolis, 2000), 26, 28, 34.

Protestantism by wedding them to enlightenment rationality. The lecturers attempted first to unite the principles of scientific certainty made popular in the seventeenth century to the study of God. These ministers tried to make God very attainable through natural law. The continued study of the physical world not only led to a clearer conception of the deity, but also acted as a guide for humans to discern “correct” actions. The lecturers extended this methodological pattern to the realm of Biblical scripture. As these Enlightened Dissenters were Trinitarians, they felt the need to demonstrate and justify the rationality of the scriptures and the validity of Christ’s messiahship. By approaching the scriptures with the same rationality used with nature, lecturers argued for a continuum of Truth that was only rightfully attainable through systematic reflection. The ministers naturally challenged the institution that regarded “tradition” over reason in determining scriptural Truth. Not only had the Catholic Church claimed infallible authority through human agents, but it had also retained “mystical” practices that attacked the notion of using reason as the gauge of Truth. This High Church ecclesiology was the source of further attack in the last lecture. Ministers upheld the Low-Church practice of presbyterian ordination by asserting that agents of Christ were equal in the world. Lecturers defended a religious philosophy that denied any role of a human mediator between God and men’s minds, thereby undermining the church and state’s principle of subordination.

Throughout the lectures, ministers stressed the rights of conscience and free judgment. These men assumed that an unfettered mind would necessarily lead to real Truth. They were generally tolerant about specific doctrinal issues, instead suggesting that an open exchange of ideas produced the greatest fruit. As a result, they challenged “arbitrary” authority, whether this came in the form of High-Church dictates or demagogic “sideshows.” Both forms struck at the central tenet of Enlightened Dissent. Parishioners needed to employ their individual minds to study nature and scriptures to determine the discernible nuggets of Truth. Mystical practices and emotion-raising sermons only clouded the reason and drew humans away from Divine precepts.

Most dissenters in the colonies could, of course, share much of the attack on High Church and state principles. In the realm of civil anti-authoritarianism there is a natural accord with Low-Church dissenters of various stripes. However, as the early Duddleian lecturers demonstrate, their anti-authoritarianism was fundamentally wedded to

Enlightenment principles. As Harvard graduates, these young men believed that they had a special role to play in their communities as promoters of this rational attack on “mental slavery.” Clearly, evangelicals had other ideas, as they continued to criticize the status and theology of these elite men. Nevertheless, in an era of political revolution, these Dudleian lecturers produced a lasting legacy for the nation.