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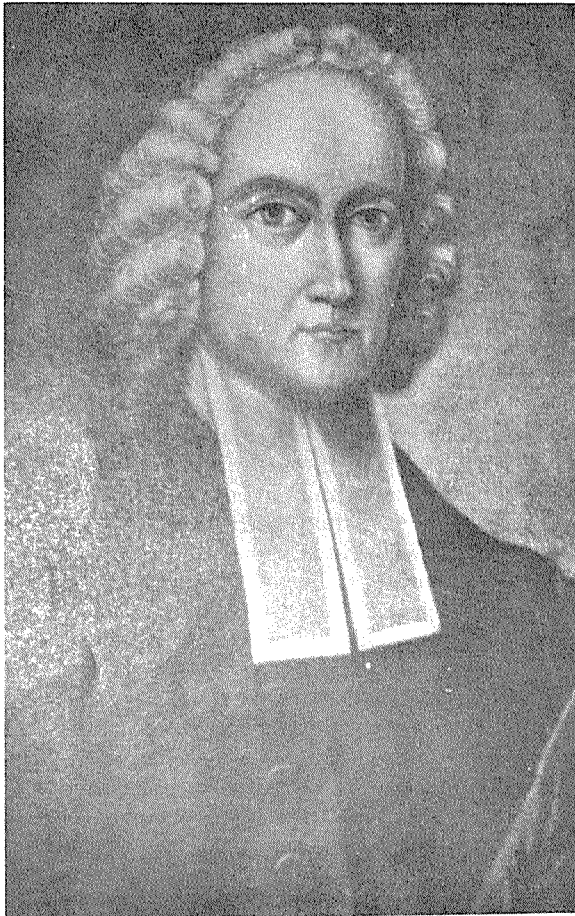
The Rise of the New Divinity in Western New England, 1740-1800

Joseph Conforti

In the decades after the First Great Awakening of the 1730's and 1740's, a conservative, evangelical school of theology came to dominate the Congregational churches in the farming villages and hamlets of western New England. The backcountry of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and Litchfield County, Connecticut, was the seedbed of the New Divinity — an influential, hyper-Calvinist religious movement begun by the clerical followers of Northampton's Jonathan Edwards. Edwards' two leading disciples held lengthy pastorates in western New England. Samuel Hopkins served as the minister of Housatonic (renamed Great Barrington in 1761), Massachusetts, from 1743 to 1769, and Joseph Bellamy served in Bethlehem, Connecticut, from 1736 to 1790. Edwards himself, after his dismissal from Northampton in 1750, became the minister at the Indian mission in Stockbridge. Edwards' successor at Stockbridge was Stephen West, who, like Hopkins and Bellamy, was a productive hyper-Calvinist New Divinity theologian. Ebenezer Fitch was another important New Divinity minister in Berkshire County. Fitch served as the first president of Williams College, which was founded in 1793 and which displayed strong ties to the New Divinity movement.¹

In addition to Edwards, Hopkins, Bellamy, West, and Fitch, a host of other less prominent New Divinity ministers served churches in Berkshire and Litchfield counties in the second half of the eighteenth century.² In 1792, for example, there were twenty New Divinity ministers in Litchfield County pastorates, more than in any other county in Connecticut.³ The New Divinity became so identified with western New England that it was often referred to as the Litchfield or Berkshire divinity. Enlarging upon the observations of Richard D. Birdsall in *Berkshire County, a Cultural History*,⁴ this essay attempts to explain how and why the New Divinity rose to a position of dominance over the Congregational churches of western New England in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The missionary commitment of Jonathan Edwards' New Divinity followers was a major reason for the strength of their theological movement in the backwoods of western New England.⁵ Berkshire and Litchfield counties were the last areas of Massachusetts and Connecticut to be settled. A road connecting Sheffield, the first town incorporated in Berkshire County, with Westfield on the eastern edge of the Berkshire hills, was not cut through the wilderness until 1735. The northwest corner of nearby Litchfield County was not even officially opened to settlement until three years later. During the 1740's and 1750's, the New England frontier became a scene of conflict in the imperial struggle between the English and the French-Indian alliance, hindering the settlement of Litchfield and Berkshire counties. With the winding down of the French and Indian War in the early 1760's, the social development of



Jonathan Edwards.

western New England accelerated. Settlers began to converge on Litchfield County from the Connecticut River towns to the east and from the coastal towns to the south. From Litchfield County these mobile Yankees pushed across the colony boundary line into Berkshire County, where they joined migrants from the Connecticut River towns in Massachusetts.⁶ The establishment of churches in growing backwoods settlements created clerical opportunities.

Simultaneous with the growth of settlements in western New England, New Divinity clerical aspirants began to graduate from Yale — the alma mater of Edwards and most of his closest theological followers — and search for open pastorates. The mere existence of opportunities in the developing Berkshire and Litchfield county backcountry did not automatically mean that ministers would be secured. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the expanding population of New England and the numbers of new churches outstripped the available supply of clergymen. Most young clerics were able to choose from among several calls to settle in the ministry. In the prevailing ecclesiastical economy, the small, remote, low-paying backcountry churches of Berkshire and Litchfield counties were in poor bargaining positions for the limited supply of clergymen.⁷ But for many young, pious Edwardsian clerical aspirants, who had experienced conversion in the great Awakening or in subsequent local revivals, western New England was challenging as a missionary field requiring Christ-like self-denial.

Edwards encouraged such a missionary commitment among his disciples. Edwards' view of the role of the ministry, which he imparted to New Divinity ministers both in his writings and in conversations with them while they studied theology under him in Northampton, stressed the importance of disinterested, self-denying zeal in the service of Christ. "As to the things of this world," Edwards informed his followers, "you are not to expect outward ease, pleasure and plenty." A minister "should prepare to endure hardness, as one that is going forth as a soldier to war."⁸

In his *Life of David Brainerd*, Edwards illustrated for the New Divinity men the self-sacrificing piety that a dedication to the ministry demanded. Brainerd was a zealous disciple of Edwards who served as an Indian missionary in western Massachusetts and later in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, as tuberculosis gradually drained life from his body. The young missionary died in Edwards' Northampton parsonage in 1747, and two years later Edwards published a memorial to him. Brainerd's religion, Edwards pointed out, "did not consist only in experiences without practice." Furthermore, the missionary's spirituality did not lead to "merely a practice negatively good, free from gross acts or irreligion and immorality"; rather, Edwards stressed, it promoted "a practice positively holy and Christian, . . . making the services of God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, the great business of life. . . ." Edwards urged upon his followers Brainerd's "example of laboring, praying, and denying himself and enduring [hardships] with unfainting resolution and patience. . . ."⁹

AN ACCOUNT OF THE
L I F E

OF THE REVEREND

DAVID BRAINERD,

MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL; MISIONARY TO THE INDIANS FROM THE
HONOURABLE SOCIETY, IN SCOTLAND, FOR THE PROPAGATION
OF CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE; AND PASTOR OF A CHURCH
OF CHRISTIAN INDIANS IN NEW-JERSEY.

Who died at NORTHAMPTON, in New-England,
October 9th, 1747, in the 30th year of his age.

CHIEFLY TAKEN FROM HIS OWN DIARY, AND OTHER PRIVATE
WRITINGS, WRITTEN FOR HIS OWN USE.

By JONATHAN EDWARDS, A. M.
LATE PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE IN NEW-JERSEY.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED

EXTRACTS from Mr. BRAINERD'S JOURNAL,
COMPRISING THE MOST MATERIAL THINGS IN THAT PUBLICATION.

Such a missionary commitment encouraged New Divinity ministers to settle in the backwoods of western New England. Samuel Hopkins, for example, clearly saw his ministry in Housatonic as a missionary endeavor. Hopkins was not only a leading disciple of Edwards, he was also the Northampton divine's closest friend. Hopkins graduated from Yale in 1741, studied for the ministry under Edwards, and, after rejecting other offers, was ordained in the Berkshire County frontier village of Housatonic in 1743. At that time, Housatonic was an outlying parish of the town of Sheffield. The rough-hewn settlement contained about thirty English and Dutch families, numbering about two hundred people.¹⁰ In Hopkins' eyes, Housatonic badly needed the services of a Congregational minister. "Took a Walk to-day in the Woods and as I returned went into the tavern," he recorded in his diary after preaching for several weeks. "It appeared to be a Solemn Place . . . There seems to be no religion here." A few months later his first impressions had been confirmed. "They are a very wicked people," he observed, "but I can't tell them of it."¹¹

In spite of the irreligion and parsimony of many Housatonic settlers, and in the face of constant disruption which warfare with the French and Indians caused in the 1740's and 1750's, Hopkins preached in Housatonic for more than twenty-five years.¹² Before he settled in Berkshire County, Hopkins could have accepted more promising calls to the ministry, and in light of the indifference of many of his parishioners and of the insecure state of the frontier in the 1740's and 1750's, he certainly could have justified leaving Berkshire County for another clerical position. He remained in Housatonic, however, because like other New Divinity followers of Edwards, he saw himself as a selfless missionary to western New England.

Hopkins' diary clearly discloses his missionary commitment. Upon entering the ministry, he dedicated his life to the service of Christ in language that Edwards and Brainerd would have found inspiring. He renounced the world and vowed to live a life of self-denial. "It is done," he confided to his diary, "I am no more my own, but give myself away to God, to be his forever."¹³ Just prior to his ordination in December 1743, when nearly six months of preaching in Housatonic convinced him that major obstacles lay in the path of his ministry, Hopkins expressed the commitment of a missionary in his diary: "my courage is increased about settling here in the work of the Ministry being willing to go where God calls me, knowing that this Life is not the place for happiness."¹⁴

For Hopkins and other New Divinity men, western New England offered two areas for missionary work. First, the New Divinity men feared that the frontier might be lost to the forces of infidelity and immorality. As Hopkins and other leaders of western Massachusetts stated in a petition to the King in 1762 to establish a college in the area, the expanding population and the growth of settlements in the backwoods aroused the concern that the inhabitants of western New England were "in danger of growing up barbarous and uncivilized, unless furnished with men of learning to serve 'em in a civil and religious character."¹⁵ Besides bringing religion to white settlers on the fron-

tier, New Divinity men were provided with an opportunity to convert Indians. When Hopkins accepted the call to Housatonic, for example, he had intentions of working with the nearby settlements of Indians.¹⁶ From the beginning of his ministry in Berkshire County, he devoted considerable time and energy to the Housatonic Indians at Stockbridge and to the Indians of the Six Nations in New York. In 1761, Gideon Hawley, another clerical follower of Edwards who did Indian mission work in Stockbridge and in New York, wrote to Indian Commissioner Andrew Oliver of Boston and reported that "Mr. Hopkins appears to be engaged in the important affair of propagating the Gospel among the Six Nations and to have them at Heart in every letter he writes."¹⁷ Other New Divinity disciples of Edwards followed the examples of Hopkins, Hawley, and Brainerd and were actively involved in efforts to convert Indians. In later years, through his famous and influential doctrine of disinterested benevolence, Hopkins expressed in theological terms the missionary idealism that was so vital among New Divinity ministers and that sustained his ministry in the western New England backwoods for more than twenty-five years.¹⁸

In addition to young and recently licensed missionaries, another group of New Divinity ministers settled in Berkshire and Litchfield Counties. Older, established New Divinity clerics who were dismissed from their pastorates in doctrinal disputes, and who were therefore unacceptable to many Congregational societies, were drawn to the small, poor churches of western New England. The experience of Jonathan Edwards illustrates how the Berkshire and Litchfield County backcountry became a haven for conservative ministers whose hyper-Calvinist theology made them objectionable to churchgoers in more populous and cultured areas.¹⁹ After twenty-five years of service, Edwards was dismissed from his Northampton church in 1750. As Hopkins noted in his biography of Edwards, the professional career of the Northampton divine appeared gloomy after his dismissal, "considering how far he was advanced in years; the general disposition of people who want a minister to prefer a young man who has never been settled, to one who has been dismissed from his people; and what misrepresentations were made of his principles through the country. . . ." ²⁰ Approaching fifty years of age and burdened with the support of a family, Edwards seriously began to consider the uninviting prospect that his future in the ministry might be limited to filling vacant pulpits on a temporary basis. Yet Edwards, the rigorous Calvinist intellectual, "was not inclined or able," Hopkins reported, "to take any other course or go into any other business to get a living."²¹ Hopkins saw the Stockbridge mission as a clerical refuge for Edwards. John Sergeant, the Stockbridge missionary, had died in 1749, and Hopkins recommended Edwards to the Indian Commissioners as a replacement.

Under circumstances similar to Edwards', a number of New Divinity ministers who carried the stigma of dismissal were drawn to the unattractive pulpits in western New England, joining newly licensed missionaries in the task of establishing Zions in the wilderness. David Perry of Harwinton, Connecticut,

for instance, was dismissed from his congregation in 1783, and a year later he settled in Berkshire County. For the next thirty years he preached in the small town of Richmond. The ecclesiastical career of Ephraim Judson of Taunton, Massachusetts, was similar. His church dismissed him in 1791 and he retreated into Berkshire County. Judson settled in Sheffield where he preached until his death in 1813.²² Jonathan Edwards, Jr., was another dismissed New Divinity minister who held a pastorate in western New England. After a dispute with the members of his New Haven Church, Edwards was dismissed in 1795. He then accepted a call to Colebrook, Connecticut, in Litchfield County near the Massachusetts border.²³

For some dismissed New Divinity ministers the backwoods churches of western New England turned into clerical way-stations. These ministers, such as the two Edwardses who were called to college presidencies from their backcountry retreats, managed to overcome the stigma of dismissal and attain significant clerical positions. Most dismissed New Divinity ministers, however, finished their careers in the backwoods. In either case, when many New Englanders closed their meetinghouses to Edwardsians, residents of Berkshire and Litchfield counties, often faced with the choice of a New Divinity minister or none at all, opened their pulpits.

But more than practical necessity molded western New England's support of the New Divinity movement. Many members of the small, isolated, agricultural congregations of the area welcomed the conservative theology espoused by Edwards' followers. The New Divinity was a Connecticut movement that originated with ministers who had been raised on that colony's historically conservative Calvinism and who had been educated at Yale, a school which institutionalized the orthodox theological perspective of "the land of steady habits."²⁴ Berkshire County developed as a cultural province of Connecticut with similar conservative theological inclinations. Especially after the French and Indian War, large numbers of Connecticut migrants settled in western Massachusetts, and as a result Berkshire County became linked socially and intellectually to Connecticut. The residents of the Berkshire hills preferred ministers from back home who were trained at New Haven, rather than Massachusetts ministers who were educated at Cambridge. Of the first thirty-eight Congregational ministers ordained in Berkshire County, twenty-six were graduates of Yale.²⁵

Thus, the preference of church members, the practical considerations that made the backcountry a haven for dismissed ministers like the two Edwardses, and the missionary commitment of individuals such as Hopkins converged to give the New Divinity a foothold in western New England. Because they were the clerical pioneers of the region, the New Divinity men were able to use their influence to reinforce and to advance the strength of their theological school in western New England. Joseph Bellamy of Bethlehem, Connecticut, for example, was known as the "Pope of Litchfield County" by reason of his seniority and his reputation as a preacher and theologian. Bellamy used the

provisions of Connecticut's Saybrook Platform to make the Litchfield County Association of Ministers the most theologically conservative clerical body in the colony.²⁶ The Saybrook Platform established in 1708 provided for a semi-presbyterian or associational ecclesiastical structure. County associations comprised of all ordained ministers controlled local church affairs, such as licensing, ordaining, and dismissing ministers. The county ministerial associations were organized into a general association governing the ecclesiastical life of the entire colony. When Connecticut residents wanted to settle a minister, they sought the advice of local clergy. As pulpits opened in Litchfield County in the second half of the eighteenth century, Bellamy and other Edwardsian ministers recommended young men who were members of the New Divinity movement.

Connecticut migrants appear to have carried elements of the Saybrook Platform to western Massachusetts. In Berkshire County the ministers were not organized into an association until 1763, but prior to this time Hopkins, Bellamy and Edwards functioned as an informal association, with considerable sway over churches.²⁷ Once the small county association was established, Hopkins and even Bellamy continued to exert influence over Berkshire churches and to approve only ministers that they believed were theologically sound. When the First Church of Sheffield was attempting to settle a minister in 1767, for instance, Hopkins wrote to Bellamy informing him that word began to spread "that Sheffield might not get a minister unless he was in a straight line from Great Barrington to Bethlehem. This being spread, some begin to say, 'we shall never get a minister so long as Messrs. Bellamy and Hopkins are our advisers.'"²⁸

Bellamy's influence extended well beyond Litchfield County in another way. He was the leading teacher of candidates for the ministry in eighteenth century New England. He studied for the ministry under Edwards at Northampton and used this experience as a model for his own educational efforts. Bellamy opened his home in Bethlehem to clerical aspirants. In his backyard, he constructed a small building which served as a classroom and study, while the third floor of his parsonage provided dormitory space.²⁹ He instilled the New Divinity in his students, and recommended them to churches in western New England. Bellamy's school was advantageously located in the rapidly developing backcountry, and it furnished numerous ministers for the churches of Litchfield and Berkshire counties.³⁰ Bellamy's school may have functioned as a clerical placement center for the backwoods — a place where destitute churches could make contact with a supply of eager candidates for the ministry. Thus through his role as a teacher and through his activities in the ministerial associations of Litchfield and Berkshire counties, Bellamy made contributions to the rise of the New Divinity in western New England which probably exceeded the contributions of any other individual.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the New Divinity followed western New England settlers up the Connecticut River Valley into

Vermont. Ezra Stiles, President of Yale, observed in 1792, "Vermont abounds with the New Divinity."³¹ While the backwoods from Litchfield County to Vermont remained the stronghold of the movement, by the late eighteenth century the New Divinity was no longer confined to western New England. The first phase of the Second Great Awakening — a series of religious revivals which began in the mid-1780's and which continued well into the nineteenth century — fostered a renewed interest in hyper-Calvinist doctrines in the New England backcountry. The New Divinity profited from this conservative religious mood. Clerical recruits flocked to the movement, and they became numerous and influential not only in western New England but in the rural parishes of central and eastern Massachusetts and in New Hampshire and Maine.³²

Thus from its modest backwood origins, the New Divinity movement appears to have matured by the early nineteenth century to a point approaching theological dominance of New England Congregationalism. Consequently, the New Divinity could not simply be dismissed by critics as the Berkshire or Litchfield divinity, that is, as a provincial and unsophisticated religious movement. Instead it has come to be recognized by historians as *the* New England theology — the first indigenously American school of Calvinism whose luminaries were backcountry parsons in Berkshire and Litchfield counties.³³

NOTES

1. West served as Vice-President of the College under Fitch. On the New Divinity influence at Williams see, for example, West to Samuel Hopkins, Sept. 19, 1797, in Edwards A. Park, *Memoir of Nathanael Emmons with Sketches of his Friends and Pupils* (Boston, 1861), p. 32.
2. In Berkshire County some of these New Divinity pastors were: Jacob Catlin of New Marlborough; Ephraim Judson of Sheffield; David Perry of Richmond; Job Swift of Richmond; and Seth Swift of Williamstown.
3. A county by county breakdown of Connecticut ministers in 1792 may be found in Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D.*, III (New York, 1901), 463-464.
4. (New Haven, 1959).
5. Birdsall first noted this and several other aspects of the Edwardsian involvement in Berkshire County; see *ibid.*, ch. 2.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-21; Joseph E. A. Smith, ed., *History of Berkshire County, Massachusetts*, 2 vols. (New York, 1885) II, ch.1; Lois Kimball Mathews, *The Expansion of New England* (Boston, 1909), pp. 78-81; Dorothy Deming, *Settlement of Litchfield County* (New Haven, 1933).
7. Some of the ecclesiastical problems that resulted from the growth of parishes are discussed in Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 62-72.
8. Edwards, *The True Excellency of a Gospel Minister, Works*, 4 vols. (New York, 1843), III, 590; see also *Christ the Example of Ministers, ibid.*, pp. 593-603.

9. Edwards, *Works*, I, 661, 668; see also Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 312-314.
10. On Hopkins see Edwards A. Park, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Samuel Hopkins D.D.* (Boston, 1854); and on Housatonic see Charles J. Taylor, *History of Great Barrington, Massachusetts* (Great Barrington, 1882), pp. 77-143.
11. Hopkins, *Journal*, Aug. 1, Dec. 11, 1743, Williams College MS.; see also Stephen West, ed., *Sketches of the Life of Samuel Hopkins, Written by Himself*. . . (Hartford, 1805), p. 47, and Howard J. Conn., *The First Congregational Church of Great Barrington, 1743-1943, A History* (Great Barrington, 1943), pp. 2-13.
12. On the problems Hopkins confronted in Housatonic see, for example, Hopkins, *Journal*, Nov. 22-23, 1745, Williams College MS; Hopkins to Joseph Bellamy, Aug. 11, Dec. 28, 1756, and July 1, 1757, Bellamy Papers, Hartford Seminary Foundation, Hartford, Conn.; and Park, *Memoir of Hopkins*, pp. 40-43, 67-72. Lay opposition to Hopkins was centered in a Dutch faction comprised of settlers who had migrated from New York.
13. Quoted in West, ed., *Sketches of the Life of Samuel Hopkins*, p. 44, Portions of Hopkins' diary that West quotes from have been lost.
14. Hopkins, *Journal*, Dec. 24, 1743, Williams College MS.
15. "Petition to George III for a Royal Charter for Queen's College," in Henry Lefavour, "The Proposed College in Hampshire County in 1762," *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings*, 66 (1936-41), 78.
16. Hopkins' uncle and namesake, Rev. Samuel Hopkins of West Springfield, was a committed and well-known Indian missionary who undoubtedly encouraged his nephew's interest in the tribes of western New England.
17. Hawley to Oliver, May 20, 1761, Hawley Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. The missionary activities of New Divinity men in western New England are detailed in the *Journal and Letters of Gideon Hawley*, 4 vols., Congregational Library MS., Boston. On Hopkins' involvement in the Stockbridge mission see his letters to Commissioner Andrew Eliot, Misc. Bound MSS., Massachusetts Historical Society.
18. See Joseph A. Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity: Theology, Ethics, and Social Reform in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (Oct. 1977), 572-589; and Oliver Wendell Ellsbree, "Samuel Hopkins and His Doctrine of Benevolence," *New England Quarterly*, 8 (1935), 534-550.
19. Birdsall first noted this development; see *Berkshire County*, pp. 41-42.
20. Hopkins, *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend, Learned and Pious Mr. Jonathan Edwards* (Northampton, 1764), p. 70.
21. *Ibid.*
22. On Perry, Judson, and another dismissed New Divinity man, John Bacon, see Birdsall, *Berkshire County*, pp. 41-42.
23. See Robert Ferm, *Jonathan Edwards the Younger, 1745-1801* (Grand Rapids, 1976), pp. 148-150.
24. Richard Warch, *School of the Prophets: Yale College, 1701-1740* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 16-19.

25. Birdsall, *Berkshire County*, p. 21; Rising Lake Morrow, *Connecticut Influences in Western Massachusetts* (New Haven, 1936), pp. 1-8.
26. For Bellamy's career in the ministry, see Glenn P. Anderson, "Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790); The Man and His Work" (Ph.D. diss., Boston Univ., 1971).
27. Albert Hopkins, "Historical Discourse," *Proceedings at the Centennial Commemoration of the Organization of the Berkshire Association of Congregational Ministers* (Boston, 1864), pp. 5-6; Birdsall, *Berkshire County*, pp. 53-54.
28. Hopkins to Bellamy, March 18, 1766, Samuel Hopkins Papers, Andover-Newton Theological School, Newton Center, Massachusetts. On the ecclesiastical history of the Connecticut River Valley, see Paul R. Lucas, *Valley of Discord: Church and Society Along the Connecticut River, 1636-1725* (Hanover, N.H., 1976).
29. Anderson, "Joseph Bellamy," ch. 7; Percy C. Eggleston, *A Man of Bethlehem, Joseph Bellamy, D.D., and His Divinity School* (New London, 1908).
30. For information on the clerical careers of Bellamy's students, see Anderson, "Joseph Bellamy," pp. 402-445.
31. *Literary Diary*, III, 364.
32. See *ibid.*, pp. 463-464; *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.: Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts*, 4 vols. (Salem, 1905-1914), I, 161, III, 364; Park, *Memoir of Hopkins*, pp. 236-237; and Charles Keller, *The Second Great Awakening in Connecticut* (New Haven, 1942), pp. 36-37, 50-52.
33. See the evaluations in Frank H. Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology* (Chicago, 1907) and Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Theology in America," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, 1961)